

# The Giant Snowdrop Company

*Galanthus* 'S. Arnott' was the mainstay of the nursery's mail order business

Giant Snowdrop Company archive

In the 1950s one nursery paved the way for galanthomania. JANE KILPATRICK and JENNIFER HARMER investigate

**W**HEN BRIGADIER Leonard Mathias DSO retired from the Indian Army in 1945, he and his wife Winifrede came to live in England. They initially looked for a house in Norfolk, where her parents lived. However, when their first house purchase fell through they decided to look further afield. They focussed on Stroud in Gloucestershire, which they knew from visits to an aunt who lived locally. They eventually bought

Hyde Lodge at Chalford, Gloucestershire, which had been the home of plantsman Walter Butt from 1920 to 1940. Butt had cleared and planted the sloping 3ha site himself. By the time he left, the garden at Hyde Lodge featured one of the finest tree and shrub collections in the country. However, labour shortages during the Second World War meant that it had been left to run wild. By the time the Mathiases moved in on 24 January

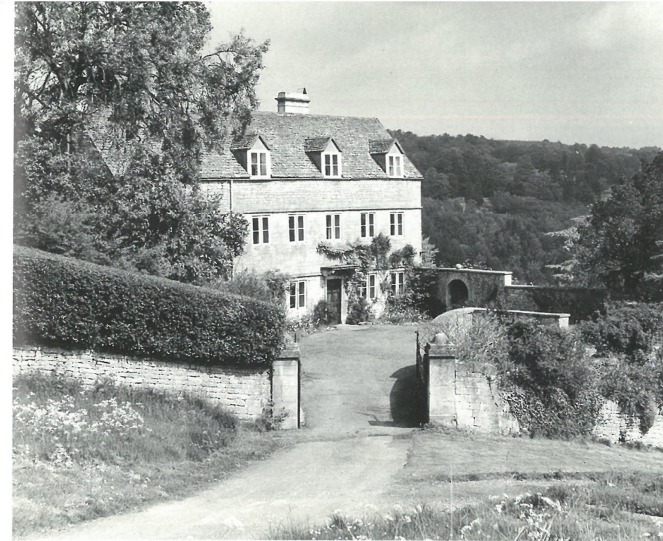
1947, Butt's creation was hidden under an impenetrable tangle of brambles.

### Snowdrop emergence

As the removal lorry rumbled away up the drive, it started to snow and by the following week, Hyde Lodge was snowed in. It was the beginning of one of the worst winters of the century and the whole country was paralysed by ice and blizzards for weeks. It was spring before the drifts blocking the lanes around Hyde Lodge melted but in the garden, sheltered by trees and untrimmed hedges and protected by the thickets of shrubs and tangled brambles, the snow covering was relatively light. From the overgrown paths it was possible to see clumps of tall snowdrops poking through the snow. On closer inspection, it was apparent that these snowdrops were not the familiar *Galanthus nivalis* of the hedgerow but long-stemmed giants with wide leaves and large flowers.

Winifrede Mathias, a keen gardener, was intrigued. She got in touch with Arthur Cotton, who had been Keeper of the Herbarium at Kew until he retired to the nearby village of Pitchcombe in 1946, and asked him to help identify the plants. Cotton was as puzzled as she was, but he promised to write to Butt, who now lived in Bristol, and ask him about the snowdrops. He also said he would consult Sir Frederick Stern, an authority on *Galanthus*.

Meanwhile, once the weather improved, work on the garden could begin. This was undertaken by Herbert Ransom, who had been chauffeur for Winifrede's family in Norfolk before the War and had come with the Mathiases to Gloucestershire. As motoring was severely curtailed by petrol rationing, Ransom agreed to work in the garden. He, and a Polish refugee,



Giant Snowdrop Company archive



Mathias family

began to clear round the house, digging out brambles and thinning the overgrown shrubs and trees. Everyone who visited helped, and gradually, as the painstaking work moved down the hillside, the bones of the old garden began to reappear.

When Cotton consulted Butt about the snowdrops, Butt said that he thought that the most impressive of the plants described to him must be one that was then known as *G. 'Arnott's Seedling'*. It was with great excitement that Ransom reported the following season that, close to the path towards the bottom of the hill, a solid strip measuring about 2.7m x 60cm of 'Arnott's Seedling' was in full flower and the air was full of the flowers' delicate honey scent. All over the garden, in the newly-cleared areas, snowdrops were appearing, and Ransom began to notice the differences between individual flowers and leaves.

It was the start of what was to become an absorbing passion. As the years passed, Ransom became an acknowledged expert. Under his increasingly experienced care, the snowdrops in the garden flourished. He thinned out crowded clumps, lifting bulbs in the green and replanting them with plenty of room to spread.



Mathias family

Hyde Lodge (top left) was the headquarters of the nursery where Herbert Ransom (top right) was in charge of snowdrop cultivation and Winifrede and Leonard Mathias (above) were the proprietors

### Snowdrop sales

By 1951 the garden snowdrops had multiplied so successfully that Winifrede Mathias considered selling them wholesale to bulb merchants. First though, she wanted to exhibit them at one of the RHS shows. She thought that the sight of magnificent snowdrops such as 'Arnott's Seedling' would pique people's interest, and she was confident that she and Ransom now knew enough about them to mount an effective display.

When Cotton gave her the dates of the 1951 spring shows, she and Ransom were ready and they exhibited the Hyde Lodge

snowdrops for first time on 6 March. They set up an old army trestle table and she artfully arranged clumps of snowdrops including *G. 'Arnott's Seedling'*, *G. 'Atkinsii'* and *G. nivalis* 'Scharlockii' among a carpet of leaves, moss and bark. Their success was immediate and both 'Arnott's Seedling' and a snowdrop that Sir Frederick Stern had identified as *G. 'Merlin'* received Awards of Merit.

It was later established that the plant identified by Stern as 'Merlin' was actually *G. 'Colesborne'* (an earlier spelling of Colesbourne estate). Also, Edward A Bowles, an authority on garden snowdrops, provided a new name, *Galanthus* ➤



Giant Snowdrop Company archive



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Although admired at the time, *Galanthus* 'Colesborne' (above left) proved to be weak and stocks dwindled. *Galanthus* 'S. Arnott' flourished in great numbers at Hyde Lodge (above right)

'S. Arnott', for 'Arnott's Seedling'; the new name now takes precedence. While these nomenclatural tangles were being straightened out, the interest aroused by their display convinced Winifrede Mathias that there was a market for choice snowdrops. She thought demand was sufficient to justify selling their bulbs directly to the public, without bothering with other bulb companies.

Leonard Mathias agreed and they set up the Giant Snowdrop Company. This was a pioneering venture at a time when snowdrops were so far from fashionable that for most gardeners the word simply meant *G. nivalis*. The Mathiases hoped that the interest displayed by visitors at the show would translate into sales and, on a domestic note, that their new business would help pay Ransom's wages.

**Identification issues**

They had to be very sure, though, before they sold a single bulb that they had the names right. Over the next few months strenuous efforts were made to identify the remaining snowdrops. Cotton had put them in touch with Butt, but although he visited the garden on various

occasions and gave Ransom good advice about snowdrop cultivation, he did not have a planting plan and admitted that 'his memory of the snowdrops at Hyde Lodge and where they were planted has nearly gone'. Later on, when prompted by queries about specific plants, Butt was able to remember more, but there was still what he called 'a jumble of varieties' to sort out. Bowles offered to help, and when the Mathiases sent him packages of moss-wrapped flowers for his opinion, he was able to differentiate between several similar snowdrops and give names to some of the more problematic plants.

By the beginning of February 1952, the first catalogue – a simple printed list – had been prepared and a draft was sent to Bowles for his comments. As well as the snowdrops exhibited the previous year, the list contained *G. 'Brenda Troyle'* as identified by Bowles, *G. 'Atkinsii'*, *G. 'Magnet'*, *G. x allenii*, *G. nivalis* 'Viridapice', *G. ikariae*, *G. plicatus* and *G. plicatus* subsp. *byzantinus*. *Leucojum* 'Gravetye Giant' was also offered. These plants became the heart of the business, although limited quantities of a few other snowdrops were offered once stocks



Julie Barenreau / OAP



Carol Sheppard / RHS



Tom Searles / RHS

**GALANTHUS (Snowdrops)**

	Prices	
	Per Each	Per 100
<b>G.X Colesbourne A.M., R.H.S. 1951</b>		
A new variety of magnificent quality. It has huge white flowers with green inner segments frilled with white. Height 7-9 inches ...	7/6	
<b>G.nivalis S. Arnott A.M., R.H.S. 1951</b>		
A superb sweetly scented snowdrop, each bulb producing a perfect flower borne on a strong stem 10-12 inches long; the outer perianth segments are one inch long and pure white, while the inner segments are marked with a crescent of green on the outside and green lines within ...	4/-	46/- £18
<b>G.nivalis Scharlokii</b>		
An unusual snowdrop of medium size, the flower surmounted by a divided spathe. The petals have pale green lines on the outside ...	2/-	22/-

Giant Snowdrop Company archive



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The catalogue (above left), such as this example from 1952, gave good descriptions and 'S. Arnott' was obviously available in quantity. *Galanthus* 'Straffan' (above right) was a popular cultivar, first listed in 1955.

had built up. It transpired that *G. 'Colesborne'* was not robust and the Hyde Lodge stock dwindled away, in spite of Ransom's care, and it was not offered after 1959.

**Business essentials**

A routine was soon established. Ransom was in charge of everything to do with cultivating the snowdrops and lifting them for despatch. Parcelling up the plants was the responsibility of Leonard Mathias, who revealed a talent for packing, and took carloads of neat, sturdy packages down to Chalford post office. Purchasers frequently commented on how well the beautifully packed plants had travelled. Winifrede Mathias dealt with correspondence and did all the typing and book-keeping.

Every year, she and Ransom would take their snowdrops up to one or two of the early RHS spring shows, and she would artfully display the snowdrops to best advantage. As their knowledge grew the displays became increasingly informative and, by the mid 1960s, the Giant Snowdrop Company stand was not only beautiful but also instructive. Gwladys Tonge (1974) was enthralled, 'Another time I spent the

whole morning at a stand entirely devoted to snowdrops. This was a revelation ... a superb exhibit, moss and grass and a few dead leaves covered the ground from which these beauties grew, highlighted here and there by a few aconites. At first it was just the artistry that attracted me. Then I studied the nearby display of photographs and botanical drawings. There was more there than could be learned in an hour, or even two. As I turned back to the flowers, I felt very humble when I realized how many plant collectors and botanists, how much learning and research had combined to make this exhibit possible'.

In total, the Giant Snowdrop Company was awarded six Lindley Medals and three Flora Medals for its displays at RHS shows. Butt visited the garden for the last time in May 1953. Before he died in October he knew that the snowdrops he had collected during his tenure at Hyde Lodge were in good hands and that they would be preserved, in the best tradition of snowdrop collectors, by being distributed.

**Expanding range**

In 1954 the Giant Snowdrop Company issued a second and



*Galanthus* 'Armine' (left) was regarded as the best of the Hyde Four, four cultivars named by Ransom and EB Anderson, which also included *G.* 'Ransom' (right)

much more polished catalogue. It had a fine black-and-white cover photograph showing an extensive area of the garden covered by *G.* 'S. Arnott'. The caption explained that this magnificent display was a result of careful lifting and then replanting the bulbs 15cm apart. The Company knew that it was not enough just to sell its snowdrops – it also had to give practical advice on the best ways of cultivating them.

*Galanthus plicatus* 'Warham' was included for the first time, while Spanish bluebells and *Rodgersia pinnata* and *R. podophylla* were also listed. Seeds of many of the trees and shrubs in the garden were offered but this was not repeated in subsequent catalogues – Winifrede Mathias and Ransom much preferred snowdrops.

The Company provided a focus for anyone with snowdrop questions or information and Winifrede Mathias made a point of asking her correspondents for the history of particular snowdrops. Robert Arnott, Samuel Arnott's son, wrote in 1960 to say that he had met one of his father's friends who confirmed that his father had raised the eponymous snowdrop, *G.* 'S. Arnott'. In 1958 they were contacted by Winifred Headlam, whose father found a double snowdrop with

yellow marks, named *G. nivalis* 'Lady Elphinstone' after her mother. David Shackleton wrote from Ireland in 1960 with a letter from James Hill Poë's daughter about her father's discovery of a double snowdrop named *G.* 'Hill Poë'.

Recollections such as these about the provenance of individual cultivars, which Winifrede Mathias so carefully elicited from her correspondents, would very probably have been lost without her efforts. Butt commented that when Bowles died, much snowdrop lore would be lost; but without the Giant Snowdrop Company, even more would have vanished. The details contained in the Company's archive were included in Bishop *et al.* (2001)

People sent snowdrops to the Company to be identified, and others wrote offering to sell or swap their surplus bulbs. The collection expanded as Winifrede Mathias exchanged rarities with her customers. Extra bulbs acquired in this way could be grown on to supplement the stocks at Hyde Lodge. Although the rarer snowdrops could still only be offered in limited quantities, more were available to fill orders than would otherwise have been possible.

Ransom eventually worked out that there had been around 15 to 20

different snowdrops in the garden when they arrived, but through exchange and purchase the collection was increased to more than 100. He and Winifrede Mathias visited other snowdrop collectors. They also went round gardens or villages where collectors had once lived, to see if old snowdrops had survived or, more excitingly, if there were new variants to be found.

Collectors such as EB Anderson also visited Hyde Lodge and, in the late 1950s, he and Ransom named four new snowdrops – the Hyde Four – the finest of which they called 'Armine' after the Mathias's daughter. The others were 'Ransom', 'Sally Ann' and 'Winifrede Mathias'.

Oliver Wyatt was so delighted by his visit in February 1965 that he wrote immediately to let the Mathiases know, 'how deeply impressed I was with your wonderful snowdrop collection and the way you cultivate them. All mad snowdrop-worshippers should come to your shrine and fall prostrate. Ransom is a most remarkable high priest. You are lucky to have him'.

#### Final years

*Galanthus* 'S. Arnott', the Company's flagship snowdrop, was cultivated to perfection at Hyde Lodge, but other best-sellers such as *G.* 'Atkinsii' were



The other two Hyde Four cultivars were *G.* 'Winifrede Mathias' (left), and *G.* 'Sally Ann' (right) named after Herbert Ransom's eldest daughter

bought in quantity whenever possible. *Galanthus* 'Straffan', first listed in 1955, became one of the Company's most popular cultivars and hundreds of bulbs were bought from Nancy Dalgety in Ireland. Purchased bulbs could be grown on until Ransom decided they were ready to be lifted again and sent out. Twin-scaling has now revolutionized snowdrop production but it was not an option at the time.

The last catalogue, issued in 1965, included a fine photograph of *G. elwesii*. This snowdrop had not been among those originally in the garden in 1947, but Ransom planted it and it did so well that it eventually

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is based on three principal sources:

- i) The letters and miscellaneous papers of the Giant Snowdrop Company archive which will be deposited in due course at the RHS Lindley Library.
- ii) A series of taped conversations that took place in 1982 and 1983 between Herbert Ransom and John and Daphne Chappell – the authors are most grateful to them for digitizing the tapes and giving them copies.
- iii) The personal recollections of Quentin and Christl Mathias, and Sally Ann Berryman.

The authors are very grateful for all their help.

naturalized under the trees.

*Galanthus elwesii* was first listed by the Company in 1959, but stocks of bulbs in the green were limited and, to meet the high demand, the Company followed contemporary practice by supplying dried bulbs imported from Turkey in the autumn. Dried *G. elwesii* bulbs were also cheaper for those who wanted to make bulk plantings.

By 1966, Leonard Mathias was 76 and his health was failing. He and Winifrede decided at the end of the year to wind the Company up and move somewhere with a smaller, flatter garden where Ransom would still be able to tend his collection. Much of the stock was sold to Walter Stagg at Broadleigh Gardens. In 1968 the Mathiases moved to Painswick, Gloucestershire, accompanied by Ransom and his family.

#### Conclusion

In the 21 years they had spent at Hyde Lodge, Winifrede Mathias and particularly Ransom had become experts on garden snowdrops and their cultivation. Their living legacy lay in gardens across the country, where snowdrop rarities ordered from the Company flourished. They used the Company's regular displays at RHS shows and its informative illustrated catalogues to transmit

their knowledge and enthusiasm to gardeners. They encouraged those who had never grown snowdrop rarities to order a few bulbs. Those who did so were not disappointed by the well-grown, carefully packed plants they received, and by the way their snowdrops multiplied.

In retirement, Ransom made certain that his most precious snowdrops would survive by giving away many bulbs. He passed them to the next generation of snowdrop lovers, including Richard Nutt and Primrose Warburg.

It is really no exaggeration to say that, during its 16 years' existence, the Giant Snowdrop Company rescued snowdrops from horticultural oblivion and laid the foundations of their current popularity.

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