

Chapter One

Growing Up at Ragworth Nurseries

IF I sit in my sun room on a bright day and close my eyes, the warmth flows over me and I am six years old again, wandering through the vast greenhouses of my father's nursery. As far as I can see, tomatoes and cucumbers stretch into the distance and the smell is intoxicating. One of the red fruits hangs down temptingly and I pull it off gently and sink my teeth in, taking care not to dribble juice down my dress. That would bring a scolding from my mother.

Outside are fields full of fragrant prize-winning roses but I step into a huge shed full of carnations or chrysanthemums. Among their nodding blooms I'm more wary, slipping between their wonderful colours hoping I won't be seen, for I'm not really supposed to be in here. But I know if my father catches me he won't make a fuss for he finds it difficult to get cross with his little girl.

Another large, wooden building contains stacks of drawers and boxes where the seed is kept dry and in perfect order. I'm definitely not supposed to be in here but of course I peep in and sniff its mustiness and imagine the exotic places from which some of these seeds and bulbs have come.

When I open my eyes and find myself back in 2009, it saddens me to remember that the greenhouses have long since been demolished and the fields of roses covered by houses. Stockton, where I was born, is a very different place today from the market town it was when I entered the world on April 4th 1930.

My name was Pamela Fewster and as I grew up, I began to realize that being a Fewster meant something special in Stockton. We weren't wealthy but Ragworth Nurseries, the Fewster family business,



Dad (left) with the Ragworth Beauty tomatoes, probably in the Twenties

was an important enterprise in the area and we were well respected. In 1839, my ancestor John Fewster had set up a market garden in Norton which by the 1930s had moved to a bigger site of 35 acres in Darlington Back Lane.

To me, the plants seemed to stretch away for ever and the statistics were impressive: 70 staff, 25 greenhouses of which the shortest was 80ft (24metres), 20,000 cucumbers, 20 tons of tomatoes, 60,000 rose trees and a huge variety of vegetables, plus their own shops and market stalls around the region. The Fewsters had developed their own tomato, the Ragworth Beauty, and for me there is no other with a better flavour. I often asked my father how he grew such a tomato and he always said, "Just add a little sugar" by which he meant potash, which looks a bit like sugar.

My father was Arthur Fewster and my mother was Edith Lumley and after their marriage they were known as Artie and Edie. Their first child, a son, also called Arthur, was born five years before I came along.

Despite being born into a family where everyone was automatically expected to join Ragworth Nurseries, my father had at first become a farmer at Middlefield Farm, which was owned by his father and was up the Durham Road. He had the misfortune to develop diabetes but by contrast the good luck to do so just as insulin had arrived as a lifesaver. Otherwise he would have died. But that was the end of his farming and it was with great sadness that he returned to the family fold, though he was extremely green-fingered and gained satisfaction from the marvellous crops.

This move happened before I was born and home for me until I married was a house called Belmont which was opposite Ragworth Nurseries and had been built and was still owned by my grandfather. This was situated along a road called Darlington Back Lane which stretched down from the main Stockton to Durham Road and was not far from a pub called The Mile House, called such because it was a mile out of the centre of Stockton. This was where we could catch the bus into Stockton. The next pub, going towards Durham, was called The Second Mile.

My father had three brothers, who had all joined the nursery business, and one sister. There had been a fourth older brother who