

The Hydroponic Leeks



You may never have heard of County Durham, but you have likely heard of one or more of its progeny: Prime Minister Tony Blair, of course. Suave singer Brian Ferry who fronted Roxy Music in the 1970s. There's Josiah Dixon, the surveyor whose name extends from the Mason-Dixon Line to define the entire southern United States as Dixie. Lord John Lambton, who, to the dismay of Anglo-Canadians, officially recognised the uniqueness of Quebec in the Durham Report. Mary Ann Cotton (she's dead and she's rotten) offered more than 15 members of her own family to get the dividend the local funeral club paid out on expiration of a loved one. By virtue of her being a woman, (I used the word virtue loosely, you'll note) she's peerless as a mass murderer. There's also Mr. Bean, the world's favourite prat, and dancing-through-the-Thatcher-years, Billy Elliot—proving that being a ballet dancer doesn't necessarily mean you're a puff.

Durham's a small county, centrally located in the ancient kingdom of Northumbria, where the English language was born from a forging of Brethonic Welsh, pig-latin and the harsh tongues of invading Angles, Jutes and Saxons. To the south is Yorkshire and to the north is Northumberland. The entire region is a cornucopia of eccentricities and quirks—Trimdon, for instance, is said to be the sweariest village in the kingdom, and it might well be frigging true.

Then there's the leeks. Wales claims the leek as a symbol of its fair land, but the Welsh never regarded the humble plant with the esteem, nay ... reverence, that it commands in County Durham. There it is a sacred thing. There, its holy affinity with humans stretches back beyond the English and their Christianity, beyond the Celts and their pixies, beyond the Britons and their stone gods and on into the mythological abyss. In County Durham, leeks are right up there with “what caused the big bang then?”

The saga of Tom Lockey's leeks began with a gardening book received as a Christmas gift and ended on Twelfth Night just two weeks later. A Yuletide tradition in the Lockey house (and a good many others) was to have the little woman get up at six in the morning to prepare—all by herself—the enormous Christmas dinner that was served at noon. She began by laying the fire.

Yesterday's cinders were rattled back and forth in the grate to shed any ash into the dustpan underneath. Any cinders that didn't disintegrate obviously had a little life left to give and formed the bed

for the new fire. Sheets of old newspaper were screwed into little balls and tossed into the grate. Sticks were laid criss-cross the paper and new coals from the scuttle balanced on top of the wood. The coal scuttle, now empty, received the ash from under the grate and Mrs. Lockey—her lungs tinged with piquant sulphur—hurried them out to the dustbins at the end of the backyard. She lit the newspaper and as soon as it took, placed a bleazer in front of the fireplace to exclude air and force the fire into life. Tom thought it was a wonderful tradition, although he had never seen it. Mrs. Lockey couldn't quite see the point of referring to it as a Christmas tradition when she had done it every day of her life since she was seven years old.

Once her two lumps of sons were grown and gone and breakfast was no longer a requirement, there was no need to wake Tom before necessary, which, based on years of experience with his going out Christmas Eve for a drink with the lads, she placed at precisely 11:30 a.m. Tom then slid out of bed, washed, shaved, went downstairs and sat at the table, pulled a cracker, put on the paper hat, ate himself into the Guinness Book of Records and fell back to sleep in front of the T.V. at one o'clock.

If you grew up anywhere in Britain you'll know that the television companies hire someone each year especially for Christmas programming. The only qualification seems to be that the person hired has no taste, just a pathological nostalgia for thirty-five year old movies and a fondness for comedians you'd throw fruit at if you'd had to pay to see them. Any latter-day Adolf Hitler would do well to learn this and invade on Christmas afternoon when all the men are comatose.

When Tom woke up again at 3:30, just too late for the Queen's Message, it was time for presents. He'd got Mrs. Lockey a new set of fireside tools. She'd got him a book. It wasn't a new book, she been giving him it every third year for more than a decade, and he never even recognised it let alone read it. That was it, there was none of this buying stuff for buying's sake with the Lockeyes.

"Very nice, love," she said.

"Very nice, love," he said. And then he surprised her by opening the book and starting to read. "Gardening, lovely." Mrs. Lockey thought the jig might be up, but Tom had no inkling that this was the fourth time he'd been given the book. "I'll need a hobby. I retire in March."

"I'm looking forward to that, Dear," lied Mrs. Lockey.

Tom continued to surprise by continuing to read. Mrs. Lockey watched intently. She had seen him pore over the racing form in the newspaper, but was curious as to how he'd react to adjectives and verbs. There was a lot of movement in his face as he read and, after an hour without pause, he clapped the book shut and nodded at her.

"Hydroponics," he said. Then he got up and left to get shaved and dressed for the evening session at the pub.

When the shops opened the following day, Tom fought his way through the Boxing Day mania to the gardening counter at the Megamart in town. He spent approximately three times more than he had spent on Mrs. Lockey's lifetime total for Christmas gifts. But he emerged with the latest, top-of-the-line equipment for growing hydroponic vegetables, hurried home and installed it all in his greenhouse. Then he returned to the book and read on.

On December the 29th, he ran a cable from the back kitchen to the greenhouse and, after a curse-filled fight with a multiple socket light fixture, he flipped the switch and lit up the greenhouse for the first time with artificial light. Mrs. Lockey was rather impressed. The day after, Tom returned from work with

half-a-dozen one-hundred-watt bulbs to replace the 60s he had used. The light thrown by the new bulbs meant it would always be noon at the back of Alma Avenue. But it wasn't enough, and Tom revamped the system and changed the hundred-watters for florescent spots. Then when he threw the switch, the lights in the street dimmed a bit and the greenhouse became the only thing in County Durham visible from space. When he opened the book again after supper, Mrs. Lockey began to worry a bit.

On the 30th, Tom painted the inside of the glass panes matt black to contain the light. The temperature inside rose dramatically and once he installed the sprinklers, the humidity quickly reached the optimum level recommended in the book. On the last day of the year, he stepped out into the garden and selected six likely-looking leeks from his cold frame.

"You shall not have to endure the winter," he told them lovingly. "For you are the chosen ones. You six are destined for greatness." Then he carefully pulled up the skinny plants, no thicker than scallions, and washed the roots in the special bottled water that came with the hydroponics kit. He laid them gently down on the newly disinfected bench, and strapped them into tiny harnesses that suspended them above a trough filled with rockwool and nutrient solution. He stepped back just a little to admire his handiwork.

"Now, grow, you little bastards."

Mrs. Lockey thought it best to wait until Tom was at work before she went into the greenhouse for a gander at whatever was going on. On January 3rd (he'd been too hung over to go to work on the 2nd) she opened the door and was almost knocked down by a stifling breeze. In less than a week, a tropical rainforest had been created in her own back yard. It was dark inside, but in the place where she expected to find a light switch, there was a flashlight, and she lifted it off its hook and turned it on. She could make out Frankensteinian shapes in the gloom: strange-looking equipment in plastic and stainless steel, with tubes and pipes everywhere. An eerie glow emanating from the flow tray cast an alien light against the underside of the little leeks. Suddenly, something whirred softly behind her and there was a just-audible click. Then the lights came on.

"Holy mother of God," she said as she held her hands over her eyes. The temperature, already making breathing a chore, increased by a dozen degrees. The shrubs and pot-plants that had been carried inside to protect them from the weather had been tripped into early spring growth and they had more foliage than they normally sported at the height of summer. "Ee, it's like a bleedin' Tarzan movie." When her eyes were quite used to the strong light, she looked suspiciously at the hydroponics set-up. It was far more complicated than she had been led to believe. Far more sophisticated. Far more expensive. There were labels on the leek harnesses and she bent to read them:

Gog, Magog, Titan, Garth, Gargantua, Goliath.

"Bleedin' hell," she said. "He's growing Triffids." A shudder shimmied down her spine and she quickly closed the door and hurried back to the dim day outside.

At supper the next night, Tom's nose was once again buried in the book.

"Look at this," he announced. "The GasBoy 1000 works full time to oxidize and eliminate bacteria, viruses and organic waste materials in your water." He missed his mouth with the soup and it slopped down his chest. "Oh," he said mechanically. "You'll need to wash this again."

"Won't that cost a lot of money?" she asked quietly.

"A bit, but it'll mean even bigger leeks and the first-prize next show is a trip for two to Malta. Not bad,

hey? You could fancy that, hey?” And his face broke into a smile of sorts. It wasn’t something Mrs. Lockey had seen on Tom’s face before. It was more of a smirk than a smile. Somehow more menacing than she was comfortable with.

“What if you don’t win?”

Tom looked up from his book for the first time and cast an incredulous glance at his wife.

“Ha!” was all he had to say about that.

“But it’s a lot of money, Tom. More than £300 ... so far.”

“Look,” he said. “Hydroponics is not only the answer to the starvation in the Third World, it’ll make sure I take that leek trophy away from Alf Brown and shut the smarmy get up for once.”

Mrs. Lockey poured more tea and opened the newspaper at the travel page. She found an ad for holidays in Malta and looked at the idyllic picture that accompanied it.

“The Gasboy 1000 uses Corona Discharge technology to generate Ozone - one of the most powerful oxidizers available,” said Tom.

“A sun-soaked week under blue skies—hospitality second to none at the Citadel Blanca overlooking the Mediterranean Sea,” she read dreamily. Then just as her fantasy was carrying her south to sunny Malta, she saw the last line in the ad.

Special Post-Christmas Break: Book Now! Only £200 per couple includes airfare and accommodation.

Tom’s voice had faded to a muffle as far as Mrs. Lockey was concerned. With the aid of a pocket calculator, he was prophesying the eventual circumference of his champion leek by multiplying the current record by the 15 per cent increase in growth promised by the hydroponics industry. And when he converted the numbers into metric he nearly choked on his tea.

Across the room, Mrs. Lockey was rummaging through the top of the oak bureau that contained all her important papers. In a tall, slim compartment right in the middle was a bundle of folded papers held together with crimson ribbon. She glanced casually towards Tom and smiled at whatever he was saying at that moment, then she unfurled the papers and selected the one embossed with the picture of a shield and the words “Prudential Assurance.”

After she read and reread her household insurance policy, Mrs. Lockey did a little calculating of her own. The cost of a trip to Malta versus the cost of hydroponic leeks. Then she folded the papers and placed them back in the safety of the bureau.

“I think I’ll just go and check on the leeks,” said Tom.

“Right, love. I’ll iron a shirt in case you want to go for a pint.”

“I’ve not got the wherewithal.”

“Yes, you do,” she lied again. “I found cash in your trouser pocket when I washed them this afternoon.”

“Marvellous,” said Tom, delighted, and stepped out through the back door with a positive spring in his step. In the bar at the Dog & Trumpet at 7:30 on January 5th, it was all he could do not to let the lads in on his masterplan straight away. Alf Brown was there and he couldn’t resist a little dig.

“Got yer leeks in yet, Alf?”

Alf cast a sidelong glance and raised an eyebrow.

“Never mind about *my* leeks,” he said, “Look after yer own leeks.” It’s the standard answer to any query concerning the great plant in Durham. But it did the trick, and Alf couldn’t suppress a suspicion

that there was a rabbit off. In the spirit of the season, he bought Tom a beer. Tom reciprocated, Alf reciprocated and by chucking-out time they were as reciprocated as newts. Tom had spilled the beans regarding his secret enterprise and had convinced Alf to come in as a partner. Mrs. Lockey opened the curtains ever so slightly and peered into the night to see what the commotion was about. Alf had got entangled in some buckets by the greenhouse and he and Tom were shushing each other and giggling like schoolkids. Once the tour was over, the two men sat on bales of peat moss inside the greenhouse and drank bottled beer that Tom had brought from the pub. Certain that they would take the leek world by storm, they were already planning how they would grow even bigger leeks next year. At two o'clock on the morning of January 6th, they parted company with what they thought was a quietly-rendered version of Elvis Presley's 'Old Shep,' and staggered off to their respective beds.

"Tom! Tom, wake up love ... the fireman needs to talk to you." Mrs Lockey roused her reluctant husband from a thick, viscous sleep. He thought he'd misheard her, but no, there was a huge fireman standing next to the bed.

"Yer greenhouse has gone up, Mr. Lockey. Can I ask you a few questions?"

Tom was out of bed and at the window in a second. Fire hoses snaked all over the back yard and the greenhouse was gone—replaced with a 12 by 20 patch of scorched earth.

"Oh, shite ..." said Tom, aptly. "Me friggin' leeks! How can a greenhouse catch fire?" The fireman continued to scribble in his notebook, licking the end of a short pencil each time he turned the page.

"It's no mystery, Mr. Lockey. You've got twelve spotlights pointed at two chuffing-big bales of bone dry peat moss. Or should I say you *used* to have twelve spotlights and two bales of peat moss."

Tom was only able to stare in disbelief. The metal frame of the greenhouse was blackened and twisted, reminding him of photographs he'd seen of smouldering World War One battlefields.

"There were two empty beer bottles nearby," continued the fireman, with a wink. "But they wouldn't be yours would they? Here you go, give this to your insurance company." And he ripped off the report form along its perforated edge and held it out to a silent, deflated Tom Lockey.

"I'll look after that," said Mrs. Lockey, taking the paper.

"Sorry about all this," said the fireman. "Still, no one hurt, just a greenhouse gone."

Mrs. Lockey took Tom by the arm and led him gently downstairs to the living room where she sat him in an armchair by the fire. She went to the kitchen and did what the English do in times of great stress, even in County Durham.

"Here's a cup of tea, Tom."

After a few minutes reflecting on the disaster, Tom saw that it could have been much worse. What if the conflagration had spread to the house? What if he'd fallen asleep in the greenhouse? He sipped the tea and stared into the hearth where the blue-tinged flames spread warmth into his chilly and miserable morning.

"By heck, lass, you make a good fire!"

Mrs. Lockey smiled and slipped the report into the bureau next to the insurance policy.



