PENNICKS OF DELGANY

Mary Forrest tells the story of a once notable nursery

Just outside the village of Delgany in County Wicklow, a road skirts a high wall that once marked the edge of a major demesne, the La Touche family's Bellevue. On the opposite side of this road, part way along, there is an area marked on old Ordnance Survey maps as 'Nursery'. This was the site of a horticultural enterprise that operated for more than a century and which, although long-gone, has left behind a legacy of mature trees.

Little is known about the origins of the nursery. Mr Michael Pennick had been gardener at Bellevue for the La Touche family in the late 1700s. The connection between the La Touches and the Pennicks continued into the following century when Michael Pennick or perhaps his son started the nursery. An undated catalogue of Pennick & Co., Delgany, Co. Wicklow, probably from the late nineteenth century, states that the nursery was established in 1820 and it is shown in about 1840 on the first Ordnance Survey sheet, when it was divided into three field units with buildings at the eastern side. The Griffith Valuation of 1852 records that Michael Pennick was then renting some six acres of land to the value of £20 and 46 acres of land with offices (outbuildings) and house to the value of £65 at Kindlestown Upper, Delgany, from Peter La Touche. A notice of probate in the *Freeman's Journal* in May 1871 records that Michael Peter Pennick died in December 1870.

According to this undated catalogue, the nursery was located 1.5 miles from Greystones railway station on the Dublin, Wicklow and Wexford line (important when many orders were despatched by rail) and 17 miles south of Dublin at an elevation of 400 feet. A notice appeared in the *Freeman's Journal* in 1872: Upper Kendalstown Nurseries, Delgany, Co. Wicklow, The 'stock of Forest Trees, Evergreens, Coniferae, Rhododendrons, Heaths &c. is unrivalled for health, beauty, and variety,' Catalogues were issued on application. Catalogues dated 1894, 1895 and 1898 together with later undated catalogues held in the Library, National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, provide more information. In the catalogue of 1894 a group of twelve men and three horses are shown in a fruit field.

By this time Mr Thomas Chalmers, late of the nursery firm Dickson's, was manager, while from the early 1900s the name Ireton Pennick Jones was associated with the company. Census returns for 1911 record that Jones was 37, his wife Ethel Jones was 28 and they had two daughters Olga and Rose Charlotte. His occupation was given as auctioneer. An extract in a local directory of 1910 provides a later snapshot of Pennick & Co. They then described themselves as nurserymen, landscape gardeners, forest planters and valuers, and contactable by

telephone at 1 Greystones and by telegram 'Pennick, Delgany'.

The earlier catalogues listed the names and prices of a comprehensive selection of fruit trees as well as a wide range of trees and shrubs, roses, alpines and herbaceous plants. Later catalogues ran to over 100 pages, were illustrated, and provided concise descriptions of trees and shrubs. The company ran an advertisement in *The Irish Times* 'Does any garden lover desire Pennick's Picturesque Catalogue?' Illustrated catalogues included pictures of large monkey puzzles, *Araucaria araucana*, the 'cabbage palm' *Cordyline australis*, and the stone pine, *Pinus radiata*. Of *Cordyline australis*, then uncommon, Pennick Jones wrote that one 'carried 28 inflorescences' which 'is quite unprecedented' and a photograph of the tree was awarded first prize by *Gardening Illustrated*, an English gardening magazine of the period. The monkey puzzles were 'so ornate with their pendulatory branches', that it was doubted 'if they are excelled in the Kingdom' (i.e. Britain and Ireland).

Among the other fine conifer specimens on the nursery were a stone pine at 40 feet with a 9-foot girth, the cedar, *Cedrus atlantica* 'Glauca', and Italian cypress *Cupressus sempervirens* 'Fastigiata' at 40 feet. These trees must have been planted in the 1870s or 1880s. The nursery supplied a selection of recently introduced Himalayan rhododendrons of which one was noted in the newspapers — *Rhododendron arboreum* had a 25-foot spread with deep scarlet flowers. The nursery also grew kowhai, *Sophora microphylla*, from New Zealand, then and now uncommon.

£100 FREE INSURANCE—vide page 8.
Nursery situate 400 FEET ABOVE SEA LEVEL.

CATALOGUE
OF PROVEN HARDY
Flowering Shrubs & Roses
FRUIT AND FOREST TREES,
GROWN BY
PENNICK & CO
DELGANY NURSERIES, Co. Wicklow.

ENTRANCE TO THE NURSERY.
NURSERY 1½ miles from GREYSTONES Station, 17 miles south of DUBLIN.
Telegrams—"PENNICKS, DELGANY."
All Plants delivered FREE AT GREYSTONES STATION, D.W.W.R.
Care taken in selection and packing. Once despatched responsibility ceases.
Plant EARLY. Dig Holes EARLIER.

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"Every man should plant a tree."—Ruskin.

Front cover of catalogue, with advice 'Plant EARLY Dig holes EARLIER'
(courtesy Library, NBG).

Indicative of the interest in fruit gardens in the early twentieth century, they supplied varieties of apples, pears, cherries, damsons, currants, figs, gooseberries, Japanese wineberry, raspberries, strawberries, loganberries together with nuts and filberts.

The catalogues also advertised that the company undertook landscape gardening and that they sent 'experienced men' to undertake 'job gardening'. They advertised 'LANDSCAPE GARDENING: In all its Branches/*INCLUDING*—/Laying-out of New and Renovation of Old Gardens,/FOREST and PARK PLANTING./THE FORMATION AND PLANTING OF/Rockeries, Waterfalls, Ornamental Lakes.'.

As the cover of a catalogue shows, the nursery maintained display gardens, with conifer borders, herbaceous borders and fine specimen trees in their grounds. It attracted visits from specialist groups whose accounts provide an insight into the many interesting large specimen plants growing on the site. In the summer of 1906 there was a visit by some forty members of The Irish Gardeners' Association, an organisation which organised lectures and visits for their members who were employed in nurseries, seed shops and private gardens. Mr Jones was President at that time.

A report in *Irish Gardening* described how members of the Association admired ivy-leaved pelargoniums and marguerites growing in front gardens as they walked from Greystones train station to the nursery, where 'everything betokened health and luxuriance of growth' . There were fine flowering specimens of *Drimys winteri*, *Crinodendron hookerianum*, *Eucryphia glutinosa* — all large South American shrubs — and white-flowered *Carpenteria californica* and a notable specimen of stone pine, both native to California. The visitors also noted the uncommon *+Laburnocytisus* 'Adamii', a graft hybrid where a purple broom is grafted into a branch of a yellow laburnum: the resulting grafted tree is unusual, part hybrid with purple-yellow, part yellow laburnum and part pale purple broom. The catalogue photograph of this 20-foot tree was

Name — Height
Araucaria Imbricata (Monkey Puzzle)
Chilian Pine ... 12 in. to 14 in. 2/- each
A well-known Conifer of noble habit.

ARAUCARIA IMBRICATA.

We claim this to be the FINEST in habit of its kind in the Kingdom, being about 20 ft. high and 8 ft. girth. Furnished from base to crown.

Page from nursery catalogue with notable monkey puzzle

published in the *Gardeners' Chronicle*, the weekly trade journal, in 1904.

In 1909 members of the Dublin Naturalists' Field Club made a similar journey. As well as studying the exotic plants they examined the weeds of cultivation under the guidance of Pennick Jones and David Houston of the Royal College of Science of Ireland. In 1923 an advertisement in *The Irish Times* read 'An ideal motor trip/To visit Pennick's nursery at Delgany and select plants whilst in Bloom'. Those who made an excursion by train or motor car had much to see.

In the early twentieth century nurseries exhibited plants at council meetings of the Royal Horticultural Society of Ireland. In May 1911 the Delgany nursery presented 'a display of hardy nursery shrubs', at an RHSI council meeting and that August some *Myrtus luma* (now *Luma apiculata*). Pennick Jones must have been very proud of this shrub. In 1913 he sent a photograph and article to the *Gardeners' Chronicle*, where he described it as a 'Snowdrift when in flower in August and September and now richly decorated with black fruit'. The fruit was used to make jam. He considered that it deserved to be more widely grown. In the nursery catalogue it was 'very rare' in Ireland and at 20-feet high 'acknowledged superb and unique'.

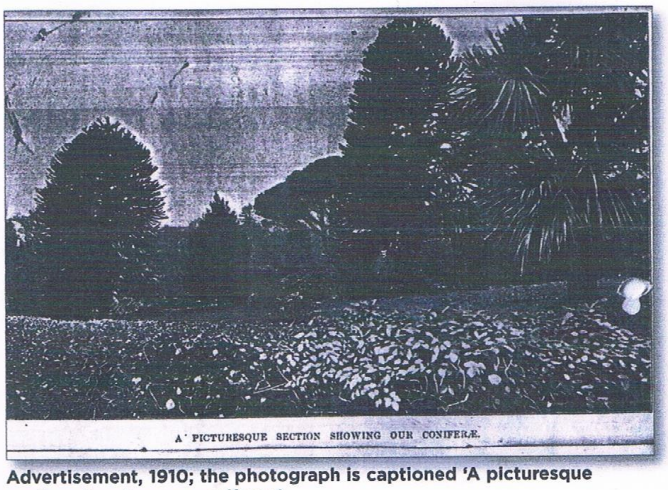
Pennick and Co., like other nurseries of the period, mounted

Surviving monkey puzzle — perhaps the one shown in the catalogue

competitive displays at various flower shows; for instance as organised by the RHSI in 1911, Terenure and District Horticultural Society in 1914 and Kingstown (Dún Laoghaire) flower shows held in the People's Park in 1915 and 1917. While the company appeared to be in decline in the 1920s, in August 1927 they were awarded a silver medal for 'Hardy Flowers' at the RHSI Show.

In November and December 1922 they held auctions of fruit trees, roses, flowering shrubs, climbers, Christmas trees and pot plants at 11 South King Street under the 'hammer' of Arthur Jones, Delgany and Dublin, auctioneer. Another notice referred to the sale of pergola poles, together with gooseberry bushes four years old at 13/6d delivered. In 1924 and 1928 they offered cabbage and cauliflower plants for sale, perhaps as a cash crop. The date of closure of the nursery is uncertain, but they advertised a clearance sale in March 1928 and in July of that year a cultivator and wooden mowing machine were for sale.

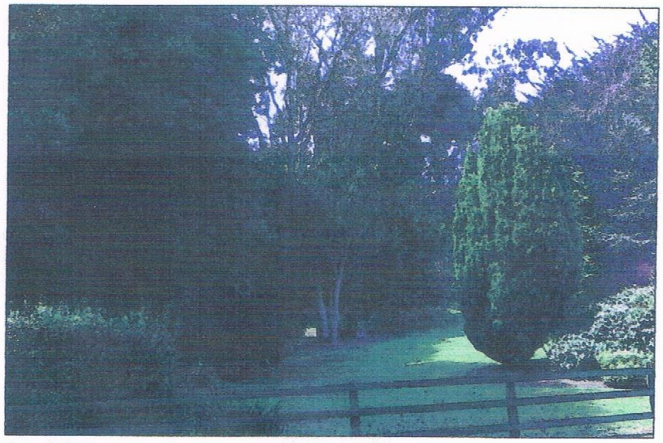
Ireton Pennick Jones had a particular interest in arboriculture. In 1909 he wrote to *The Irish Times* requesting information about suitable sites for tree planting. He noted how 'many squalid streets and neglected areas could with advantage be civilised with tree planting'. He deplored the lack of afforestation in the country and said that arboreal devastation was 'a


A PICTURESQUE SECTION SHOWING OUR CONIFERÆ.

Advertisement, 1910; the photograph is captioned 'A picturesque section showing our coniferae'

national calamity'. In 1909 correspondence with Bray Urban District Council he was prepared to supply trees at half price: he also offered a quantity of shrubs for planting on the Esplanade. An advertisement of 1921 included 'Specimen trees for avenues and streets have been specially selected'. In a letter to *The Irish Times* again in 1922 regarding trees on the Quinsborough Road, Bray, Pennick & Co. agreed that the tree selection was poor. They had grown *Ailanthus glandulosa*, the Chinese Tree of Heaven, and acacias as street trees, but without success and recommended wych elm, sycamore and London plane. They also hoped that the new State would support tree planting in rural towns.

Pennick Jones also supported Arbor Day which was organised by the Irish Forestry Society from 1904 to 1923. To mark Arbor Day in November 1916, standard apple trees donated by Pennick & Co. among others, were planted by students of the Irish College of Gardening for Women, Meanee, Terenure, Dublin.



Pennick trees survive in present-day gardens

A year later they were one of the companies that supplied birch and purple beech trees for Arbor Day planting at Harold's Cross Park in Dublin. Pennick & Co. must have supplied many gardens with unusual trees and shrubs, however apart from Rowallane. Co. Down, no information about other customers has come to light.

After the nursery closed, the site appears to have remained little used until the last decades of the twentieth century, when part of it, at least, was built upon. Kendalstown Rise follows the south-east side of the former nursery, lined with houses in extensive grounds where a number of noble trees remain among the modern lawns, flower beds, trees and shrubs. Some slight traces of glasshouses have survived and the Pennick name is not forgotten locally. ■