

## THE MITCHAM HARVEST.

THE "happy thought" occurred to us one day last month to travel down to Mitcham to learn about the flower-harvest. The pretty Surrey village — or, rather, group of villages — which is so famous, and, if we may say so, so "essential," to the drug trade, lies within about half-an-hour's railway journey from the City or West-end, and within view of the Crystal Palace. But there is no suggestion of London in its pure air, and even the villa-builder seems hardly to have invaded the precincts of its breezy commons. And yet one would have thought that the proximity of the famous flower-gardens would have offered an extra attraction which the Queen Anne speculator and the poetical auctioneer would have known how to utilise.

Our visit was to the manor house. The lord of the manor has been the chief flower-farmer about here for generations. There is no indication of business about the old-fashioned, substantial manor house, standing well back from the road nor is there any betrayal of commercial character in the adjacent old still-house, whereon an old clock, which has probably worked on for a century or more, still fulfils its monotonous task. The firm is ostensibly that of Potter & Moore. Those gentlemen are probably now cultivating the Elysian Fields. Who they ever were we are not quite clear about, as Messrs. James H. & Edwin Bridger, who now carry on the farm and the distillery, are the third generation of the Bridger family who have been flower-farmers, and their great grandfather is reputed to have introduced the lavender cultivation into Surrey.

Their still-house was quite still when we visited it, but it had been having a lively lime, for the lavender crop especially has been an abundant one. There are four stills in the place, and the biggest is a curiosity. No one would venture a guess as to its capacity, but we were told that its regular charge is a ton and a half of herb. The same still can be used for lavender, peppermint, and camomile. Filling with water and vapouring it off once entirely clears it of the odour of the last operation.

Lavender, as we said, has been an unusually good crop this year, both as regards quantity and quality. It is always cut in the early part of August. Oil which last year brought

80s. has sold this year down to 48s., and that price must be a satisfactory one, if Mr. Bridger's rough estimate that the yield this year was about four times that of last year be anywhere near accuracy. Next year he believes there will be much more under cultivation, but of course the yield is largely dependent on the weather. Four years ago was *l'année terrible* for lavender-growers. Frosts and apparently a fungoid disease almost totally destroyed the crops. Messrs. Bridger that year distilled less than a Winchester quart of oil, which even at eight guineas per lb. was very poor business. Curiously, the disease has not appeared again, though no special precautions seem to have been taken against it.

The real lavender water, that is the distilled water from which the lavender oil has been collected, is a perquisite of the workmen, and is sold at Mitcham by the quart. Messrs. Bridger keep their oil in Winchesters, uncorked. Lavender is not a volatile oil, and there seems to be a theory that it is improved by contact with the air, but whether this is anything more than a tradition we know not.

The lavender plant flowers three years in succession, the second year being considered the finest. After the third year it grows stalky and coarse. Farmyard-manure seems to be all that is used at Mitcham, but a field which has grown lavender for three years is generally changed for wheat, oats, or potatoes for a year, and is then planted with peppermint for the next three years, the wheat or potato year following, and then coming back to lavender. For peppermint we were told elsewhere wool-dust from Bradford is a favourite manure.

The peppermint crop has not been an exceptionally large one this year, but the oil is said to be very fine. There are two English oils of peppermint distilled, one from white and the other from black peppermint. The black peppermint, however, is not grown in Mitcham proper. There seems to be no botanical difference between these plants, but the difference in aroma is considerable, as is evidenced by the fact that, while the oil from the black peppermint may be worth about 30s. per lb., that from the white will make nearly 50s.

Peppermint also grows for three years. After the harvest the fields are "dotted," that is, the new

runners are hoed in November the old plants are ploughed in, and the young ones covered.

Camomiles, which are largely grown by Messrs. Bridger, are a dainty crop. The beds are set out every March, and the flowers are gathered in August. They are not fit to gather till they are quite white, and then a heavy rain will seriously damage them. Another difficulty Mr. Bridger says is with the gatherers. They are paid Id. per lb. for gathering. Formerly women were glad to do it for that sum, and gathered the flowers carefully; now they have to employ children, who are less particular. The rather obvious remedy of increasing the wage does not somehow seem to have occurred to the lord of the manor.

Roses are an important crop on this farm. They, too, have yielded satisfactorily this year. Messrs. Bridger have been growing some Provence roses, and have distilled rose-water, but they do not seem satisfied with the experiment, and do not intend to continue the cultivation. The *Rosa gallica* is, however, evidently good business with them. This harvest requires very watchful attention. "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may," wrote Herrick, and he quite correctly adds that "the same flower that smiles to-day, to-morrow may be dying." But for druggists they must be caught even before they smile. Only those gathered in the bud pass as "firsts." If the flower has blown it only sells for confection, and at a lower price. In thundery weather sometimes the buds will open with provoking alacrity, and very early in the morning, between three and six, is the only safe time for collecting the buds. Then they are passed to a number of women, who deftly nip the white claws from the petals, and the still unopened velvety buds are dried rapidly over a stove, and sold for the *Folia rosea Gallicæ* of the shops. The leaves for confection are not dried. Bentley and Trimen tell us that 2,000 rosebuds yield about 10 lbs. of dried or 100 lbs. of fresh petals.

Licorice is grown largely at Mitcham; so are boys. Consequently it has been found necessary to keep the licorice- fields near home. The plant takes four years to come to perfection. The roots are dug up in November, and those which are not dried for powder are buried in trenches. Licorice-roots are sometimes 4 or 5 feet long, but they want a rich loam to grow to that extent. For powder the roots are trimmed and decorticated, cut into little finger-lengths, and carefully dried over a furnace. The trimmings are also dried and powdered for horse-powders.

Lovage is another of the products of this farm, but it seems to be going out of use. Poppy-heads are regularly raised here, as also are belladonna, henbane, and stramonium. One other crop may also be mentioned — the *Ecballium elaterium*, or Squirting Cucumber. Messrs. Bridger grow the plant and prepare the elaterium, and the business is by no means a sinecure. "We lost one man through it," Mr. Bridger observed, and the man who works it now, and showed us all his apparatus, remarked that during the period when that work is on, he never gets any rest. The English elaterium is well known for its purity, but it does not bring the price it once did. Years ago it fetched three guineas an ounce; now an ounce will not command a single guinea, though that price is four or five times as much as is paid for the foreign product, most of which comes from Malta. Mr. Bridger talks of suspending his cultivation of this uncanny plant for a year or two, apparently on the principle of absence making the heart grow fonder.

Leaving the manor house, with thanks for information very readily given, we walked, or rather, waded, two or three miles through some very muddy Surrey lanes to the other end of Mitcham Common, where our friends Messrs. John Jakson & Co. have set up some very perfect steam distilleries, no doubt the finest and most modern plant for the production of essential oils throughout the district. Messrs. John Jakson & Co. grow large quantities of peppermint, lavender, and camomile on the highest ground in the Mitcham and Beddington districts. By repeated rectification they produce specially pure oils, and their peppermint oil, which is sold under their brand, commands an extra high price, and is bought largely by many of the principal liqueur-makers on the Continent.

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