The Glasshouse Crop Research Institute

The Glasshouse Crops Research Institute (GCRI) was established in Littlehampton in 1954. Its principal objective was to 'to promote scientific research bearing on the cultivation of glasshouse crops and mushrooms, and of bulbs, flowers and shrubs grown in the open and on matters ancillary thereto.' It was situated 'in the heart of the West Sussex glasshouse area,' which was also an important area for mushroom production. It was administered by the Agricultural Research Council which was responsible for the general supervision of the Institute's staffing and research pay.

The Littlehampton base succeeded an experimental and research site at Cheshunt, which had existed from 1915 to 1955. At the same time, it took over the work of the Mushroom Research Station at Yaxley which ran from 1946 to 1954.

The governing body of the Institute consisted of 14 members: six from leading commercial growers representing the horticultural industry, 7 eminent scientists and a former senior Education and Advisory Officer of the then Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The governing body was appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science jointly with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.
The site occupied about 100 acres of land in Worthing Road, just inside the Rustington boundary, (now a housing estate known locally as the flowers estate). The greater part of the land was required for work with outdoor crops, for the supply of loam and for re-soiling the glass houses when experimental work required it.

As well as an administration block which included a library, there was a well-equipped block of laboratories with an annex for special services. The glasshouses were used for large scale experiments and trials as well as research laboratories for work in plant physiology, plant pathology, chemistry and crop protection.
A feature was a large compartmentalised glasshouse in 2 sections (for etymology and virology) which had a system of air conditioning and pressurization designed for ventilation and cooling and insect control.

There was a continuing programme of capital development. A separate unit, which included three growing houses, was provided for research on mushrooms. There was a Dutch barn, a packing shed, as well as staff housing and eventually a nursery.

The Scientific Staff worked in a range of specialisations: Plant Breeding; Plant Physiology; Chemistry; Statistics; Plant Pathology: Entomology, Mycology and Bacteriology, Nematology, Virology, Crop protection and Horticulture.

Research covered areas such as:

An experiment in CO2 enrichment
A nuclear stock scheme for ornamentals
Tomato – breeding new varieties, nutrition and feeding, fruit quality and chemical composition
Cucumber stem rot
Lettuce
Mushroom
Carnation
Chrysanthemum
Bulb and Corm Crops

The Institute's work on the virus diseases of ornamentals led to the creation of the Nuclear Stock Association (Ornamentals) Ltd. Its role was to apply the results of the virus work to the production of and multiplication of virus free or virus-tested propagating material of ornamentals – initially carnation and chrysanthemum for eventual distribution to growers.

Other major achievements of the Institute include:

Through the Staff Association several clubs and Societies were introduced including a Social Club, Photographic Society and Cricket Club.
The work attracted much interest from growers/suppliers and received visitors from colleges, schools, working parties, young farmer clubs as well as overseas (Australia, Canary Islands, Ontario, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Israel, Nigeria and Norway).
The Institute ran a subscription service enabling growers and others to take an interest in the research programmes
The staff welcomed visitors from a range of interested organisations and gave tours of the site. These were generally educational and technical visits from students at colleges, schools, working parties, overseas visitors etc. There was also an annual open day for growers.
Papers on the research were regularly published in Scientific Journals and staff gave presentations at relevant international conferences. Staff colloquia were introduced to provide accounts of the different types of work to colleagues. A range of talks, lectures and papers were given.
Working parties from different organisations visited, for example the West Sussex Tomato Working Party; Worthing Science Society, International Photographic Convention, Women's Farm and Garden Association,

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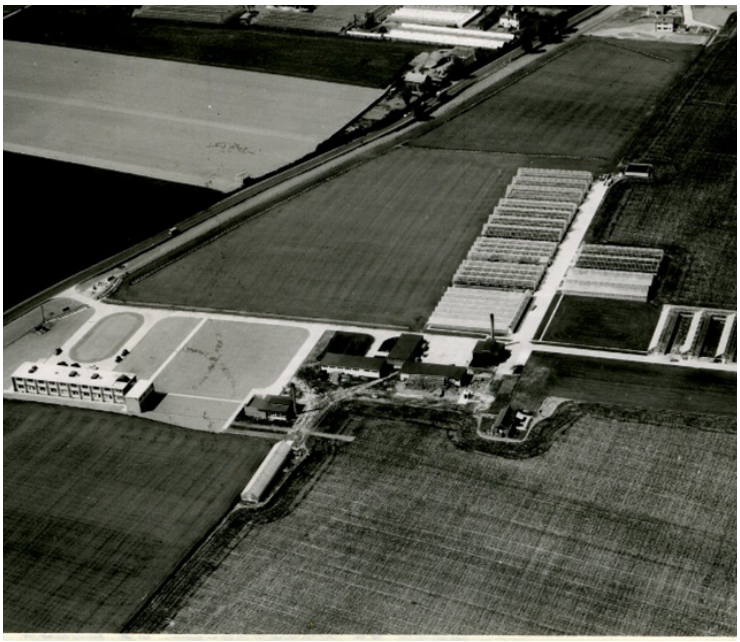
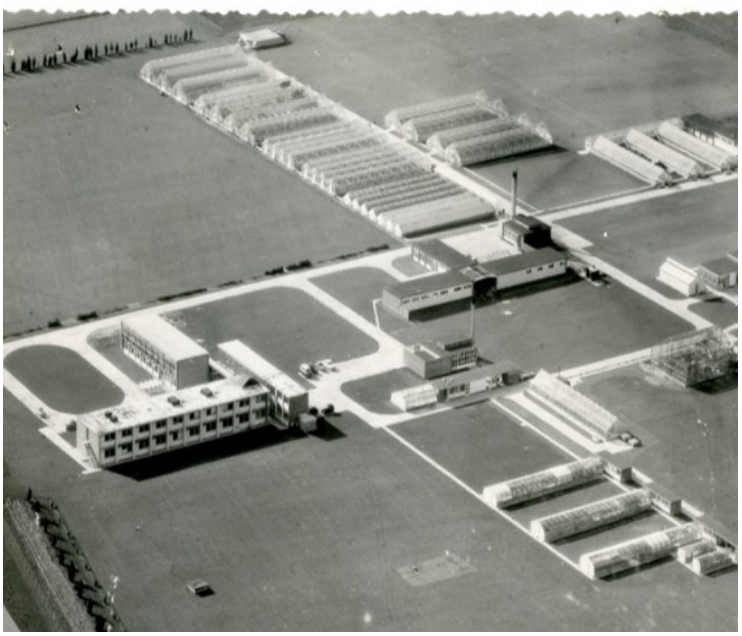
By 1985 the centre at Littlehampton was shut down and merged with the National Vegetable Research Station in Kent and the Hop Department of Wye College to create the Institute of Horticultural Research. GCRI was formally closed on 15 December 1995.

The GCRI Trust was established in 1989. It exists to promote scientific research and education bearing on the environmentally sustainable cultivation of horticultural crops growing in glasshouses, polytunnels and other structures. It provides grants and sponsors a biennial lecture on international future trends named the Bewley Lecture.

Papers written and presented by GCRI staff can still be found on the internet via Wiley Online Library; Oxford Academic; JSTOR.

(Left: The Glasshouse Crops Research Institute. Right: A scientist doing some laboratory work inside).





(Left: An aerial photo of the GCRI compound. Right: Another aerial photo of the compound from a 1995 postcard).