

ARTICLE FROM THE CRAVEN HERALD BY JOHN SHEARD:

Two or three years ago, I arranged to have a bunch of flowers sent to lady who was staging a special anniversary party at Herriot's Hotel in Skipton.

The flowers, I seem to remember cost £6 or £7 but I was shocked when I received a credit card bill of £18: the rest covered a delivery charge of a journey from the centre of town, half a mile at the most. Being a penny pinching sort of fellow, I very rarely buy flowers: my wife begs, borrows or steals cuttings and our back yard tends to be a veritable feast of flora throughout the year (if the winter pansies thrive, that is)

And on those rare occasions that the odd (small) bouquet seems to be appropriate, I confess that I have slipped into one of the big supermarkets which tender the odd bundle of foreign-grown blooms for ridiculously low prices. As someone who likes to support local shops, this troubles my conscience but eases the pain to my wallet.

Note, however, the past tense. I now have a place to go which satisfies both criteria and, what's more, is run by a delightful young woman who has had the courage (even though she calls it 'lack of business knowledge') to take on the supermarkets.

She produces flower displays which are not cheaper - that would be virtually impossible for a small independent trader - but which completely outshines them when it comes to colour, style and service with the proverbial smile.

Even getting there was a colourful journey. Until I first saw the work of florist Rachel Seed (I shall avoid the obvious pun) I always thought that the prettiest bloom in the world was the bird of paradise flower, which my wife and I used to bring back from winter breaks in Madeira.

Then over a pint in the Royal Oak in Skipton I was dazzled by a plant I later found out to be the heliconia, brought all the way from South Africa to brighten up a dull and wet summer's day in Craven.

This is a plant that makes the bird of paradise look like a dandelion, with six claw like orange, red, blue and green flower heads (almost the colour of the new South African 'Rainbow nation' flag) and it pierced the gloom like a laser beam.

'Where on Earth did you find that?' I asked and was pointed across the road to the Little Flowerpot Company in High Corn Mill, the venture recently launched by 34 year old Rachel Seed and husband Nick Hewitt, when they should have been on their honeymoon.

Ilkley-born Rachel is one of those modern young women who like a challenge. On leaving school, she trained as a sommelier - wine waitress - and spent five years on the high seas working for American cruise lines. Tired of life afloat she became a sommelier at the ultra-posh Harvey Nicholas restaurant in London then moved back home to Yorkshire to work in Harvey Nick's store in Leeds. The Leeds store did not run to a sommelier, however, and she had to work as a waitress which she found did not satisfy her creative urges.

What it did do, however, was to start her thinking of her Yorkshire childhood and, in particular, days spent learning about flowers in her grandfather's garden.

'I have always loved flowers, always dreamed of being a florist, so I took myself off to college to learn the trade.' Adding somewhat ruefully 'I should have learned more about running a business, but if I had known what I was letting myself in for I may not be doing this today.'

It was a steep learning curve. She and husband-to-be Nicholas, who runs a joinery business in Cowling, began by making up bouquets and wreaths in their garage and selling them from a stall in Craven Court.

Encouraged by this early start, they later bought a shop on the edge of Victoria Square, only to find it a total disaster.

But the move into High Corn Mill on Chapel Hill, which added yet another splash of colour to what was fast becoming the most exclusive business quarters in the town, brought a swift upturn - although she and Nicholas had spent their honeymoon converting and refurbishing the shop. The company began to win prestige contracts to supply arrangements to clients ranging

from Skipton Building Society - they decorate the SBS foyer - and local small businesses and hotels, including the Royal Oak, where the wondrous Heliconia had first attracted my attention.

'If I had known more about running a business I might never have started,' says Rachel with an infectious laugh. 'But we have learnt from our mistakes and we have never looked back since we moved into the mill.'

I like this shop for many reasons, not because we need all the colour we can get in this horrendous summer, but mostly because it is good to report on young people who have the guts and the determination not just to set up new businesses but have the strength of will to see them through those tough early days.

I am glad to hear that Rachel and Nick finally had a lovely honeymoon, on a cruise ship that used to have Rachel as a crew member.

'I always promised myself that I would go cruising on the luxury side of the operation. I think we earned it.' she said.