Still growing strong

Described by fellow growers as an industry 'legend' deserving of a 'collective hug', Graham Ward is certainly a force to be reckoned with as **Mark Holdstock** found out

A MAN who helped a horticultural research station rise 'phoenix-like' from the ashes of a proposed closure a decade ago has been recognised by the industry he has served for more than half a century at this year's Horticulture Week Grower of the Year Awards.

Winner of the 'Outstanding Contribution to the Industry' award, Graham Ward was honoured not just for his part in the rescue mission, but also for the tireless campaigning work he does for UK growers.

In 2001, as the livestock sector faced the calamity of foot and mouth sweeping the country, the centre Graham now helps run was facing a survival battle of its own. The government was making big cuts to its plant research arm – Horticulture Research International – and closure plans soon emerged for the site at Stockbridge House near Selby.

But growers had different ideas and asked Graham to lead an industry drive to save the site as an independent research facility and so safeguard years of vital staff expertise.

"The response was tremendous," said Graham, "and with the help of longstanding colleague Michael Holmes – who is sadly no longer with us – we raised huge a sum of money very quickly."

In fact, more than £160,000 was pledged in just three weeks and less than six months later they took over the site, first as tenants, and then as owners, buying Stockbridge in a public auction in October 2001 and launching it under the new banner of Stockbridge Technology Centre (STC).

From day one the aim was to build up a world-beating facility to support the horticultural industry. At the heart of the operation is the specialist plant clinic, which has effectively put STC at the forefront of the drive to tackle emerging plant issues. A classic example in 2003 saw Yorkshire's red beet growers suddenly and unexpectedly afflicted with severely malformed and distorted roots. And just a year later, the ornamental sector experienced problems when the popular amenity and garden shrub Hebe suffered an unusual fungal attack.

In both instances, the problem came to light thanks to local growers contacting the plant clinic on an individual basis but the R&D team, led by Dr Martin Macpherson, was able to identify them as economically important issues for the sector and so secure research funding through the horticultural levy body HDC. Thanks to this approach and the benefits it delivers back to the industry, the Plant Clinic team was recognised in the 2007 Grower of the Year awards, securing the Science into Practice award.

Graham is a tireless campaigner for the industry

Alongside its plant health work, STC has also blazed a trail when it comes to pioneering new growing and production methods. From all-year-round Yorkshire cucumbers and the development of 'living' salads for the food retail market to extensive research into the use of beneficial insects to help reduce growers' dependence on pesticides, STC research has helped numerous businesses to push the boundaries.

Having now celebrated its tenth birthday, the STC team has its eye firmly on the future of sustainable production. One idea is using LED (light-emitting diode) lighting to replicate the parts of the sun's light that make plants grow.

According to Graham, the benefit of this approach is that it allows 'vertical farming' in places where land is in short supply. This could see food grown in the agricultural equivalent of a multi-storey car park, and compared to conventional light bulbs, LEDs not only use less power, but are cooler and less likely to damage the crops.

"Just think you can control the light spectrum and so maximise plant growth and responses," said Graham. "For protected growing this must be the way forward: less energy, and greater control of water, nutrients and light. Plus you can put the building where you want production – in the towns not thousands of miles away. With this approach, there are no seasons, just product every day of the year. It's a step change in production technology."

Not only is Stockbridge looking at the production techniques of the future, it is also developing the growers and consumers of the future. Working extensively with primary schools, children are actively encouraged to come and see how food is grown and to have a go at growing it themselves.

Much of this work has been funded through the old Countryside Stewardship Scheme, and Graham fought a successful campaign to make sure money was made available for educational access through the Higher Level Stewardship programme.

It was in direct response to his tireless campaigning that Graham received is outstanding achievement award. His current passion is the government's proposal to ban the use of peat in England – a move Graham says would put local growers at a severe disadvantage vis a vis their European competitors.

"This is something we have to fight," he said. "All we want is a level playing field and this is very far from that."

While he's at it, Graham is also on a mission to tackle the government's careers information policies in secondary schools: "There seems to be a real 'downer' at the moment on vocational education, but without vocational education you don't produce anything!"

As someone who's been actively involved in the healthy eating drive in schools for many years, it's certain Graham will make his voice heard!

After 50 years in the industry, Graham says it's vital that Stockbridge has and will continue to thrive. Other sites haven't been so fortunate.

"Since Stockbridge was earmarked for closure, HRI Warwick (Wellesbourne) has closed, Kirton has closed and East Malling has been re-privatised," he said. "In essence government support for horticultural research comes to an end this year.

"This means money will have to be found from new and different sources – something we've been doing for the last decade. The only two research facilities now available to the industry are owned and controlled by growers – namely East Malling and ourselves.

"ADAS still survives and the new Warwick Crop Centre has been thrown a temporary lifeline by Warwick University, but these are challenging times for the industry. It's been exciting for the last ten years and there's no sign yet of the pace slowing – let's just hope we can keep up with the changes ahead."

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Numerous awards recognise a career spanning 50 years

Graham graduated from Reading University in 1960. He then spent five years as the manager of a top and soft fruit farm in the Teme Valley in Worcestershire.

From 1965 to 1977 he worked for ICI Plant Protection, eventually running the Fernhurst Research Station which worked on high technology approaches to growing a range of crops from tomatoes and flowers to strawberries and apples.

In 1977 he was appointed as the chief executive of The Land Settlement Association (LSA). This was a scheme designed to help farm workers and others get into horticulture. Whilst there he helped the growers who had been given their chance of getting into the industry break into supermarkets with their products.

He was approached by the Thatcher government and asked to move the LSA into the private sector. This was achieved by forming grower-controlled marketing co-operatives.

Graham then moved back into the private sector where he was appointed CEO of Home Grown Salads – a group made up of some of the growers' co-operatives formed through the privatisation of the LSA . This group in turn was sold to Geest and three years later Graham moved to Snaith Salads based at Goole in Yorkshire.

Graham has held various roles in the NFU and was the first chairman of the National Board for Horticulture and Potatoes. He remains on the regional horticulture and potatoes board.

In 2005 he was awarded an OBE for services to horticulture and the same year he received the 'Lifetime Achievement Award' at the Grower of Year Awards. Graham also holds the Harlow Carr Medal for services to horticulture in the North of England.