



**JOHNSONS**  
**OF WHIXLEY**  
PROFESSIONAL NURSERYMEN

The Johnsons Story

taking a growing lead

# Where we come from: the story of Johnsons of Whixley

*Johnsons of Whixley is, by nature, a business that would rather look forward than back. It's the kind of attitude that has led us to so many firsts in horticultural production. But it never hurt anyone to know their roots and that applies as much to people in a business – especially a business in horticulture – as it does to people in ordinary life.*

*These, then, are the recollections of Mr ER Johnson who started the nursery, and of Mr John Richardson who acquired it in 1964.*

*At the beginning: Mr Johnson remembers;*

*“On coming out of the army in 1920 I did not know what to do with myself for a living, at an age of 23. I did not want to go into a factory or office job, and would have preferred an open air one. Farming was out of the question, owing to lack of capital and knowing nothing of the industry.*

*My father, who had been a chemist in Leeds, suggested “what about market gardening or nursery work? You are always very interested in field botany”. In fact the only prizes I won at Leeds Grammar School were for proficiency in Botany and I had passed the matriculation exam in the same subject at Leeds University.*

*As a result of this suggestion I wrote to several well-known nurseries including Kings Acre Nurseries of Hereford, James Backhouse Nurseries of York, Mack and Miln of Darlington, and Fisher Son and Sibray of Handsworth, Sheffield, asking them if they would take me on as a pupil.*

*I eventually went to Handsworth in the Spring of 1921. It was a large tree and shrub nursery of 250 acres and had been trading since the 18th. Century and were seedsmen and nurserymen to the Royal Family for a long time. They had several shops including one in Rotherham and one in Sheffield.*

*They agreed to find me lodgings in the village. It was in the home of a retired miner, where I was very well looked after. I was paid 35 shillings for a 50 hour working week, which just covered my lodging expenses. I just worked with a gang of other workers*



*Mr. Eric Johnson, 1897 – 1988*

*doing usual work of the nursery, hardwood grafting, layering, budding fruits and roses etc. In winter, hardwood cuttings, and of course lifting all the different kinds of trees and shrubs for orders.*

*The foreman George Moore was a real tough blighter who kept us all hard at it, but in the second winter I was there, he put me in charge of a lifting gang and a handful of tree tickets, with instructions to go and lift them saying, ‘You know which field they are in and see that they are all good specimens and well lifted with no damage.’ This went on for some time and he gave me other specialised jobs, so in the end I said to him, ‘ I think I am worth more than the 35 shillings I am getting.’ ‘You may be,’ he said, ‘but I can’t do anything, you had better go and see the Managing Director, but I don’t think you will have any luck.’ I did go and see the boss, Mr. Wm. Atkinson, but as the foreman thought, there was nothing doing – ‘You are here to learn the trade, and that will take you years!’ So I gave in my notice.*

In the meantime I had become engaged to be married to a girl whose family owned several malt kilns including the one near Cattal Station. At the Cattal malt kiln there were two little cottages, one empty and the other used by the foreman maltster, and a small orchard and several old fashioned vineries and a peach house, and my future father-in-law suggested that I could go and live there to look after the gardens and live in the empty house and be fed by the maltster's wife, more or less free with just a token rent.

That is how I started, growing plants and selling fruit and tomatoes, cucumbers etc. locally and at Wetherby market. As soon as I could I began growing a few shrubs, privet, Ionicera, roses etc. and managed to rent 2 acres in a neighbouring field.

We got married in 1923 and my wife helped me no end in many ways. We had very little capital to start with and had to be very careful. After a year or so I got one employee and bought a T Model Ford lorry and started going to Knaresborough and Otley markets, also selling at home weekends and all hours, -always very hard work.

About this time a few Dutch men found me, and I did a little importing. As trade increased I took on another man and two youths.

Then of course the Second World War started in 1939 and we had to stop growing ornamentals and concentrate on growing vegetables and other food stuffs. I was left with only one man and I was given a commission with the Home Guard, with a platoon to organise eventually reaching some 60 members, covering the area from Walshford Bridge to Skip Bridge along the river Nidd to Nun Monkton, back to Green Hammerton and the A1. I had to attend various courses etc. and was fully occupied, almost until the end of the war, in 'Dad's Army'.

Towards the end of the war Broadfield House, together with 7 acres of grassland, came up for sale by auction and with the aid of £1000 loaned to me by my father, I managed to buy it.

I got some of the grass ploughed in by a local contractor, and to get the turf rotted down, cropped it with Brussels sprouts, marrows etc for the first year,



Staff 1964. Mr. Eric Johnson middle



October 1964

then proceeded to crop with roses, ornamental trees and shrubs, ploughing out another acre or so each year.

With a lot of hard work doing mostly retail trade, things gradually increased and I had to employ extra staff. This went on for several years. One of my outstanding orders, I remember, was for 100,000 1 year seedling beech sold to the Forestry Commission, they were all from one year's crop from one tree and I retained 25,000 to grow on to larger size.

Soon after this my accountant advised me to turn the business into a Limited Liability Company, which I did, with the result that we became E R Johnson (Nurseries) Limited.

The turnover increased and we got extra staff and then eventually Mr Richardson became interested, and after some months we made a deal and he took over. I built a bungalow in the corner nearest the village, and took a great interest in what went on in the firm that I began all those years ago.

I will leave the rest for Mr Richardson to work out, who has increased the size of the firm in all ways, to be one of the largest in the North of England.

I will end by wishing him all the best for the future and every success in all his enterprises".

Mr Johnson died in 1988.

## John Richardson continues the story

John Richardson had grown up on his grandparents' market garden at Carlton, between Leeds and Wakefield, and always enjoyed the practical and physical life, working outside after school each day, school holidays etc.

When he was 18 he went to Writtle College in Essex and completed the 2 year 'College Diploma in Horticulture' course from 1955 to 1957.

"On leaving college we were told that we knew almost nothing of how to be a good grower, but we had been educated in how to find the necessary information and interpret it!

With this philosophy in mind I worked a full year first for Willy Bean and then Robert Bean at Brough in East Yorkshire on intensive salad crops. At that time I was also growing rhubarb in my spare time on borrowed land and managed to sell the whole lot to the Bean Brothers for £400, a small fortune when the wage was £6.50 per week. I also grew spring onions on two rented allotments and filled my then girlfriend's garden with lettuce which I sold into Hull wholesale market. In the winter evenings I trained as an oxy-acetylene welder.

In September 1958 I moved to Surrey to work on the specialist market garden of F A Secret Limited. I stayed there 3 years and gained a great deal of experience. If I have ever known fear, it was trying to supervise and pay 40 gypsies who were employed to harvest daffodil bulbs on piecework! Overtime was unlimited and a substantial amount of piecework meant that I could save £16 per week, although the basic wage was only £7 less £3.50 for accommodation in an ex-Irish labourers' hostel. I did contract welding for local garages in the evening and a friend and I ran several contract gardening projects at the weekends.

We made quite a lot of money by buying all the reject and under-size daffodil bulbs and packing them at nights in polythene bags of 100; there are a lot of 100's in 5 tons! We sold these through outlets in the Midlands and the North as well as Surrey. My Mother sold many thousands for us, selling from her car boot

at the gates of what was the Yorkshire Copper Works in Hunslet, Leeds. I had a 6 month spell lorry driving to Covent Garden wholesale vegetable market, to arrive by 3.30 a.m. Life with the cockney barrow boys needed a very sharp wit! On the return journey I had to hand load either 5 tons of spent hops from the Guinness brewery in north London or a load of horse manure from the Royal Mews beneath Buckingham Palace. On one occasion I was almost arrested as I drove down the Mall and through Admiralty Arch with a load of manure – lorries of any sort, particularly those full of manure, are not allowed down the Mall in front of the Palace.

My intention was always to start growing on my own, particularly vegetables, but in spite of working very long hours etc., it was not easy to get enough capital together to start my own firm, and I decided to look at other forms of experience.

In 1961 I joined Fisons as the Commercial Representative for horticulture in Scotland. That experience was probably the best I had, as I was seeing 5-6 growers each day, and it became easy to identify why some did well and others did not.

I married Dorothy in Scotland in 1962 and by 1963 I knew I wanted to return to practical growing. The training courses I did on selling, and becoming a trainer of new reps all added to my knowledge of business and horticulture.



*Whixley plot in 1964*

From 1935 to 1963 my uncle had owned a garage in Whixley, and when Mr Johnson told him one day that he was considering retirement (he was 67 at the time and had no family) my uncle telephoned us to explain the situation.

Eventually, after 16 trips from Scotland we reached agreement on the sale of the business and Dorothy and I took over on May 1st. 1964. A part of the deal was that Mr Johnson would build a retirement bungalow on the Whixley nursery (now Robert's house) but this could not be started for 9 months until a crop of standard roses had been sold.



*June 1965 "A new trainee receives materia handling experience"*

We lived in a caravan until September 1965 and Graham was born whilst we lived there. We then moved into what is now the students' house where we stayed until we built our present house in 1975.

It was obvious soon after I started that the business would be affected by the advent of Garden Centres, which were just beginning in 1965. At that time the majority of our sales were retail with customers visiting the nursery in the summer and placing orders for autumn delivery. We had just a few sales to other nurseries and outlets such as York and Harrogate parks.

When I took over there were 11 full-time men, and we had a total turnover of £39,000 in my first year.



*Mechanisation comes to Whixley, 1965*

In 1965 we rented the gardens at Myton Hall, and a year later took an extra 2 acres of land outside the walled garden. In order to grow quickly with the idea of becoming wholesale, we advertised in the Sunday papers, which produced lots of small orders and not much profit, but at least we got the money up front!

We became totally wholesale in 1971 and this coincided with the purchase of the 50 acre Newlands nursery. The purchase price was £24,000 and once more it seemed we had mortgaged our entire lives. It is a good indication of inflation that by 1991 a single lorry was costing well over that price.

In the belief that we could only expand slowly, we let off a substantial part of Newlands for farming, but due

to demand and sales promotion we filled the whole 50 acres in 3 years, having also sold off the land at Farnham. We withdrew from Myton in 1980 or thereabouts.

The land at the Triangle was rented from Colin Farrer in 1982 and was eventually bought from him in 1988. The glass and 2.5 acres of land at the Triangle was bought when Mr Challenger died in 1990. Because of a shortage of land, 22 acres of land at Dunsforth was purchased in 1983. The land was heavy and not easily worked in winter, but by the spring of 1989 all available land was planted and we were unable to plant whips and rootstocks. After much telephoning, advertising etc., we found the 72 acres we currently have at Ryther, and were able to plant by ploughing in some of the corn already growing.

In 1990 we were offered Endfield Nursery at Wilberfoss, which provided us with a substantial source of transplants and a new market selling forest trees to estates and forestry planting contractors. The 14 acres we bought originally have been increased to 180 acres, the additional land being rented.

The principle of high quality plant production has continued to be a motivating factor in the development of the Company, and is reflected by the Company becoming the first European horticultural business of any kind to achieve BS 5750 (ISO 9000), in 1992. This led to developing relationships with organisations such as Sainsbury and many senior architects throughout the country.

The purchase of an additional 18 acres at Cattal Station in 1994 provided an opportunity to expand container production economically, using many of the resources already available within the Company. The purchase also brought back into our control the 2 acres of land behind the South View houses which was originally rented by Mr Johnson in 1923 and given up in 1969 when owners of the Malt Kiln wished to increase the rent beyond an economic value.

By 1996 the new container area was fully cropped, bringing the area of containers to 17ha. A new, state of the art, 2000 sq.m. propagation unit was built at



*The container unit at Cattal*

Whitley, complete with overhead gantry transportation. Expansion continued at Endfield with the renting of additional land, and a sophisticated Web page was made available on the internet.

Spring 1998 saw the purchase of Roecliffe Nursery, which provided 1½ acres of relatively new glass to support the increasing production of high quality specimen plants for both the retail and amenity sectors. The management training course first implemented in 1995 proved successful in that a trained manager was available for the new site from day one. An additional 2 ha of containers were established on the only remaining spare land in the Triangle nursery.

In autumn 1998 the continued growth of sales at Endfield meant that new dispatch facilities in excess of 1400 sq.m. together with new offices and loading bays were built, additional land rented, and three additional delivery vehicles increased the total Johnson fleet to 10 trucks. The Cash and Carry unit went from strength to strength and became the northern distributor for Vannucci Italian plants.

Spring 1999 saw us crash through the first £1m sales month subsequently repeated several times. A further 7500 sq.m. of polytunnels for both winter protection and liner production have been built. Production of 7 and 15 litre specimen plants continued to increase and a 25 litre range was introduced. Twenty-five thousand specimen container plants were produced for Homebase, our first contract with any of the superstores for several years, and we now sustain enlarged repeat contracts.

2003 saw the establishment of our Chobham cash and carry outlet which now also acts as a southern base for our amenity sales operation. In that year we also established two glasshouse units in Humberside to give us increased production capacity to meet growing demand for our plants from Garden Centres. In the following year we completed the construction of new engineering workshops and created 2 ha of new container production beds at Newlands. 2004 also saw the construction of 1ha of covered area at our Roecliffe site.



*Chobham Xpress (cash and carry)*



*Covered beds at Cattal*

In 2005 we undertook major works to construct lagoons for better water management as one of the first formal steps in re-thinking the impact of our activities on the environment, now even more formalised in the adoption of an Environmental Policy and the stated aim of working towards ISO 14001. In that year we sold off our transport fleet to improve distribution efficiency, completed the construction of 1ha of new covered beds at Cattal and a further 1.5 ha of new container production beds at Newlands.

In November 2005 John Richardson was honoured with an Individual Excellence Award for Lifetime Achievement Award by the HTA and Horticulture Week. In 2006 turnover reached £11m per annum and has since risen to exceed £12million. In 2007 Andrew Richardson was elected as president of the horticultural Trades Association and awarded the prestigious Pearson Memorial by the HTA, and honour he shares with his father John. 1ha of new covered beds were completed at Cattal that year, and further 1ha in 2008.



*Expanded container production at Newlands*