

LEONARD van GEEST



The Father of the British Bulb Industry

A 'Lincolnshire Life' exclusive interview
by DAPHNE NEECH

MANY people wonder about 'Mr Len'—what's he really like? They've heard their parents and their grandparents tell the oft-repeated tale of the two Dutch lads who biked round Quadring, the Fens and Eaudyke, selling bulbs in the early thirties . . . *but gerroff, I aren't that green . . . bulbs tak' a bit o' sellin' . . . even i' them days . . . an' be young 'uns niver! Meb-be there's summat in it . . . it's what folks roun' 'ere allus said . . . yer mun be right at that. One thing's for sure . . . them lads have made a go on it . . . where would we be without Van Ducks? . . . tak' it fra' me, them two old boys have made Spalding!*

And like all of us who join in the Tulip Time revels this month and bask in the reflected glory of our bulb growing progress—we echo the Fenlanders' toast and salute the brothers van Geest, John and Leonard. But just who are they—and more important how did they bring out the best in the bulb trade and much else besides?

From his pleasant office in White House Chambers, facing the tree-lined banks of the River Welland, the younger of the two—Mr Leonard van Geest—told me of his early days.

As you will see, the local apocryphal version runs fairly close—but there was never anything hit-and-miss in the actual story! The young men had taken the trouble to thoroughly learn the basics of horticulture (and bulb culture in particular) before striking out to be 'their own men'. It was very hard work and took a great deal of self-discipline. (At this point I'd said courage or even guts as both boys were so young and living in a foreign-to-them country. "No", declared Mr van Geest, "life was hard in 1931 and my father said it was necessary for me to follow my brother to England—and that was that").

But let's begin at the beginning.

"Our life at home in Holland was simple; strict

yet happy. We were brought up in the Protestant tradition and I had two brothers and two sisters. I remember my sisters had to wear black stockings on Sundays. Nobody minded because that is how it was in those days."

Like many other families in The Hague/Hook of Holland farming belt, everybody did their share of work around the Nursery. As elsewhere, times were getting very difficult. Economic conditions and the size of their small country meant that the Dutch people had to look abroad to sell their produce. In the van Geest household it was agreed that John should come to England. He stayed with Cecil Robinson in Quadring and this was perhaps the real turning point in their young lives. Here in South Lincolnshire he came to know the people and the nature of the land in the county.

"I came to Wellingborough and stayed with the Linnell Family. The idea was to learn English so I went to school. But they had a Nursery and I liked to be outside. They were a very good family and I enjoyed being in England. After a while I hankered to be across in Lincolnshire with my brother though," and here Mr van Geest really chuckled, "so I journeyed over—in a train and not by bicycle!"

With their father's guidance and the knowledge they had acquired from working here, their natural good humour and understanding of the British nurseryman's markets, the young men began to develop the embryo of what is now the Geest Horticultural Group Ltd. "We had our first Nursery in 1934. It was in Marsh Lane at Boston and had belonged to Mr Arthur Lealand. Today, it is all part of an industrial estate. However, we are still firmly based in South Lincolnshire." Visitors to the Fens will see evidence of their cultural skills in almost every field of daffodils, tulips, gladioli and peonies. "You won't see quite so many hyacinths though because they must have

The Geest Organisation has a turnover in excess of £200,000,000; employs over 5,500 people in over 80 locations; operates 600 vehicles PLUS an ocean-going fleet of refrigerated ships; runs one of the largest Computer Bureau Companies; sells £180,000,000 of fruit and vegetables each year; has 40 per cent of the United Kingdom's banana market.

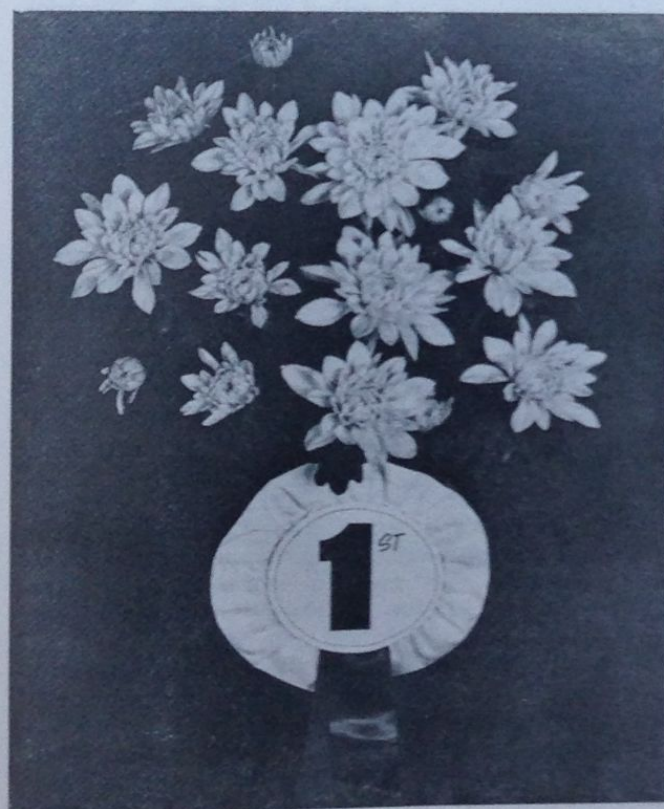
sandy soil. Luckily, they will grow very well (when treated) indoors and of course I like to remember the gardeners too!"

What was a cottage industry forty-odd years ago is now a flourishing scientifically based commercial trade. Research and Development, in-house Training and Quality Control have been used to give Mother Nature a hand. Millions of flower bulbs and corms are packaged and marketed each spring and autumn. (Not all can possibly be grown here, so this is where the Quality Control has a special role to play.) However, thousands of Lincolnshire grown daffodils are exported for the Dutch, German and Swiss cut flower trade!

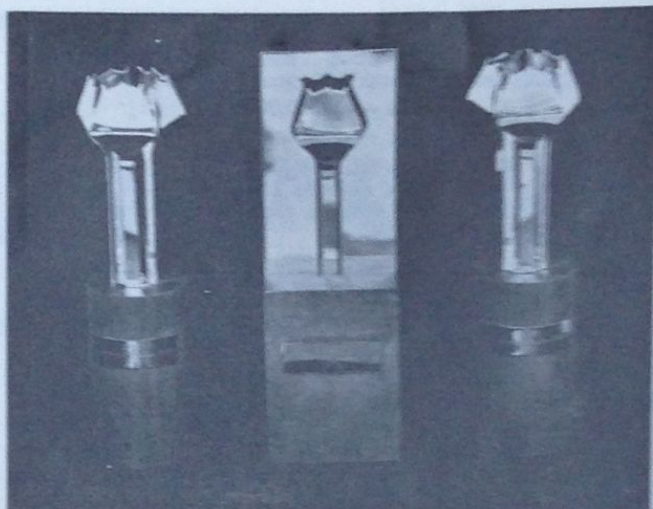
"I want to see flowers and plants in EVERY home — that is my *real* ambition. They are living gifts and they can give so much pleasure. I hope they'll go on every weekly shopping list soon—not just when a husband has been a naughty boy. Or just for birthdays and special occasions. After all, look at a house plant. All right, you spend 50 pence to £5 but it will last for ages if you look after it." To help in this respect GEEST have booklets on the care of all their range from Azalea simsil to Zebra Plants (*Aphelandra squarrosa*) . . . and cultural details on every label, too.

And Mr Leonard practises what he preaches.

All the Organisation's offices are graced with all the popular plants — Dragon Trees, Leopard Lilies



Top of the Pots! Known as the Pot Mum in the trade, Geest sell more Chrysanthemums than any other houseplant.



Geest Garden Writer of the Year Awards, designed by Roy Risdale of wood and silver were presented in October last year.

(*Dracaena* and *Cordelyne* varieties and *Dieffenbachia Exotica Perfection* to the purists), *Star Blossom* (*Kalanchoe blossfeldiana*) and the Swiss Cheese Plant (*Monstera deliciosa*). In the busy corridors and reception areas along with *Sweetheart Plants* (*Philodendron scandens*) and planted up bowls, I saw lovely displays of *Dried Grasses* and *Silk Flowers*—and, although they looked brand new, I was amazed to discover that some were two years old (so there's a tip for *real* economy). No, GEEST haven't been disloyal to the Horticulture Growers — every part of these dried arrangements has come from living material!

Although many exotic plants and foods now feature in GEEST catalogues and depots, Leonard's own likes are still fairly simple. (I had remarked on some particular favourites of mine that brightened his office on the day of our interview — some very pretty pot chrysanthemums.) "Yes, at home in Fulney I enjoy growing chrysanthemums. I get a lot of pleasure from growing lemons and cacti and lilies, too. A good cabbage, too—it's quite something to get a truly good one." And here spoke the man who enjoys seeing all plants grown well—the gardener as well as the commercial horticulturalist. This is probably why he is so welcomed by the community—not just in Spalding or Lincolnshire but wherever he travels.

Today, he and his brother have extended their business interests throughout the world. They are acknowledged as fine businessmen and are respected at all levels from the board room to the shop floor within the industry. They have both done much to enrich the quality of life for us all, both in trade and in the social areas where their Company is based.

Leonard is very interested in his links with the St John Ambulance Brigade and the Sports Facilities for Spalding. For leisure—although like many other Fenlanders he equates work with leisure—he likes to read good stories, the financial and trade papers and visit various markets and depots. "I've always liked to see English gardens and castles, and in this way I can get to do this, too. Great Britain is still Great and I tell my overseas friends to come and see the lovely parks and buildings over here—where else can you have flowers growing all the year round? In Britain it is always possible."

Unlike his brother, Leonard has retained his Dutch

Geest Horticultural Group has a turnover of £11,000,000; employs over 900 people; raises:

- roses — 1,000,000
- bulbs — 600 acres
- houseplants under glass — 30 acres
- ornamental flowers and grasses for drying — 6 acres

exports: 7,000,000 cut flowers (daffodils) to Holland, Germany and Switzerland.

nationality but those who have met him (however briefly) will know that he has heart enough for his birthplace and his Lincolnshire homeland. "We went into business at the same time as Marks and Spencers and I am pleased that we also sell and are known throughout Britain. The gardens in Britain look very much better now—a few tulips and daffodils, a rose or two and some shrubs are within the reach of everybody today . . . and I am happy about that. For the future? Well, if they are protected from the frost, I think lilies are *the* flowers to go for. There are so many different kinds and colours—so many

Right: Mr Leonard van Geest shows the Duchess of Gloucester round Springfields at the opening of the rose gardens in July 1976. (Photo by Les Prudden).

Below: Inspecting the quality of Geest standard roses is Growing Manager, John Taylor. Inset shows three grafted buds growing strongly.

Checking blooms against catalogues at tulip time in Springfields.



shapes and sizes—yes, they are the flowers for the future!"

His other interest is in bringing lots of good, fresh food to the people—but that will be another story, and no doubt just as fascinating. Already we are buying and growing aubergines and peppers, avocados and guavas . . . and bananas and grapefruits have been on our shopping lists for years.

So it is true—Leonard and John did give the lead to our Lincolnshire bulb industry and it looks set fair for a rise in our daily demand for fresh fruit in the not so distant future.

His greatest contribution to the County, however, must be his work for Springfields and the annual Tulip-time Flower Parade. He was the prime mover in both these internationally famous attractions, which have brought pleasure to millions . . . and work and extra income for many local firms, shops and small businesses. Springfields' gardens were planted out in the late '60s and have been steadily blooming and maturing, a beautiful sight especially now and through the summer months. "My first float, THE first float, was in 1958. Now we are having our 22nd Flower Parade. I am glad to be Chairman and so pleased that Springfields and our Flower Parade are such a success. It makes everybody so happy . . . it makes me happy . . . it's my life, you know," said Mr Leonard quietly. He has certainly shared his love and knowledge of tulips, daffodils and many other flowers with all of us. He well deserves his accolade of Father of the British Bulb Industry—and the appreciation of his adopted home county, Lincolnshire.

Meanwhile, we offer our greetings to this unassuming, hard working, kindly man, sixty-five years young-in-heart last March, who has done so much for every aspect of horticulture and the people who live by it.