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7.6. Shropshire Horticultural Society

This text has been prepared for VCH Shropshire by Sara Downs. It is made available to readers in advance of its full publication. We welcome suggestions for improvement, references and, of course, we invite readers to point out errors.

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7.6 Shropshire Horticultural Society

The Shropshire Horticultural Society supports horticultural education in Shropshire, particularly through its flagship event the Shrewsbury Flower Show. The current Shropshire Horticultural Society was founded in 1875 but was not the first to put on horticultural shows in Shrewsbury. In the 1830s and 1840s, the Shrewsbury and Shropshire Horticultural Society and Salop Horticultural Society held flower shows in the town.¹ In 1853, the Shropshire Botanical and Horticultural Society was established.² The society's first show was held in 1854 at the racecourse along with the National Archery Meeting and also in the Quarry.³ However, the shows put on by the Society were discontinued after August 1866.⁴

The present Shropshire Horticultural Society was established in October 1875. following a successful flower and horticultural exhibition held at the Quarry in Shrewsbury on 29 and 30 July 1875. The success of the show and the existence of shows in other towns in the county encouraged the townspeople to create a permanent horticultural society to support a regular show in the county town.⁵ Initially, the society provided up to three shows each year with the summer fete, now the Shrewsbury Flower Show, as the main attraction.⁶ At first, it consisted of horticultural competitions with the addition of entertainments such as military bands and sports. Fireworks were added in 1876 and show jumping (initially called horse leaping) in 1891.⁷

The Shrewsbury Flower Show is held annually in the Quarry in Shrewsbury over a two-day period in August. The attendance and profits of the show have fluctuated over the years due to economic and global crises. The first show made a profit of £409 with £96 prize money set aside for 79 classes of exhibits.⁸ The second show, the first under the newly formed Horticultural Society, made a profit of £59 16s. 11d. The society increased the prize money to £230 for 111 horticultural classes.⁹ The show was interrupted for the two world wars.¹⁰ After both pauses the show had successful comebacks. In 1920, it resumed with an

¹ SC, 2 Oct. 1835; *Eddowes's Shrewsbury J.*, 7 Aug. 1844. The Florist Society held a Carnation and Gooseberry Show at the Crown Inn as early as 1823; SC, 15 Aug. 1823.

² *Eddowes's Shrewsbury Journal*, 19 Oct. 1853.

³ SA, 665/3/406; SA, 665/3/415.

⁴ *Wellington Journal and Shrewsbury News*, 18 Aug. 1866.

⁵ *Eddowes's Shrewsbury Journal*, 4 Aug. 1875.

⁶ SA, 3122/1/1.

⁷ SA, 3122/4/3; SA 3122/1/1.

⁸ G. Riley, *The World's Wonder Show* (nd, c. 1987), p. 15.

⁹ *Eddowes*, 18 Oct. 1876; Riley, *The World's Wonder Show*, p. 17.

¹⁰ 1914-19 and 1940-46.

estimated attendance of 108,000.¹¹ The profits of £5740 11s. 7d. increased from the £1660 2s. 11d. achieved in 1913.¹² In 1947 the show returned with an estimated attendance of 180,000 people.¹³ The profits raised were estimated at £3844 19s. 8d. up from the £1037 13s. 1d. realised in 1939.¹⁴ In the early 1970s the Society was subject to financial difficulties especially after a disastrous show in 1970 when two inches of rain fell on the first day.¹⁵ The pressures were alleviated with the financial support of its members, the use of volunteers and changing the days of the event from Wednesday and Thursday to Friday and Saturday.¹⁶ In 2025 the show was again cancelled due to losses sustained by the Society. This was partly due to the Covid 19 pandemic which prevented the show being held in 2020 and 2021 and rising costs due to large events having to provide additional security measures.¹⁷

The rules of the society required there to be at least thirty members of whom seven were to be professional gardeners from the county of Shropshire.¹⁸ Notable members of the Society have included William Adams and Percy Thrower. Adams received a cup for fifty years of service in 1938.¹⁹ He kept the work of the society to the forefront during the two pauses of the show during the two world wars.²⁰ Percy Thrower (1913-88) was the parks superintendent in Shrewsbury from 1946 until 1974. He was responsible for restoring the Quarry and the Dingle following the Second World War. Mr Thrower, who was chairman of the Society in 1975-6, was influential in the continuation of the Shrewsbury Flower Show. His successful second career in broadcasting influenced the ever-changing entertainment provided at the flower show.²¹ In 1970, he acted as a joint guarantor to help the flower show through financial difficulties.²²

The Shropshire Horticultural Society was registered as a charity in 1972. In 2023 it had 26 trustees. It achieves its charitable object of supporting horticultural education through the delivery of the Shrewsbury Flower Show, supporting The Young Horticulturalist of the Year

¹¹ SC, 20 Aug. 1920; *Wellington J.* 21 Aug. 1920.

¹² SC, 3 June 1921; 20 Mar. 1914.

¹³ *Wellington J.*, 23 Aug. 1947.

¹⁴ £5844 19s. 8d. after entertainment tax but before estimated income tax of £2000. SC, 9 Apr. 1948; *Wellington J.*, 11 May 1940.

¹⁵ Riley, *World's Wonder Show*, p. 67.

¹⁶ Riley, *World's Wonder Show*, pp. 68-71.

¹⁷ *Shropshire Star*, 16 Apr. 2025.

¹⁸ Riley, *World's Wonder Show*, p. 17. For the founding members, *ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁹ SC, 19 Aug. 1938; Riley, *World's Wonder Show*, p. 17.

²⁰ Riley, *World's Wonder Show*, p. 25.

²¹ Riley, *World's Wonder Show*, p. 38. For Thrower, see his obituary in *The Times* 19 Mar. 1988 and his autobiography, *My lifetime of gardening* (1977). There is also an autobiography by Timothy O'Sullivan (1990).

²² *Shropshire Star*, 10 Jan. 2022.

competition through the Percy Thrower Bursary, and lectures.²³ The Society is also associated with the Shropshire Horticultural Society (Wisley Trainee) Charitable Trust which provides bursaries for local students to undertake Royal Horticultural Society training.²⁴

The Society has made donations to the town of Shrewsbury and the wider community. It received the Honorary Freedom of the Borough of Shrewsbury for donations in excess of £200,000.²⁵ Many donations have provided improvements to the Quarry. In 1911 the Society purchased Salt's field increasing the size of the Quarry.²⁶ It provided the bandstand in 1879, the park gates in 1881 and Quarry Lodge in 1886. Quarry Lodge was once the accommodation for the parks superintendent. It is now the home of the Society.²⁷ Other major donations made to the town include the presentation of the Charles Darwin statue to the town in 1897 and the purchase of Shrewsbury Castle in 1924.²⁸ The society has provided funds to many local community projects including the Port Hill bridge in 1922.²⁹ In 2001 the society donated £565,00 to the Quarry restoration project.³⁰ Donations have also been given to many local gardening landscaping and restoration projects in Shrewsbury and in the county.³¹

²³ <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/en/charity-search/-/charity-details/501564>, Accessed, 10 Dec. 2024.

²⁴ <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/en/charity-search/-/charity-details/701677>, Accessed, 16 June 2025.

²⁵ Riley, *World's Wonder Show*, p. 22. For a full list of donations, see *ibid.*, pp. 101-2.

²⁶ SA 3122/1/2; SA 4122/4/3.

²⁷ SA 3122/1/1; SA 3122/4/3; Riley, *World's Wonder Show*, p. 60.

²⁸ SA 3122/4/3; D 64 v.f., Borough of Shrewsbury, *Opening of Shrewsbury Castle 21st January 1926, at 3 p.m. by the Right Honourable Lord Barnard, President, Shropshire Horticultural Society.*

²⁹ SA 3122/1/2.

³⁰ SC, 1 Feb. 2001.

³¹ Riley, *World's Wonder Show*, pp. 101-2.