**Short History**

**Perennial – Gardeners’ Royal Benevolent Society**

Perennial – Gardeners’ Royal Benevolent Society is a charity founded in 1839 by a group of people concerned with gardening and with commercial nurseries. Originally the focus was on head gardeners – the Society (or “Institution” as it was then called) helped by giving pensions. The main source of income was ‘subscriptions’ paid in to the charity’s funds each year be people working in the business but also important, right from the start, were donations from wealthy land and garden owning people. In those days gardening was labour intensive, employing large numbers of low paid workers. Sickness and injury were all too frequent, owing to the nature of the work. A particular problem related to tied cottages, with many gardeners losing their homes when they became too old to work. They faced destitution and the workhouse.

Given the size of the gardening workforce employed on the estates of royalty, the aristocracy and the wealthy – and the visibility of the problem – the charity enjoyed a considerable standing in, and support from, the upper echelons of society.

From early in the 20th century Perennial began to appeal for funds from the general gardening public – the first garden open days were held just after the First World War. The beginnings of a decline in employment in gardening were evident, but hidden amid the general unemployment problems of the Depression.

After the Second World War it was decided to help older people in need of accommodation. Money was raised to buy a home in Horton, a village within easy access of London, which opened in 1952, and was extended in the mid 1950’s. Called a ‘country home’, rather than a care or nursing home, many of the people living there were fit and active, enjoying a busy retirement including lots of gardening. In 1969 the decision was taken to move the home to Henfield in West Sussex, a village offering a better quality of rural life for retired gardeners than burgeoning Heathrow Airport area. Gradually, though, the ‘country home’ became more and more a care home and in the 1990’s a nursing home. Against this background of changing social attitudes towards old age, the number of referrals steadily dropped. In 2004, by which time more than half of the residents of the home were local nursing care patients, unconnected with horticulture, the home was sold to a leading care home company, Barchester Healthcare plc. Perennial continues to pay for a number of gardeners there.

Back to the 1950s. The number of working gardeners dropped rapidly, associated particularly with the aristocratic and land owning classes. However, the number of retired gardeners remained high, reflecting the high levels of employment in earlier times. Perennial was facing major competition from other charities, and looked for new support within horticulture, including the rising stars of the horticultural world who were using the new media of TV and radio to build up amateur interest in gardening – the predecessors of people like Alan Titchmarsh and Monty Don. In 1956, the charity started a programme of garden openings by private individuals called Gardeners’ Sunday. This became part of the National Gardens Scheme (NGS) in 1985; the National Gardens Scheme (in Scotland, Scotland’s Garden Scheme) remains one of the charity’s most generous and regular donors. Perennial also strengthened links with the City of London, most notably with the Worshipful Company of Gardeners, a City livery company, who sponsor the awards certificates scheme for local horticultural society shows.

Christmas cards were first sold by the Society in 1949 and trading became an important part of the charity’s fundraising. In the 1970’s the charity rode on the first wave of the fashion for people sending charity Christmas cards, and built up, for that time, a very substantial mail order business – GRBS (Enterprises) Ltd. As more and more charities, and latterly high street and supermarket retail outlets, got into the charity Christmas card market, the scale of GRBS (Enterprises) operation fell back, and more emphasis was placed on gifts; it remains an important part of Perennial’s fundraising activities, and currently ‘guests’ as a charity in the Cards for Good Causes organisation, where Perennial’s cards are available through Cards for Good Causes outlets throughout the United Kingdom.

Needs for financial assistance continued strongly, especially from retired people, and the charity become more and more involved in the provision of grants. In an era when private pensions were virtually unknown and the state pension even more basic than today, many gardeners struggled financially in retirement. Increasingly gardeners, like the rest of society, were living longer and wanted to remain independent in retirement. The charity found a new way to help people by providing accommodation specifically for retired people. Barton in Cambridgeshire was the first in 1965, expanded in 1967, followed by Rayner Court (1985), Kings Stanley in Gloucestershire (1992) and Netherbyres in Berwickshire, Scotland (1993). Today the properties at Barton and Kings Stanley are still owned by the charity and helping with accommodation remains a small but important part of our work.

From 1970 onwards the number of people employed in gardening and horticulture began to rise again. Increasingly, the people who turned to Perennial were not the retired, but those at a younger stage in life who had met misfortune, particularly illness and disability. More and more were horticulturists who were employed in the new areas of horticulture, not least garden centres, rather than as gardeners.

As Perennial entered the 21st Century, it took certain important decisions – to serve all those who work in horticulture; to serve people of all ages and to recognize that they will have a wide variety of different and individual needs and our response must be based on the needs of each individual. Key to our response was the creation of a new team of caseworkers, who could visit people face to face and not only help them through the provision of services by the charity, but more importantly act as advisors and advocates to assist people in getting all the help and services they need, not least from the statutory welfare benefit system. In 2008 a Debt Advice Team was established as Perennial recognized that many of the people contacting our Caseworkers had debt issues as well as other problems. Today the majority of our services are provided through our Caseworker and Debt Advice services and over 65% of the people we assist are below retirement age.

Having worked closely together for many years, on 1st January 2011 Perennial merged with its sister charity, The Royal Fund for Gardener’s Children (RFGC). The RFGC helped the children of horticulturists who were disadvantaged by their circumstances by awarding grants or in certain cases, ongoing benefit. The merger means a seamless service can now be provided for the greater benefit of both the children and adults within any family helped.

To maintain its position as a leading fundraising charity in the world of gardening and horticulture, Perennial also invested in a Marketing and Fundraising team.

### Horticulture today

Today gardening is a booming leisure activity. Millions of people spend billions of pounds on and uncountable hours of their leisure time in their gardens. Much to everybody’s surprise a tiny number of professional gardeners have become celebrities. Many more have done decently from this expansion, perhaps those working in a prestige environment, through self-employment as a consultant or landscape designer, or by running a business.

This success should not hide the problems. For the army of self-employed people, working for several employers at different times, life can be hard, low paid and uncertain. In public service the old parks and gardens departments used to provide a job – if not well paid – at least, generally speaking, for life. However, the last fifteen years have seen the process of ‘contracting out’ transforming the landscape.

Over 10 years ago, Perennial commissioned a report, which showed that there were 175,000 people who gave their employment as either gardening or horticulture. The numbers have been increasing since a low point was reached in the census of 1971. 10% were women, 90% were men. These figures wildly underestimate the numbers of people with a legitimate present or future claim for help from Perennial.

The picture, therefore, for Perennial is complicated. On the one hand there are many opportunities, particularly to gain public support and donations, although competition for support and funds is ever growing. The number of people working in the industry is growing, and the gaps in the welfare state remain as wide open as ever. On the other hand, we can be certain that the best way to help people – particularly younger people who may have met with misfortune or disability – is going to change. Different problems will demand new responses. Like all voluntary organisations, Perennial needs to work hard to ensure it develops new services and regularly reviews its existing ones.