

The Fennessy Nursery in Waterford

Although we Fennessys derive from Fiangus of Cashel of the Kings, whose name is translated as a “strong soldier” or “brave warrior”, the Fennessy genes must have had some gentler elements which came to the fore in the eighteenth century when an interest in horticulture became evident.

Richard Fennessy, who died in 1779, over two hundred years ago, established a nursery at Ballynattin, a few miles north of Clonmel, and this was believed to be the first of its kind in Ireland. This Richard had eight sons and the second of these sons was William, who was a nurseryman in Limerick. He set up his nephew, also called Richard, in the nursery business in Waterford, in lands which had been used by William’s brother, Nicholas.

We are told that Richard, the nephew, died at the age of 96 in about 1873 and left four sons and a daughter, along with an estate of some £30,000. It seems that the business was highly profitable in those days, and that £30,000 at today’s values would be reaching a million pounds.

Richard’s eldest son was Edward, who inherited. Edward married a lady of English stock, named Mary Belcher. My late father, when he belched occasionally, used to excuse himself by saying: “Well, my grandmother was a Belcher”!

Edward bequeathed the nursery to his son, William Henry, who was my grandfather. William Henry married Lillian Agnes Rance, the daughter of Major Frederick Rance, who once served in the British Army in India. I had a souvenir of the Major in the form of a sword stick, which was a thick Malacca walking cane, hollowed out, from which one could withdraw a thin steel rapier in case of need. It was a lethal weapon.

William Henry, from when I first knew him was crippled, having been thrown from a horse and trap, which was the mode of transport in those days, and he was never able to walk again. My father, Arthur Fennessy, was then asked to run the nursery and the family moved to a house in the nursery grounds.

The nursery was located in the townland of Grange in Waterford. It lay between Upper John’s Hill and Passage Road. In its latter years the trade had declined considerably. The 1920s and the 1930s were bad years for the Irish economy, in what was then our fledgling state. Money was scarce and for most people gardens were a bit of a luxury. The old days of planting out big estates were over and the trade now consisted of selling shrubs, bedding plants and tomatoes, which were grown commercially in season. In those days cattle and pig fairs were common-place, as were the established market days when people came into the town. My father would hire a small lorry to take shrubs and plants to towns in Counties Waterford, Tipperary and Kilkenny, where money might be in circulation.

There was also a seed shop on the Quay, quite near to Reginald’s Tower. It was established around 1820 although the business itself dates back to the 18th century. Documents indicate that there were earlier premises on the corner of Gladstone Street, where it meets the Quay, and in Barronstrand Street. We still have some artefacts from the business, including some of the stationery.

The nursery itself was well laid out, with proper walks in between the trees and shrubbery, and with cultivated areas for young trees. It also had greenhouses where seedlings were nurtured until ready for planting out.

It was a magic place for a nine year old boy, as I was then, where you could make a bow from a yew branch and arrows from the tropical bamboos, not to mention the cover for games of hide and seek. There was a large mulberry tree which fruited regularly and aromatic seed pods from the eucalyptus trees, and all sorts of wonderful things. Along with hay, oats were grown to feed the plough horses and the mare that drew the trap and there was a fine orchard with apples, pears, quince, raspberries, loganberries, gooseberries and all kinds of currants.

The main house in which my grandfather lived was called “Grange Villa” and the house in which my family lived “The Laurels”. Both are still there today. Regretfully, following my grandfather’s death in 1937, the nursery lands were sold to a development company and they are now covered by the Grange Park housing estate. To give the developers their due, they incorporated as many of the mature trees as they could so that a few reminders of former glory still remain.



Today, of course, we have garden centres which are more compact and can supply the same needs. The trade has diversified too into specialist productions like mushrooms, soft fruit and cut flowers.

In their heyday the Fennessys had nurseries in many counties of Ireland, including Kilkenny, Limerick and Kerry as well as Waterford and the first one at Ballynattin in Tipperary. They brought their specialised knowledge to the United Kingdom and to America and Australia and quite possibly to other parts of the world as well.

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This article and the next were first published as part of a book of genealogical interest for the Fennessy family, "Fiangus to Fennessy," ed. by Michael J. Fennessy and Aine C. Ni Fhiannusa. Ed.

