THE GROWTH OF PROVINCIAL NURSERIES: THE NORWICH NURSERYMEN, C.1750-1860  
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*English nurserymen of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have received far less academic attention from garden historians than the designers of gardens and parks. But the activities of the latter depended fundamentally on the existence of a sophisticated nursery industry, the logistics and operations of which remain largely unknown. The Norwich Nursery which operated between c.1750 and 1859 was one of the largest nurseries in eastern England and yet has fallen into relative obscurity. This article seeks to redress this gap in our current knowledge of provincial nurserymen, while demonstrating that provincial nurseries were often far larger, more complex and sophisticated enterprises than has been previously assumed.*

The ‘supply-side’ of designed landscapes and gardens has long been overlooked by academic scholarship in favour of the designer. Current literature certainly reflects this imbalance, not least due to the recent surge in publications to coincide with the anniversaries of Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown’s birth (c.1716) and Humphry Repton’s death (1818).[[1]](#endnote-1) Without an established industry of nurserymen capable of providing hundreds of thousands of plants to individual projects, such designs would never have been realised. The development of the commercial nursery industry also enabled the proliferation of designed landscapes and gardens further down the social scale, particularly for the villa-owning members of ‘polite society’. Scholarly research is only starting to acknowledge the significance of provincial commercial nurseries in the history of the development of designed landscapes, but much of this still amounts to only a passing contextual reference for histories of the designers, who remain the primary focus.[[2]](#endnote-2) Examining a case study of the Norwich Nursery, which dominated eastern England’s gardening industry from c.1750 for over a century, demonstrates how the nursery industry evolved with the rapid social and technological changes of the period, far earlier than has previously been anticipated.

Much of our limited knowledge of historical provincial nurseries stems from the research of John Hooper Harvey in the 1970s. Harvey’s most extensive publication, *Early Nurserymen* (1974), attempted to chart the development of provincial nurseries across England.[[3]](#endnote-3) More recent efforts have been made to bring nurserymen to the forefront of scholarly research: Kathleen Clark’s doctoral research, introduced in her 2012 article, promises to answer ‘What the Nurserymen did for us’, while Richard Coulton’s 2018 article explored early eighteenth-century London nurseries which have been neglected since Eleanor Joan Willson’s publication on the subject in 1982.[[4]](#endnote-4) *Garden History* has recently published two provincial case studies of nurseries in this period: Margaret Maddison’s contemporary study of the Callenders nursery in Gateshead, County Durham, and Jan Broadway’s ‘Wheelers of Gloucester’.[[5]](#endnote-5) Regional Garden Trusts have also begun to make valuable contributions through histories of individual nurseries, such as the *Cheshire Gardens Trust’s* research on Caldwell’s Nursery at Knutsford.[[6]](#endnote-6) This approach allows for a detailed regional chronology to be developed, which in time can be examined from a more holistic perspective.

Some of the earliest national examples of nurseries have received much attention - the Brompton Park Nursery in London, run by George London and Henry Wise between 1689 and 1715, is perhaps the most cited nursery of all - and for good reason, considering the national scale of their commissions.[[7]](#endnote-7) It has long been held that the first commercial nurseries were established in London, with greater connectivity for exotic imports and a ready market during the city’s annual ‘Season’. Harvey suggested that the nurseries in England’s provinces were established later, most after 1750.[[8]](#endnote-8) In Norfolk, Harvey did not consider large commercial nurseries to be operating in the county until c.1773, the date at which he considers the Norwich Nursery to have been founded.[[9]](#endnote-9) Initial examination of the provincial press in this period, however, found that large nursery sites were already operating in and around Norwich by the 1750s, suggesting Harvey’s conclusions ought to be considered with caution.[[10]](#endnote-10) The Norwich Nursery, run first by the Aram, then Mackie family, was the largest nursery in the region. The lifespan of the Norwich Nursery (c.1750-c.1860) corresponded with a period of profound social, economic and technological change. In charting the development of one company, the impact of these changes can truly be demonstrated.

The recent digitisation of provincial newspaper archives and parish records, as well as historic maps and catalogue publications, have enabled a far greater quantity of data to be processed than ever before. The Norwich Nursery lacks an archive of its own: to date, no direct evidence such as ledgers or account books owned by the nursery have been discovered. Much of the evidence of sales comes from estate archives deposited in county record offices. Tom Williamson has noted that Mackie’s appears in estate papers with almost ‘monotonous regularity’ during this period.[[11]](#endnote-11) In Norfolk, estates from Sheringham, to Anmer; from Felbrigg to Heacham and Heydon to Castle Rising, ordered plant stock from the Norwich Nursery. Subsequent receipts and letters accompanying these purchases survive, but much of the detail surrounding the operation of the nursery exists only in printed published material: mostly in newspapers and a few surviving catalogues.

THE PROVINCIAL CONTEXT

The characteristics of a region - landscape, social and economic - defined the pattern of development of provincial businesses during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries until improvements in transport connections via the railways from the 1840s gave all major provincial businesses the opportunity to become national players. In Norfolk, the presence of the regional capital drew in a variety of industries and businesses, including commercial nurseries, as the population and wealth gravitated towards Norwich.[[12]](#endnote-12) The suggestion that the social and economic characteristics of a region often determined the success of a business potentially underestimates the extent of a provincial nursery’s sphere of influence by not looking beyond their immediate locality.[[13]](#endnote-13) Many, as the case study of the Norwich Nursery will show, were of nation-wide importance and significance, despite not being based in London. Provincial nurserymen should not be side-lined from the ‘national’ history of the development of designed landscapes because of their regional locations.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Norwich still maintained its historic status as England’s ‘second city’ but its main income from the textile trade faced steady decline as the new industrial areas in the north of England began their rapid expansion.[[14]](#endnote-14) Norwich was home to many wealthy merchant families, whose fortunes had been made in the preceding centuries, and the city was considered a hub of ‘polite society’ in the east of England.[[15]](#endnote-15) This socially aspirational population had disposable income for ‘improving’ their homes and gardens, providing a ready market for the nursery industry. The proliferation of ‘polite society’ led to an expansion of ‘villas’, rather than landed estates, on the outskirts of urban areas and it was villa owners who provided the regular mainstay of income for commercial nurseries at the start of the nineteenth century.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Villas should be considered an entirely separate entity to the vast estates of the traditional elite.[[17]](#endnote-17) Whilst still grand, architecturally designed properties, villas lacked the acreage and wider features of a landed estate. By far the most famous example, Lord Burlington’s villa at Chiswick, London (1729), extended to just over sixty-five acres. In 1793, the architect Charles Middleton described villas as either ‘temporary retreats’ for the nobility; ‘country houses’ for wealthy people of office needing to be close to their occupations, or ‘the habitations of country gentlemen of moderate fortune’.[[18]](#endnote-18) Norwich’s wealthy merchant population suggests the latter was probably the most common. As acreage and property still equated to power and status at the beginning of the nineteenth century, villas offered the opportunity and land-owning qualifications for upward social emulation without the expense and hassle of managing a large estate.

Norwich’s villa ‘suburbia’ was found mostly to the east and south of the city, in Catton, Lakenham and Eaton.[[19]](#endnote-19) From the 1780s and 90s, these areas became considered part of the city for the first time, referred to in contemporary directories as ‘The Hamlets’.[[20]](#endnote-20) Humphry Repton’s first commission in 1788 was for Jeremiah Ives of Catton Hall.[[21]](#endnote-21) Ives was a silk merchant, who should be considered representative of the ‘polite society’ social group who built and inhabited Norwich’s villas. Catton and Lakenham were also both the sites of notable nurseries between c.1750 and c.1860. George Lindley, father of the botanist John Lindley, dominated the nursery industry in Catton from the 1800s, but the site referred to as ‘the old nursery ground’ had long been associated with the industry before Lindley’s arrival.[[22]](#endnote-22) Lakenham was home to the Norwich Nursery’s main site, which in itself monopolised the city’s commercial nursery business. The proliferation of villas in these areas undoubtedly attracted potential nurserymen to a concentration of potential customers. These grand properties with essentially over-sized gardens could not justify the expense of a private nursery like the large landed estates of Holkham, Felbrigg and Blickling. Commercial nurseries were therefore necessary to fulfil the horticultural aspirations of villa-owners.

THE NORWICH NURSERY: A BRIEF HISTORY

In 1972, John Harvey devoted a chapter to the development of Mackie’s of Norwich in his book, *Early Gardening Catalogues*. However, many of the partnerships which enabled the nursery to develop into the equivalent of a ‘modern garden centre’ went undetected.[[23]](#endnote-23) Tom Williamson’s 1998 volume, *The Archaeology of the Landscape Park* went some way to uncover the origins of the nursery, countering Harvey’s ‘start’ date of c.1773 by linking the Mackie name back to the first Norwich Nursery run by William Aram in the 1760s.[[24]](#endnote-24) In fact, the company must date back to at least 1750 when the nursery was run by John Baldrey, offering ‘whole sale or retail’ stock of everything from greenhouse plants to forest and fruit trees.[[25]](#endnote-25) When the Aram family took over the nursery following Baldrey’s bankruptcy in 1759, they were already offering two year old ‘Scotch firs’ at ten shillings per thousand.[[26]](#endnote-26) By this date, the nursery industry in Norwich was operating in a recognisable, modern, commercial capacity. Norfolk has therefore gone unnoticed as the home of a nursery of national importance, said to have been ‘one of the most extensive and best managed’ in the country by 1839.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Between the first published mention of the Aram-run Norwich Nursery in 1759, and c.1777, when the nursery moved to its permanent home in Lakenham to the south of the city, the nursery underwent at least three different partnerships and was based at three different sites. An advertisement in the *Norfolk Chronicle* in 1776 declared the opening of ‘a large and commodious warehouse’ in the St Stephen’s area of Norwich for the nursery’s ‘better accommodation’ (Figure 1).[[28]](#endnote-28) This indication that the original St Benedict’s site once owned by Baldrey was no longer adequate demonstrates the early success and expansion of the nursery. The old site was certainly still in use in c.1780, when it was visited by the prolific diarist Parson John Woodforde, but it disappears from the archival record shortly after. The nursery then moved permanently to a hundred-acre site in Lakenham, which would remain associated with the Norwich Nursery until the company’s sale in 1859.

When John Mackie, the eventual namesake of the nursery, joined William Aram at the Norwich Nursery in c.1777, the company moved to the site in Lakenham, now either side of the crossroads between Daniel’s Road and Ipswich Road.[[29]](#endnote-29) This hundred-acre site was functioning on the same scale as London and Wise’s celebrated Brompton Park Nursery which operated at the beginning of the century.[[30]](#endnote-30) Mackie’s marriage to Aram’s daughter secured the Mackie family role in the business, and the nursery became known as ‘Mackie’s’ after Aram’s death in 1780.

Despite the move to Lakenham, south of the city walls, the nursery did retain a city-centre presence. By the early nineteenth century, Mackie’s had warehouses at 10 and 11 Exchange Street, Norwich. The area became associated with seed warehouses throughout the period, with fellow competitors John Ewing and John Bell, also having establishments here. The warehouses operated as Mackie’s offices in the city centre, distributing catalogues and receiving orders for the Lakenham site, as well as selling seeds.

The Norwich Nursery remained a family business throughout its century of operation, bringing in external partnerships, but always retaining the family name. For fifteen years between 1818 and 1833, the nursery was run by Sarah Mackie as the death of her husband and brother-in-law in quick succession had left the business to her. The term ‘nurseryman’ appears to exclude women from any significant role in the nursery industry, but female-run nurseries were not uncommon in this period. For Mackie’s, no male relative was available to take on the task. Arthur Mackie, who would eventually run the nursery, was only three when his father and uncle died. Sarah signed her correspondence with only an initial, perhaps to deter prejudicial opinions.[[31]](#endnote-31) Despite this, her obituary in *The Gardener’s Magazine* in 1833 commended her running of the nursery as a fine example of ‘modern improvement’.[[32]](#endnote-32) Sarah produced a number of catalogues during her time, as well as encouraging links between the nursery and the newly formed *Norfolk and Norwich Horticultural Society* in 1829.[[33]](#endnote-33) Research on female authors of gardening texts has gone someway to place women in the development of the nineteenth-century commercial gardening industry, but further research into the trade is required to establish the demographics of the profession.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Sarah’s children, Frederick and Arthur Mackie, took over the nursery upon her death. In 1849, the Norwich Nursery, now run solely by Arthur, expanded to three sites, buying up John Bell’s nursery site in Bracondale which now lies under housing around Corton Road, Norwich.[[35]](#endnote-35) The Bracondale site had long been associated with nursery growing, and was known as a ‘Horticultural Establishment’ since the 1830s, when the site was owned by the Roe family. Bell became sole proprietor of the site in c.1840 upon the death of Jeremiah Freeman Roe, having previously been a partner in the Roe nursery.[[36]](#endnote-36) This pattern of ownership was typical of the nursery industry in this period, with partnerships offering the opportunity of expansion for successful nurseries and rescue for faltering ones.[[37]](#endnote-37)

Photographic evidence of the Bracondale site shows some of the infrastructure of the nursery. Taken in c.1855 by the Norwich Nursery’s last partner, John Stewart, one photograph shows some of the glasshouses and cold frames (Figure 2). The Bracondale site advertised ‘hothouse grapes’ in the provincial press throughout its existence, suggesting glasshouse growing may have been a specialism. This is confirmed by the extent of the glasshouses on the site, revealed on a trade card from c.1830 (Figure 3), and confirmed on the Lakenham tithe map of 1840.[[38]](#endnote-38) Vast glasshouses were built against a central brick structure, which gave the nursery the air of a walled garden on a country estate. The layout of the Bracondale Nursery underlines how much these sites were designed as destinations for customers to visit, as much as forming the productive elements of the business. The large glasshouses were still present in the 1880s, as shown on the 1:2,500 Ordnance Survey (OS) maps (Figure 4).[[39]](#endnote-39) Today, only the brick building supporting the glasshouses survives as ‘The Shrubberies’, No. 9 Corton Road, having been a residential property since the Colman family acquired the nursery land in the 1890s.[[40]](#endnote-40) The property has been divided into two dwellings since the 1960s, one of which still retains a late Victorian glasshouse at the back of the property, likely to have been part of the last instalment of Bell’s nursery from c.1860-c.1870.

The expansion of the Norwich Nursery to include the Bracondale Horticultural Establishment secured Mackie’s place as the largest such enterprise in the region. The Bracondale site doubled in size between Bell’s ownership of the site in the 1840s, as shown on the tithe map, and the OS surveys of the 1880s.[[41]](#endnote-41) Mackie’s held an auction of ‘one million forest trees’ following the purchase of Bracondale in 1849.[[42]](#endnote-42) Although the majority of these would have been seedlings, this still gave a clear indication of the capacity of just one of the nursery’s locations. This multi-location enterprise might seem unusual, but Margaret Maddison has demonstrated that the Callender’s Gateshead nursery in County Durham operated in a similar manner, with a shop in the city centre representing the company name, and a larger nursery close by.[[43]](#endnote-43) As Maddison suggests that the ownership of two sites distinguished the Callender nursery from smaller companies, the operation of three sites therefore truly illustrates the success and scale of the Norwich Nursery.[[44]](#endnote-44)

The addition of the Bracondale site allowed Mackie to better segregate his stock. Seeds and catalogues were available from the warehouse in Exchange Street, while the Lakenham site continued to provide fruit trees, forest trees and shrubs. The Bracondale site stocked bedding plants, arranged in ‘extensive and commodious frames and pits’.[[45]](#endnote-45) Mackie’s nursery now had departments, with the ‘Greenhouse, Forcing and Floral Departments’ to be found at the Horticultural Establishment in Bracondale, utilising the extensive glasshouses. The scale of the nursery by the early 1850s suggests a near complete monopoly of the commercial gardening industry in Norwich.

Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, Mackie’s hosted several of the Norfolk and Norwich Horticultural Society shows. These were widely reported on in the provincial press, and provide an insight into the layout of the Lakenham site in particular:

*On passing the entrance gate, the visitor proceeded down a gravel-walk towards the greenhouses … Turning to the left, you came to a small but neat lawn, inclosed [sic] with laurel and other shrubs, lying in front of Mr Mackie’s residence … As the spectator wandered from one tent to the other, he was equally entranced by the beauty of the grounds, which displayed the perfection of landscape gardening*.[[46]](#endnote-46)

Both the diaries of Parson Woodforde and various early nineteenth-century trade directories frequently make reference to ‘Mackie’s Garden’.[[47]](#endnote-47) Certainly from the description of the horticultural show above, Mackie’s nursery could have been considered a ‘show garden’, with Mackie’s own garden forming part of the commercial site (Figure 5). The *Norfolk News* report cited above goes on to imply that Mackie’s nursery grounds had been carefully designed so as to fully exhibit ‘the perfection of landscape gardening’.[[48]](#endnote-48) The Lakenham site was ‘encompassed by a drive of one mile in length’, planted with the stock of the nursery - fruit and forest trees and ornamental shrubs.[[49]](#endnote-49) Williamson cites a reference to ‘driving’ around the site in 1811, suggesting this was how most of the nursery stock was to be viewed before purchase. At the end of its account, the report describes following ‘the winding and well shaded walks’ until ‘suddenly’ Mackie’s residence comes back into view.[[50]](#endnote-50) The design, whether by Mackie’s own hand or that of a surveyor is unclear, appears to have been cleverly manipulated for the grounds to appear far larger than their still substantial ninety acres, perhaps demonstrating to the discerning villa owner how they could make their own grounds appear even grander.

The Norwich Nursery dominated the Norfolk nursery industry for just over a century. In 1859, after four generations of the Mackie family and numerous partnerships, the Norwich Nursery sold up to John Bell, previous proprietor of the Bracondale nursery ground. The entire Mackie family left England on the *SS Indian*, a steamer ship bound for America.[[51]](#endnote-51) According to the family’s descendants, the Mackies set up a farm in Illinois, eventually brokering cotton, coal and other produce. The reason for the sudden departure from the nursery trade remains unclear, but the association of the Norwich Nursery’s sites with the horticultural industry continued. Bell’s family operated out of the Bracondale site until his death in the late 1870s. The site was bought by the Colman family at the end of the nineteenth century and completely remodelled into terraced housing by 1907.[[52]](#endnote-52) On Ipswich Road, part of the nursery became ‘Town Close Nurseries’, eventually owned by Daniel’s Brothers. Their garden centre was bought by Notcutts (established in Woodbridge, Suffolk, in 1897) in 1976 and continues to operate today.

The Mackie name also held longevity. Mackie’s final partner, John Stewart, fought publicly in the newspapers with Bell over allegations of poaching customers.[[53]](#endnote-53) The significance of customer loyalty in this period cannot be underestimated in ensuring the success of a business. Stewart continued to evoke the Mackie name in news advertisements - furthering angering Bell.[[54]](#endnote-54) Bell himself, despite having previously owned the Bracondale Nursery, was still including ‘Late Mackie’ in the typehead of his receipts in 1861.[[55]](#endnote-55) The Norwich Nursery and the Mackie name had effectively become a ‘brand’, resembling not just a company, but an industry.

‘THE FLORAL PUBLIC’: CUSTOMERS OF THE NORWICH NURSERY

By the 1830s, the Norwich Nursery was considered ‘one of the most extensive’ provincial nurseries in the country, and was said to have ‘supplied the germes’ for ‘the greater part’ of the ‘gentleman’s seats of Norfolk and Suffolk’.[[56]](#endnote-56) Most of the archival evidence for the Norwich Nursery can be found in the record collections of large estates and landowners, but it should be noted that this may be due to the greater survival rate of large estate archives than those of smaller villa properties. This can skew the balance of evidence to suggest that Mackie’s solely supplied the gentry and nobility of eastern England. However, catalogue evidence and the stock of the Norwich Nursery would suggest that Norwich’s villa-owning ‘polite society’ provided the mainstay of the nursery’s income.

The early scale and sophistication of the Norwich Nursery is best recorded by the company’s few surviving catalogues. The earliest, published in 1790, shows Mackie’s to have stocked over six hundred and fifty named varieties of ‘Hardy Trees and Shrubs’, and seven hundred herbaceous plants. Also listed were ‘Hot-House and Greenhouse Plants’, fruit trees and seeds, subdivided into flowers and vegetables. Seventy-four types of rose were individually named in 1790.[[57]](#endnote-57) By the time Mackie’s next surviving catalogue was published in 1812, a whole section had been devoted to roses, with three hundred and thirty named varieties given.[[58]](#endnote-58) By 1825, this number had risen again to three hundred and ninety-six.[[59]](#endnote-59) Despite this, the Norwich Nursery was never a specialist rose grower; this was simply the scale on which the company operated.

The Norwich Nursery had come to dominate the industry for large-scale contracts in eastern England by the early nineteenth century. Between 1832 and 1838, Mackie’s provided forest trees between ‘two to three feet’ in height to the Duke of Bedfordshire for new plantations at Oakley and Woburn.[[60]](#endnote-60) The correspondence for these orders between Bedford’s land agents implies that Mackie’s was one of the only nurseries in the country capable of supplying trees on the scale required. The land agents seemed impressed by the scale of the nursery , ‘above a hundred acres of forest plants’, which at the time would have just referred to the site at Lakenham, with the Bracondale expansion still to come in 1849.[[61]](#endnote-61)

The Bedfordshire archives document a long-term commercial relationship between the Norwich Nursery and the Duke of Bedfordshire’s estates, with repeat orders being made over six years despite some criticism over costs of delivery and in some instances, reliability. The letters suggest that purchasing trees from external, commercial nurseries was unusual for Bedford’s land agents.[[62]](#endnote-62) Much of the correspondence was dedicated to finding nurseries other than Mackie’s, capable of meeting demands closer to the estates. Large estates on the scale of the Duke of Bedfordshire’s, and others in Norfolk such as Felbrigg, Blickling and Holkham, would have had private plant nurseries. The growing popularity of major tree-planting projects however, particularly in the forms of plantations in this period, were often beyond the capacity of private estate nurseries. The scale of the plantation projects at Oakley and Woburn in the 1830s meant trees had to be commercially bought in. Correspondence between Bedford’s land agents implies some hesitancy in whom to source orders from for several thousand tree saplings, suggesting that for the Duchy of Bedford at least, the need for commercial nurseries was relatively new.

Mackie’s could supply excessively large orders even before the 1830s. In 1796, the Norwich Nursery supplied sixty thousand trees to the Ffynone estate in Pembrokeshire, south-west Wales.[[63]](#endnote-63) This vast order remains one of the largest traceable in the history of the nursery, and the only one outside of eastern England. It is unknown how Colonel Colby of Ffynone made contact with the Norwich Nursery. The scale of the order corroborates the idea that the Norwich Nursery was one of the few businesses in the country in this period capable of supplying so many plants in a single shipment. This is furthered by records from the Felbrigg estate in Norfolk. The landowner, William Windham, was not satisfied with his orders from the Norwich Nursery, which were intended to establish a plantation on heathland. The failure of the plantation pushed Windham to go as far as to state he would ‘never advise anyone to purchase trees of Mr Mackie’.[[64]](#endnote-64) As a result of his boycott of the Norwich Nursery, Windham was forced to buy trees from the Gateshead Nursery in County Durham. The distance between Gateshead and Felbrigg would suggest that these nurseries truly were exceptional in the quantities of trees they could supply. If this was the case, Mackie’s should be considered a nursery of national significance. While the order from Ffynone appears to have been an anomaly, it is unlikely that this was the nursery’s only client outside of eastern England. Further archival research undertaken on a national scale would undoubtedly reveal more clients throughout the rest of the country.

The Norwich Nursery might have been capable of supplying tens, or even hundreds, of thousands of trees to individual estates, but it is doubtful that orders on this scale formed the bulk of the nursery’s income. Mackie’s also supplied hedging plants such as hawthorn, or ‘whitethorn’. Vast quantities of hedging layer were needed quickly as the pace of enclosure on estates in this period reached its peak. At the Heydon estate, north Norfolk, Colonel Bulwer purchased almost four hundred and fifty thousand whitethorn layer between 1794 and 1802.[[65]](#endnote-65) Mackie’s provided around forty-one thousand of these, but the Norwich Nursery never advertised hedging stock in the press. The most likely explanation for this is that, for the most part, Mackie’s client base did not require enormous quantities of hedging stock because they did not own estates with acres of working countryside. Those potential clients who were targeted with catalogues available in coffee houses and advertisements in the provincial press were members of ‘polite society’ with villas, not landed estates.[[66]](#endnote-66) Social emulation dictated the need for designed landscapes, as part of the ‘landowner image’, but on a much smaller scale than the Duchy of Bedfordshire or Colonel Colby at Ffynone.

The Norwich Nursery not only served clients across eastern England, but across the social scale. Those who were equal in status to the Duke of Bedford, or William Windham of Felbrigg Hall, would have known of Mackie’s by endorsement. Word of mouth and personal recommendation still dictated the success of a business at the end of the eighteenth century. Clientele lower down the social scale, but still members of ‘polite society’, Parson Woodforde or Abbot Upcher of Sheringham for example, would have been among those still passing personal recommendations, but also targeted by nurserymen through advertising and catalogues. In this way, nurseries were able to claim the ‘nobility and gentry’ among their clients while attracting new customers by appealing to their social aspirations with the ‘by appointment’ style of advertising.[[67]](#endnote-67)  
FROM WAGGON TO RAIL: THE OPERATION OF THE NURSERY

The logistics, operations and particularly delivery capacity of early provincial nurseries are not well documented in secondary literature. Establishing how the business operated provides greater insight into how provincial nurseries functioned and met the demands of their clientele, furthering our knowledge of how designed landscapes and gardens of the period were created. Use of the provincial press to advertise increased exponentially throughout the lifetime of the Norwich Nursery, while the delivery methods employed by the company continued to innovate alongside the expansion of the canal and rail network.

By the late 1780s, the sheer quantity of advertisements from Mackie’s and other Norfolk nurseries in the county’s provincial press would suggest that this was the primary means of establishing contact with prospective clientele. Everything was reported: from the ‘safe’ importation of ‘bulbous roots’ from the Netherlands, to competitive prices for forest trees.[[68]](#endnote-68) For the first time, the expansion of the provincial press and print enabled businesses to solicit a far wider audience, allowing the nurseryman an entrance into the ‘polite’ world by utilising their methods of communication.

Mackie’s business ventures were also reported across eastern England. The Norwich Nursery received attention in the *Ipswich Journal*, *Cambridge Intelligencer*, *Suffolk Chronicle* and occasionally in the *Stamford Mercury* in Lincolnshire. Despite courting this relatively large catchment area, Mackie’s remained firmly within the confines of the provincial press. To date, no mention of the Norwich Nursery has been found in the London or national papers of the period. The *Norwich Post* first published in 1701, was widely held to be England’s first provincial newspaper.[[69]](#endnote-69) The level of engagement of the Norwich Nursery and other Norfolk nurserymen with the press by the end of the eighteenth century is therefore perhaps unsurprising.

At its peak in the late 1840s, Mackie’s was operating across three sites in Norwich, each with a distinct specialism. The city-centre warehouse distributed seeds in both ‘retail’ and ‘wholesale’ quantities, as well as processing orders for the nursery grounds. Twenty-five pages of seeds were listed in Mackie’s 1825 catalogue, which were ordered and delivered in much the same way as plant stock.[[70]](#endnote-70) Large quantities of seeds would be delivered in casks, while smaller retail amounts could be bought in packets, as today. Norwich city centre always seems to have attracted the seed merchants of the gardening industry. In practical terms, nurseries on the scale of Mackie’s could not be built within the city, which did not expand beyond its medieval walls until the late 1790s.[[71]](#endnote-71) The seed warehouses functioned as shop fronts, promoting the nursery grounds on the outskirts of the city.

Prospective customers were encouraged to visit the nursery grounds in person, where they might be ‘driven’ around the grounds to select their stock.[[72]](#endnote-72) The Duke of Bedford’s land agent, William Forbes, described his own visit to the Lakenham nursery to his colleagues, and stated the plants ‘could not be had from a better place’.[[73]](#endnote-73) The Norwich nurserymen would also visit clients at home. In 1781, Parson Woodforde described a visit from the nursery’s founder, William Aram, who examined his garden and offered advice for the protection of fruit trees from ants. Woodforde described Aram as ‘a very hearty man … very large and looks as if he was dropsical’.[[74]](#endnote-74) Despite this perhaps unflattering description, Aram and later the Mackie’s were certainly the face of their company, actively engaging with their customers. The Norwich Nursery offered an ‘after-care’ service for its clients: Tom Williamson has even uncovered evidence of a ‘mobile pruning service’ maintaining fruit trees some fifty miles away from Norwich at Anmer.[[75]](#endnote-75) This additional customer care would have further contributed to the success of the Norwich Nursery as a reliable name in the industry.

Once a client had placed an order, either in the city, at the nursery grounds or through a ‘home visit’, the plants had to be delivered. Trees and shrubs had been selected, they were ‘carefully taken up, pack’d and delivered’.[[76]](#endnote-76) Plants were packed in rush matting and straw for protection, before being driven by wagon, shipped or, later in the period, put on trains to their destination. Throughout its existence, the Norwich Nursery, like most contemporary businesses, relied on ‘land carriage’ by waggon or cart for at least part of all deliveries. In 1758, an advertisement in the *Ipswich Journal* declared that a waggon passed weekly between Griffin’s Mundford Nursery, then associated with the Norwich Nursery, via Swaffham towards London.[[77]](#endnote-77) From here, ‘goods may be conveyed to any part of England’. Land carriage was slow and expensive - contemporary receipts from a courier company show the journey between London and Norwich took approximately five days.[[78]](#endnote-78) Cost of delivery very often exceeded the price of the plants when smaller quantities were ordered.[[79]](#endnote-79) It is perhaps, therefore, unsurprising that, despite Mackie’s advertising efforts, most of the Norwich Nursery’s orders came from within Norfolk. With the cost of transport by land in this period limiting all companies to an extent, it is also unsurprising that where there was a substantial potential client base, large provincial nurseries could be found.

Correspondence between the Duke of Bedfordshire’s land agents in the 1830s suggests that the cost of delivery was often the deciding factor between nurseries, rather than the price of the plants, which were, for the most part, fairly consistent. Innovation in delivery methods were therefore a lucrative investment for nurseries hoping to gain an advantage over a rival company. For the Duchy of Bedfordshire, Mackie’s Nursery was favourable due to the ability to transport plants by boat for most of their journey, from Kings Lynn to Bedford via the River Ouse. Despite the distance, this cheaper mode of transport was preferred over land carriage from nearer nurseries such as the Rivers Nursery at Sawbridgeworth, Hertfordshire.[[80]](#endnote-80) In terms of size, Rivers appears to have been comparable to the Norwich Nursery.[[81]](#endnote-81) It was well-positioned for ‘related provisions’, such as pots, willows for packing and basket weaving and fertile land.[[82]](#endnote-82) But despite being only around forty miles from Bedford, the land agents chose to use Mackie’s, more than twice the distance away, presumably because of the willingness of the Norwich Nursery to use cheaper, more direct water transport. The significance of cheap transportation for the expansion of nurseries in this period cannot be underestimated. The Norwich Nursery owed much of its success to the development of its delivery methods throughout the early nineteenth century, which won long-distance contracts despite the proximity of other local companies.

This is perhaps emphasised best by Mackie’s 1796 order from the Ffynone estate, Pembrokeshire. This order for sixty thousand trees, evidenced by a single letter and bill, provides an invaluable insight into the handling of large cross-country deliveries at the end of the eighteenth century. The trees were sent from Norwich to London by road, to the cost of nineteen shillings and six pence. Upon arrival, the plants were transferred to a ship and sailed to Pembrokeshire. The cost of shipping was not recorded, but the ‘porterage, wharfage and suffrage from the waggon to the ship’ totalled three shillings and six pence.[[83]](#endnote-83)

For long-distance deliveries, slow transport by road only occurred when no other viable means were available. Frederick Mackie, who ran the nursery from c.1833 to 1842, appears to have been particularly entrepreneurial with regards to dispatching deliveries from the nursery. John Harvey’s reprint of the 1833 catalogue includes a postscript note in which Frederick ‘thinks it necessary to inform his friends at a distance’ of the possibility of using the canal network between Norwich and Lowestoft (which was expanded in 1832) for delivery.[[84]](#endnote-84) By this improved access to the coast, the Norwich Nursery intended to supply plants ‘as regularly and cheaply as can be desired’ to London, the north of England and beyond. The canal improvements allowed larger coastal vessels direct access to Norwich via the Haddiscoe Cut. Enabling the first stretches of all long-distance deliveries to be conducted by water would save costly land carriage to London. Whether Mackie was ever able to put his canal delivery scheme into practice is unknown. The expansion of the nursery throughout the 1840s into three sites would suggest trade was flourishing, but this is more likely due to the arrival of the railway than advances by water.

Norwich joined England’s rapidly expanding rail network in 1845. As with the canals, the Norwich Nursery greeted the arrival of the trains with enterprising enthusiasm, declaring the ‘great facilities for the speedy and cheap transit of nursery goods’ by the railway. ‘Large quantities’ of plants were to be ‘sent [f]ree to London by the Norfolk railway’.[[85]](#endnote-85) Given that forest tree seedlings, as evidenced by catalogues, were priced by the thousand, or hundred thousand, as standard, ‘large quantities’ were clearly exceptional projects. With the new connection to the capital, the Norwich Nursery was clearly targeting London and beyond, and a very particular group of clients. Mackie’s advertised rail deliveries of ‘instant arboretums’ from 1845. These pre-selected deliveries ranged from ‘a general collection’ of tree and shrubs of six hundred and fifty varieties for thirty-five pounds (just over four thousand pounds today) to a miniature arboretum selection of ‘150 ornamental trees and shrubs’ for seven pounds ten shillings.[[86]](#endnote-86) These package deal plantations targeted the newly monied classes residing in villas on the outskirts of urban areas, with only small areas of land. Mackie’s catalogues also included tables to calculate the number of plants required to fill an acre, depending on spacing. With ‘Plantations Undertaken’ advertised in 1790, the nursery offered the ability to select and plant a garden or designed landscape with minimal horticultural knowledge required by the client, which was enhanced by the offer of the ‘Instant Arboretum’ in 1845.[[87]](#endnote-87) Catalogue ordering and pre-selected planting made achieving the necessary credentials and ‘ideal’ image of a landowner easier than ever before.

CONCLUSION:

The evidence assembled here clearly demonstrates the scale and complexity of the Norwich Nursery in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Together with the research of others, most notably that of Margaret Maddison into the history of the Callenders nursery in Gateshead, it shows how large provincial nurseries were operating in a sophisticated and recognisably modern form far earlier than was previously thought. The development of these businesses should not be seen in isolation, but rather as part of the wider ‘consumer revolution’ of the period.[[88]](#endnote-88) It should also be emphasised that the majority of the Norwich Nursery’s customers were villa-owning members of ‘polite society’ rather than major landowners. The ambition of the former to emulate the horticultural activities of the latter was recognised and exploited by Mackies, as it was by similar businesses. Regular advertising in the provincial press, the hosting of horticultural shows and the provision of a dedicated ‘after-care’ service all served to firmly associate the Mackie name with the nursery industry in Norfolk.

The success of the Norwich Nursery was both enabled by, and a clear expression of the steady growth in the wealth and population of the provincial middle classes. Such companies provided the means for landscape design and innovations to be disseminated to new and wider markets. The demands of customers shaped the development of the nursery, and by extension drove design in new directions as the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth. Study of the provincial nursery industry therefore forms essential connections between the social and economic context, and the resulting horticultural innovations of the period.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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