

## CONGRATULATIONS VAL!

How fortunate we are that a lad of fourteen, having left school in spite of winning a scholarship to continue to 16, apprenticed into carpentry, lost his job after six months when his employer went broke. The father then decided that the boy should follow his own calling and learn to be a good gardener.

So Alfred Valentine Mitchell, Val or Mitch as we know him, after a full green-fingered life, celebrates his 95th birthday on St.Valentine's Day, 14th. February 2002. He was christened "Alfred" after his father and "Valentine" after the date.

Val has contributed his piece on gardening in virtually every issue of this magazine since it was first published 22 years ago - about 130 of them. Val is a fair minded, unbiassed man who is proud of his skills which are many. He believes that the name "gardener" should only be given to those who have trained in the craft. His greeting is a smile and a courteous word; there is a lovely sense of humour and a ready anecdote. He will talk at length and with enthusiasm of his life as learner, gardener and head gardener and seemingly there is little that he regrets. Most important, he is always ready to listen.

He has a great love of nature, carefully observes the changing seasons day by day and times the arrival and departure of our summer visitors almost to the hour. He made friends with a tiny wren that crept through a little hole into the greenhouse to roost during chilly nights.

A very knowledgable person, always ready to give advice, answer questions, identify plants and flowers, he has often been sought as a judge at flower shows and as a panellist on Gardners' Question Times in neighbouring towns and



villages. Under the guidance of his father he learnt his craft in a number of gardens, nurseries and 'big houses' and his first position as head gardener was in 1936 with Lady Henderson at Barnsley Park. At Val's request she kindly gave enough land to make a cricket ground which was laid out under Val's guidance. After sixty years, to the best of our knowledge, the cricket field with the original square is still used by Barnsley-Beeches C.C.

Val moved to Bruern in 1955 when he became head gardener to Mr. Michael Astor. Once again cricket became an interest for he had much to do with Bruern Cricket Club which was sponsored by Mr. Astor. Val played until he was fifty, but continued with his work until well beyond normal retiring age.

He married in 1937 but sadly his wife died suddenly in 1951. He subsequently married Nancy in 1954.

When hostilities broke out with WW2, he chose to be a soldier rather than remain in a reserved occupation growing potatoes, in his estimation an indignity for a head gardener!

A gunner during the war, he was firstly engaged in the defence of Bristol. Later, in 1941, he and many thousands sailed from Liverpool in a troopship, via Freetown, Capetown, and Durban heading for Singapore, which fell before they arrived, and so they were diverted to Bombay before finishing in the Middle East, where he remained for 31/2 years.

So much more could be written of this amiable man, of his family life and many interests outside gardening but, unfortunately, space is limited. So, on behalf of the people who run this magazine and of his many friends and readers, Val is thanked for all that he has done for us and good wishes are extended for a very happy 95th birthday and in addition the prospective enjoyment of many more years with good health, happiness and peace of mind.



### **Wychwood Playgroup**

The festive season ended with the end of term party and saying goodbye to six children who were starting at nursery. The New Year has seen seven new children starting and are settling in well.

The theme for this half - term is letters and numbers. With the encouragement of Karen, Lesley and Wendy the playgroup performed the Nativity for parents and grandparents in December and many a tear was shed.

We have had successful fund-raising events in the past couple of months and would like to thank all those who have supported the Playgroup.

For more information regarding Wychwood Playgroup please see our advert or contact Karen 01993 831269 or Alison on 01993 830669.