



Chapter Five

Early Days in the Parks Department

I thought that I would wait for a week or so before I started looking for work. It was quite amazing how many people, knowing that you were looking for work, would tell you about jobs that were so small and a long way away that it just wasn't worth entertaining them at all.

One job that I tackled in Harold Road had a back garden on rather a nasty slope. The only thing I could do was to make two small slopes about a third of the way down the garden and another slope the other two thirds of the way down the garden. We had 280 turfs delivered, to be carried down there, plus some sand and cement to make some steps with blocks.

I first of all made the two slopes and laid the turfs on them. Then I carried the rest of the turfs down and laid them on the more level parts of the lawn. After this there were just the steps to put down, which I had never tackled before. However, the old people who lived there seemed very pleased with it. The whole lot only cost £32 altogether. Of course this was July 1951, it would cost a bit more now.

I heard about a job at the top house in Linton Road, which I think was no. 30. Mr and Mrs Paskell lived there, but Mr Clark, who was Mrs Paskell's brother, owned the house. However he was hardly ever there as he always seemed to be going abroad somewhere. A gardener called Harry Penton worked at the house and he and his wife lived there. It was quite rare for Harry to work in the garden as he was always taking Mr Clark up to London Airport or bringing him home.

When Harry was out in the garden and we were working together I found that he was a very nice chap. He was interesting to talk to and also a good gardener.

I also got a job for a few weeks in St. Helens Avenue where I worked for an estate agent. It fitted in alright with one or two other jobs.

One day this estate agent came out when I was raking all the leaves and rubbish off the lawn and said, "Wouldn't you prefer to work in one place all the time instead of a day here and a day there? There is a lady who lives just down the road who is on the Parks Committee and she could put in a word for you to Mr Cassidy, the Parks Superintendent.'

"Well, that would be nice if it could happen," I replied. In just over a week I received a letter from the Parks asking me to call in and see Mr Cassidy on Monday week. When I got there he said there was a vacancy in an outside gang under Mr Held and I could make a start next Monday, February 18th 1952.

So this was marvellous. I knew Fred very well as he only lived just down the road from me. I got down to the park the following Monday and I saw Fred helping to load a box, some tools and a canvas shed onto a lorry. As I walked in the yard Fred called out, "Over here, Les!" So of course I went over to them and helped. Then Fred got into the cab with the driver and I got in the back of the lorry.

First of all, we all went up to the bottom of Churchill Avenue where another three chaps were waiting and we also loaded some tools on the lorry. We didn't go very far because our next job was just up the road near the top of Churchill Avenue. We unloaded all the tools from the lorry, plus the canvas shed which we put up. The next thing we had our 9.00 lunch. Our job after lunch was to plant some privet hedges in the gardens of some council houses so that people knew where their gardens finished.

We carried on to the top of Churchill Avenue to turf a bank and plant some trees and shrubs. This was right opposite the new school that was being built.

Fred then had a lot to say quietly as people walked by. We were able to hear what they were saying and Fred used to finish it off in his own words. Not loud enough for them to hear, but he was very good at that sort of thing. It certainly was quite amusing.

When we heard where we were going next we were very disappointed. It was out to the Firehills at Fairlight. I don't think that there could have been a colder place in Hastings at this time of year. The lorry came quite early, soon after 7.30, and picked up all our equipment and took us out there. We got all the tools unloaded, put up the shed and then it was time for lunch. We had to cut out some more fire lanes through the gorse and burn the rubbish. That was the warmest part of the job but of course you couldn't stay there for long. The lorry brought us back at about 4.30. We were out there for about a couple of weeks.

The next job was for three of us on the West Hill in Hastings. Fred and Harry were going to scythe the edges of the grass along the paths because in those days we didn't have mowers to do it. They would cut the edges, one each side and I would rake the grass down onto the path and then sweep it up. The barrow that I had to put it all in was quite massive. I think really it should have had a horse on it. I only needed a bag of oats to look the part. It was lucky that I was fairly tall.

To start with, I had to take it a long way, from the end of Collier Road or the Angel pub to the ladies parlour at the top of where the lift stopped. Gradually I didn't have to take it so far. The job lasted about a week altogether.

On Friday Fred asked me if I would pick up the litter on the West Hill the following day, Saturday, as

Jim, the chap who usually did it, was away on holiday. So I said that I would. It was a very easy job which made a change. Still, I couldn't really grumble as I had been working all over town in a short time.

On the next Monday we were drafted into the park called Coronation Wood. It was to clean up the rubbish and leaves, but it was an awful morning with drizzling rain. We soon realised that the weather wasn't going to improve so Fred, our charge-hand, said, "Come on, we'll get along to the park greenhouses, out of this."

We were only washing flower pots but we were in the dry and it was a job that had to be done anyway. While I was in there John Taylor, the deputy superintendent, arrived. He came over to me and said, "Oh Les, on Monday will you report to Warrior Square Gardens as you will be working there under Charlie Eldridge from now on."

I replied, "Oh that's good news as I'll be able to do some gardening then. Thank you, John."

I thought, at least I shall know where I shall be working each day from now on. That's what I thought at the time but of course it wasn't quite like that. So on the following Monday I set off for Warrior Square Gardens. There were about six gardeners and I actually knew one of them, Frank, who was two or three years older than me but he went to Ore Village School when I did during the war.

It seems that it was quite a nice little gang. I paired up with Taffy. His real name was George but the only reason he was called Taffy was because he came from Wales years ago.

To start off, we dug the borders on Warrior Square Gardens. After that we could be going anywhere along the Front Line which was three miles long, from the fish market to the bathing pool. Warrior Square was our depot.

One morning I was teamed up with Bernard. We went out to the fish market and he mowed the roundel in the middle of the road, while I just weeded and cleared up any rubbish and forked over the flower bed. Then Bernard said to me, "Would you take this bag of grass over to the lady in the pie shop?" The pie shop used to be on the corner of George Street and High Street.

When I handed this bag of grass over I said to the manageress, "Oh, I can see what you put in your pies now". She strongly denied it but it was no good!

Anyway, we got our tools together and went along to the town centre. Bernard was going to mow the lawns around the flower beds, of which there were five, while I trundled my hand mower across to the Memorial Clock Tower. After that I took my mower back across the road and I saw that there was a policeman standing next to the police box on the corner. As I reached him I said, "Could you tell me what the time is please?"

He looked at his watch and told me what the time was and then he said, "You've got a big clock over there." But strangely enough as the clock tower was about 30 feet high you couldn't see the time until you got away from it.

We got our mowers and tools together and moved a little way just around the corner where the sunken gardens were. There were two lawns here. All I could do was edging and clearing up in general. Then it was back to Warrior Square. On the way back there were seven small lawns to be mowed, but they would need to be done by hand mower. There was one by the pier, four in the middle and the other two were near the bottom of Warrior Square. I think Charlie, our foreman, must have read our thoughts because he suggested that Dave and I take the hand mowers out in the afternoon to mow those lawns. So off we went.