



The Hundred Parishes

Introduction to a famous local person . . .

THOMAS RIVERS (1797 – 1877)

Thomas Rivers was a renowned nurseryman. For 50 years, he ran and developed the family horticultural business in Sawbridgeworth, leading the way in fruit tree breeding and cultivation and building national and international recognition

Thomas's grandfather, John Rivers, had come to Sawbridgeworth from Berkshire in 1725 and founded the nursery in what he regarded as an ideal location with excellent soil on the southwestern side of the town. Over the next hundred years, John and succeeding generations steadily expanded the business so that Rivers Nurseries was already well-known for its roses and trees by the time Thomas took the reins in 1827.

Under Thomas's leadership, the scale of operation of the nurseries accelerated through concentration of its focus on the cultivation and breeding of fruit trees. New varieties were developed to suit specific needs. The Victorian era was a good time to grow the business, with increased private wealth, expanded interest in plants, railways easing transportation, and particularly the removal of the tax on glass in 1845 which made cultivation under glass viable. Rivers embraced advances in growing techniques and heating systems for glasshouses, in particular growing fruit trees in pots.

Thomas Rivers promoted his ideas in his books *The Miniature Fruit Garden* and *The Orchard House, or the Cultivation of Fruit Trees in Pots under Glass*. He corresponded with Charles Darwin, exchanging thoughts and ideas on their shared interest in botany and evolution. Darwin contributed to the cost of a painting of Thomas Rivers that was commissioned in 1870 to recognize his contribution to horticulture.

The nursery flourished and earned an international reputation. It was famously known for developing the variety of orange upon which California became established as a major orange grower. The nursery developed varieties of many kinds of fruit including apples, pears, peaches, apricots, nectarines, plums, cherries, raspberries and strawberries. At its peak, Rivers Nursery stocked hundreds of varieties of fruit trees.

Thomas Rivers died in 1877. He was, in fact, the third Thomas Rivers to run the family business, and two more Thomases followed. His son Thomas Francis Rivers continued the nursery's success and it probably reached its peak during his era, employing over



100 men on a site of more than 300 acres. This Thomas was chairman of the International Fruit Conference at the time the nursery produced the Conference pear in the 1890s. This is still the main commercial variety in the UK.

Rivers Nursery existed for over 260 years until its closure in the 1980s. Some of the site was used for housing development and some for a private hospital which opened in 1992 as the Thomas Rivers Medical Centre. Since then, the centre has expanded steadily and is now called Rivers Hospital.

Around 1% of the nursery site is now maintained by a volunteer group, Rivers Heritage Site and Orchard.

Further information:

Rivers Nursery of Sawbridgeworth, Elizabeth Waugh, 2010.

Rivers Heritage Site and Orchard - <http://www.rhso.co.uk/>

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