

Wallace & Co history

[This history was written for the benefit of my family but as it may be of general interest I have added footnotes giving some explanations of names which would otherwise only mean anything to the family. BAW 14/12/2011]

Mr Robert Whistler Wallace's nursery was originally at Kilnfield Gardens, Colchester, Essex. He claimed to have established the business there in 1893, but his son-in-law stated that he bought the business in 1888 from his father, who was bankrupt and had started it in 1871. He traded through a company R.Wallace & Co Ltd but I don't know when that was formed.

In 1920 he moved to Tunbridge Wells taking a lease of land at Bayham Road, which was known as The Old Gardens, from the Marquess of Abergavenny. The Old Gardens had been occupied by nurseries since 1837. The lease was for 21 years expiring 25th Dec 1940 at a rent of £100 p.a. In 1937 he took a lease of more land at Forest Way, off Forest Road and adjacent to Whybourne Crescent. This lease was for 21 years from 25th March 1940 (possibly as a result of an extension). There is a summary of the trading figures between 1920 and 1936. After Mr Wallace had drawn his salary rising from £500 to £1000 there were profits every year until 1930 except for two years including a bad one in 1926. Gross sales over this period were about £40,000 per year. This was more than halved during the years of depression with substantial losses and beginning to pick up again in 1935.

However by 1940 he had to put the company into liquidation and sell the business. He sold it to GLW¹ to whom he had been introduced by Mr.W.B.Cranfield², who had been a friend of Mr Wallace for some 50 years. His intention in buying was to provide a business which Barbara and Guy³ could take over when they returned from Jamaica. In a letter to a supplier in March 1941 he said that they were very keen. My mother's letters indicate that he was very disappointed when they decided not to do so.

Heads of agreement between Mr Wallace and GLW were dated 28th October 1940. The formal agreement for sale dated 5th Nov 1940 was between Percy Wickenden, of Creasey Son & Wickenden as liquidator and GLW and was for the sale of the business and the Forest Way lease for £2000. As the Old Gardens lease was expiring arrangements were made for a new lease to be granted by the Marquess of Abergavenny. This was for 21 years from 25th April (?Mar) 1940.. The transaction was completed on the 25th Dec 1940. Mr Wallace was to continue as manager at £7 per week (formal agreement dated 20th Jan 1941).

The business then traded as R.Wallace & Co, proprietor G.L.Wates, successor to R.Wallace & Co Ltd. – landscape and garden architects, specialists in lilies, irises and rhododendrons

¹ GLW is my grandfather, George Leslie Wates

² Mr Cranfield was the son-in-law of Mr W.C.Johnson, GLW's long term client and business associate.

³ Barbara was his daughter and Guy her husband. They were both trained horticulturalists and at the time he was working in Jamaica but they were expected to return which they did at the end of the war

The assignment of the lease of the Forest Way land and the new lease of The Old Gardens were taken by J & S & W Ltd. It is not clear why GLW arranged it in this way, possibly for tax reasons. He wrote to the company's accountants, Booth Anderson & Co of 40 Norfolk St, The Strand, in April 1941 instructing them to hand over the books to Creasey Son & Wickenden, explaining that he had taken over the whole of the share capital. In June 1941 Mr Fanner of Baltic Saw Mills⁴ was appointed secretary in place of GLW's secretary Mrs C.E.G.Chapman (known as Miss Grinstead) and asked to handle the accounts.

GLW wrote to Percy Wickenden explaining the background in July:- J & S & W was originally formed as a private finance business, shareholders subscribed to the company and lent it money in equal shares. For some years it financed Triumph Auto on hire purchase agreements. This company suffered losses and was twice reconstructed resulting in debts. It was now wound up and had no assets. Debts of £1800 from 1931 and £940 in 1936 were written off. In writing about this to Bernard Wilson⁵, who was a director, GLW explained that the debts were from 'the old piano company' and there was no chance of recovery.

In Jan 1948 Mr Richard G.Walter was appointed General Manager in place of Mr Wallace who continued to be employed as a consultant. Mr Walter was Mr Wallace's son-in-law who had worked for the company until its liquidation. He had applied to come back after the war but was presumably turned down. He then applied in 1947 in answer to an advert for a general manager.

The principal people involved in the management who met periodically as a "board" were GLW, Mr Wallace, Mr Walter, Mr Fanner and Mr King was the internal accountant in charge of the office administration and bookkeeping. He had been employed since 1920 at the age of 15 with an interval during the war.

Profits were made in 1945 and 1946 but thereafter it was always losses. The accumulated losses from 1940 to 1949 were £3254 and in 1950 the loss was £4038. This was financed by a loans from J & S & W of £10,339. The business continued to make losses and in 1954 this was financed as to £8557 by J & S & W and as to £8489 by a bank overdraft. There were constant complaints from GLW about the losses which he, and Mr King, blamed on the management.

In 1945 GLW bought the business of E.B.Champernowne in Buckland Monachorum, Devon. This was always run as a separate business but Mr King helped with the accounting and the intention was that as much stock as possible should be bought from there.⁶

In 1951 GLW bought the freehold of both nurseries from the Marquess of Abergavenny for £6000. The conveyance of the Old Gardens on 25th Sept 1951 was for £3500 so the Forest Way land must have been for £2500. These were purchased in his own name subject to the leases to J & S & W

⁴ Baltic Saw Mills was a company in Tonbridge of which GLW was a director and which was owned largely by W.C.Johnson's estate.

⁵ A colleague and close friend of GLW

⁶ This business is now owned by GLW's grandson, Peter Argles

From Jan 1954 Mr Wallace no longer attended board meetings although he remained a consultant. GLW's daughter Barbara attended and Mr Elphick. Mr Elphick had been employed since 1923 with an interval during the war.

Mr Walter gave notice of resignation in April 1954 effective 31st July. He was replaced by Mr J.Stewart Hale from 1st Sept. In Oct 1955 Mr Walter, in writing to GLW, said he was unhappy in his new job and regretted leaving Wallace & Co where he had been happy.

In 1955 GLW bought the business of Barr & Sons. I do not know what the background to this was. I recollect GAW⁷ being very proud of some legal work that he had done which I thought had something to do with them. They had a nursery in Taplow, Berks and premises in Covent Garden both of which were given up. The agreement was dated 8th Sept 1955. GLW purchased the stock etc for £2400, George Barr was employed at a salary of £700 p.a., plus £600 for the first three years, and 25% of the profits. Herbert Barr was employed as consultant at £100 p.a. plus 25% of the profits.

At the same time, and presumably in conjunction with the amalgamation, work was put in hand for a new office building and bulb store. The electrical work was done by Johnson & Phillips⁸, which also provided some temporary storage in Kensington St., and . the bulb store was erected by Conder (Robin Coles'⁹ company)

On the 5th Sept GLW wrote to Mr Hale dealing with various points relating to the new buildings and the merger and ending:- "I think you know my mind in relation to this exciting scheme. I am sure it is going to be a huge success and that I can rely on everyone at Tunbridge Wells to pull their weight in the general interest. Please take this letter as my authority to settle with George and Herbert Barr any practical details not involving substantial capital expenditure which may arise during my absence"

The merger took effect from 1st Jan 1956. The combined business was carried on from The Old Gardens under the joint direction of Mr George R.Barr, Mr Herbert R.Barr and Mr J.Stewart Hale under the name of Wallace & Barr. Mr Wallace would have continued as a consultant but he had died on 16th November 1955. Stocks from Barr & Sons were to be planted up at new nurseries in Forest Way and at E B Champernowne¹⁰. . GLW arranged a dinner party for the staff of both firms at the Swan Hotel on 29th Dec.

In Nov 1955 Cocke Vellacot & Hill of 16 Berkeley St, W1, presumably Barr & Sons' accountants, had prepared a report on the bookkeeping systems. Mention was made that Mr Fanner was about to retire.

⁷ GAW was GLW's son and my father George Ainsworth Wates. Both GLW and GAW were solicitors and partners in the firm of J D Langton & Passmore, London

⁸ This was a cable and electrical equipment making company in Charlton, Southeast London of which both GLW and GAW were directors, the Johnson being W.C.Johnson mentioned above.

⁹ Robin Coles was married to a family cousin and had founded and expanded what became a very successful structural engineering company initially with some financial help from GLW

The accounts from 1955 to 1957 are missing. The 1958 accounts show a loss of £5252 and accumulated loss from 1940 of £54706. They show that GLW's capital had increased to £14222 and the Barrs' capital was £15000 (no mention of this in the agreement), J & S & W's loan was £22302 and the bank overdraft £14136

There are letters from both Barr brothers in Aug 1956 making various complaints which were rejected by GLW but no evidence of what the ultimate outcome was.

GLW died on the 22nd Jan 1958¹¹. Over the next four years the business just about broke even showing profits in 1960 and 1962.

On the 21st June 1960 the land at Forest Way was sold for development to Cooper Estates¹², £2000 to GLW's estate for the freehold and £25000 to J & S & W for the leasehold. Seeing that the lease was about to expire I don't know why the consideration should have been split in this way

On the 1st Jan 1962 the goodwill and stock of part of the business, namely bulbs (excluding lilies), plants (excluding irises), seeds and sundries was sold to P de Jager & Sons (London) Ltd for £3400 together with the use of the name Wallace & Barr. The letterheading for the remaining business was then R.Wallace & Co, proprietors – exors of G.L.Wates decd under the direction of J.Stewart Hale. The Barr brothers must have retired although I think George Barr may have continued as a consultant to de Jager.

Following the sale to de Jager the family idea was to sell the remaining land and carry on the business by selling from Tunbridge Wells but growing at Rowhill¹³ and Champernowne. Mr Hale was invited to come in as a joint proprietor but he did not have enough confidence in the business. In Nov 1963 GAW wrote to Mr Hale – “with the sale of the land and reinvestment of capital in the nursery at Pembury we are cutting adrift completely from the old policy...as run under my father and in future the business must be run on commercial lines to make a profit! This is not consistent with the manner in which GLW ran the business but he could afford it and we cannot.” In fact, from the earlier correspondence that GAW may not have been aware of, GLW always intended to run it as a commercial concern and was very unhappy about the losses.

In August 1962 Prall & Prall of Dartford were instructed to apply for planning consent for the development of the land at Bayham Road and in 1963 auction particulars were prepared for a sale in November. However an offer was received from Pearce & Barker Ltd in excess of anything they had expected and the land was sold on the 14th Nov for £155,000 to be completed in stages over the period to Sept 1964, which in the event was extended.

¹¹ His estate was left in trust for his widow Lucy W Wates for life and then to his four children equally. The trustees were Lucy Wates and Bernard Wilson, although all the work was done by GAW

¹² Harry Gough-Cooper of Cooper Estates was a family friend but I do not know whether this was relevant in connection with the sale

¹³ This was Rowhill Grange, Wilmington, my grandparents home where a small farming business was run.

It was thus necessary to move the business. In 1961 Mr Hale had personally bought Lakeside Nurseries, off Hastings Road, Pembury so the family agreed to purchase it from him, GAW reaching agreement with him when in Switzerland in Sept 1963 for the price of £5000. In 1964/65 new glasshouses and offices were erected at Lakeside Nurseries

Losses in 1963 and 1964 were £4977 and £2163. More money had been put in to reduce the bank overdraft and J & S & W's loan was £36102

On 25th Sept 1965 Mr Hale gave notice. This presumably left the family in some difficulty. Mr Whitelegg (George G. Whitelegg Ltd, The Nurseries, Knockholt) was approached to assist with the running and GAW took overall charge with the assistance of Miss Miller, secretary, Mr King doing the books, the accountants Creasey Son & Wickenden and Mr Barnes. Mr Barnes had been with the business longer than anyone, having started in Colchester in 1915 with an interval during the war.

The 1965 accounts showed a huge loss of £11493 and GAW wrote to Bernard Wilson in June 1966 with the accounts pointing out there was a huge loss but that he was negotiating with Mr Whitelegg to take over the business and in the meantime it was being run on a care and maintenance basis.

Negotiations with Whitelegg seemed to come to nothing but continued in 1967 with agreement finally being reached in an exchange of correspondence in May and June. The business was sold for £2000 with completion on the 30th June. Licence was given to use the land pending negotiations for sale. The landscape dept had closed down at the end of May.

In the meantime the business had been able to continue to use the office at the Old Gardens. Planning application was made for temporary use as offices of Baltic Saw Mills premises at Meadow Road but this was either not granted or not needed. The developers did not require possession of the offices until the end of Sept 1967. Whitelegg took over the nursery staff but the office staff were made redundant; Mr Barnes went to Baltic, Mr Holden had worked for Barr & Sons since 1929. Albert Drury¹⁴ collected furniture and papers at the end of Sept to take to Rowhill

The Queen Mother's warrant, originally granted to Mr Wallace and passed on to GLW and LWW was cancelled in Dec 1968. De Jager was going to apply.

It seems that GAW then forgot about the land at Pembury and in 1982 Whitelegg applied for possessory title. The legal position was not at all clear and ultimately the sale of the land was agreed at £10,000, although there was I think a valuation at £75,000 which may have been with planning permission.

BAW
Nov 2008
Revised Jan 2014

¹⁴ Albert Drury was employed by the family at Rowhill where he had worked since 1929