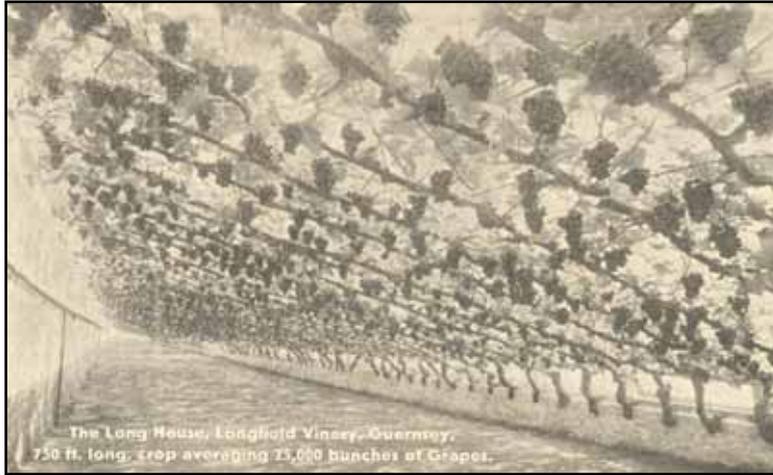


Grapes and the Horticulture Industry

Towards the end of the 18th century the cultivation of table grapes in Guernsey developed from humble beginnings into a major export industry. The skills of the local boat builders and carpenters were put to good use with the design and



construction of glazed wooden “lean-tos” which were traditionally erected against gable walls of farm houses and cottages around the island.

The early lean-tos were unheated, relying solely on the sun to heat the air space under the glass. This system was improved later on with the introduction of cast

Traditional "vine-house" lean-to. Early 20th century.

iron heating pipes that would carry hot water through the grape-houses allowing heat to be given off. This was a crucial development in the expansion of the grape industry on the island as it enabled the grape growing season to be extended into the shoulder months of the year which were much colder. Normally this would have been impossible as low sunlight levels and insufficient heat would have stunted the growth of the grapes. With the introduction of piped water heating the growing season of the crop could be artificially extended which, in turn, meant better financial rewards for the Guernsey growers.

A typical lean-to would comprise of a low granite wall (approx. 2ft high) some 20ft out from the main wall which it ran parallel to. A sloping timber frame was built from the top of the high wall (or gable wall of the house) down onto the short wall and was glazed with



Grower tending his crop on a sliding ladder. 1938.

12” x 20” panes of glass. The main strength of the structure came from a series of 3” x 9” timber ‘principles’ which ran between the walls. Interspersed between these were the wooden glazing bars into rebates in which the panes of glass were fitted. The distance between the principles would allow sufficient space for six panes of glass to be fitted with their glazing bars. These areas between the principles became known as “bays”. A lean-to could run anywhere from 30 ft up to 100ft in length.

The vines were actually planted outside the lean-to and grown through holes in the low granite wall. This was a deliberate act which enabled the plant to take-up moisture and nutrients from a large soil area outside the lean-to whilst having the benefit of growing all its trunk, foliage and fruit under the warmth and protection of the glass. In later years the unused soil area inside the lean-to



underneath the grape vines was to become an ideal place to grow secondary crops such as beans and tomatoes. The tomato was to eventually take over from the grape as 'the' export item with hundreds of thousands of tons being shipped out every year.

As the grape industry developed beyond simply supplying the local market demands, growers began exporting the fruit to England. Paddle steamers, and

Grape crates waiting to be winched aboard steamer. Late 19th century.

later screw steamers, shipped wooden crates containing the wicker baskets of grapes across the Channel to ports such as Southampton and Weymouth from where the produce was taken by rail to markets across the country.

As the grape industry grew in size with the demands from mainland markets growers on the Island expanded their growing methods. The local boat builders and carpenters again came to the fore by designing and building full span greenhouses in which to grow the vines.

The process of cultivating the vine was a dedicated and laborious one. In order to maximise the crop a process of "thinning out" had to be undertaken as the vines grew. This was designed to reduce the number of leaves and remove new shoots from the plant so that the vine would put all its energy into swelling the fruit



Span greenhouse with well established vines. Late 19th century.



A "grape-thinner". Late 19th century.

on the bunches of grapes that were already formed. This process was extremely time consuming and was often performed by women or boys because they had small hands and could reach in amongst the foliage and cut out the shoots with tiny pairs of scissors. These thinning teams would usually work off step ladders to get up into the higher parts of the vine towards the centre of the greenhouse.

When ripe the fruit was picked very carefully to ensure that the fine white "bloom" on the surface was not rubbed off. This was an extremely important feature of table grapes as it prevented moisture loss and the decay of the fruit. A good white bloom was felt to indicate freshness and quality and so was highly prized. Growers would ensure that during harvesting the grape bunches were only handled by their stalks and were laid on coloured tissue paper in the wicker baskets to prevent bruising and rubbing. This would ensure that the fruit would travel safely and arrive at its market destination in the best possible condition – commanding the very best price.

The export of grapes from Guernsey was superseded by the tomato which began its life as a secondary crop which was grown at certain times underneath the vines to give growers a little extra income and variety. It proceeded to become an export industry which shipped out millions of trays of fruit each season and upon which the Island's economy relied for £100,000s of income for almost 100 years.