

# Roy Hattersley

IN SEARCH OF ENGLAND



## Tulip fans put the petal to the metal

**S**PALDING in Lincolnshire on Bank Holiday Saturday. The crowds in the streets would do credit to a Cup Final. Some of them hurry to the Sir Halley Stuart Field where, despite the country dancing display, there is a feeling that the excitement is yet to begin.

It is the day of the annual Flower Parade. The long procession of decorated lorries will not arrive at the recreation ground for hours. But the clowns, on other days members of the Spalding Lions Club, are already taking tickets at the gate — part of the army of helpers who are doing their bit for charity.

As the day wears on, the pavements of the town centre will fill, three or four visitors deep, with the tourists. Even at noon, they have begun to spill out of the cars and coaches.

Spalding is ready to welcome them. Churches and chapels have turned themselves into cafes. Cakes and cold drinks are on sale from stalls in front gardens, in the way they were on a feast day in medieval England.

And it is all done for the greater glory of the bulb that made Spalding famous. The Flower Festival is a celebration of the tulip.

For years, tourists flooded into the area just for the joy of seeing the fields of tulips bloom in the early May sunlight.

Then the growers decided to celebrate their product — and encourage business — with a floral spectacular. The raw material was to hand. Spalding sold tulip bulbs as well as cut flowers, and bulbs grow best when the flower heads are removed. So the idea of the parade was born — float after float, with each topical tableaux 'made from tulips'.

In those days, the tulip fields of Lincolnshire covered 300,000 acres. Now, they cover barely ten. Holland, where the soil is lighter and bulbs can be lifted by machinery, has cornered the market.

**B**UT THE parade goes on in memory of one of England's past glories. Half-a-million tulip heads were paraded through Spalding last Saturday.

Asked how the organisers could be so precise about the number, Robin Chapple — a one-time tulip grower who has switched to daffodils — gave a wholly convincing answer. 'We had to buy 500,000 pins.'

At noon, the floats were all assembled in Springfield Gardens. The theme, on which they were to provide variations, was Planet Earth. But the most poignant exhibit on display neither respected the theme nor was built to take part in the parade.

A Spitfire — yellow tulip heads

and green tulip leaves for camouflage, with red, white and blue markings on its wings — reminded visitors that Lincolnshire was home to some of the airfields from which the Battle of Britain was fought and won.

The floats, preparing to tour the town, were a tribute to the imagination of their sponsors. One, called Polar Ice, had at its centre a wonderfully realistic polar bear — just as white and twice as large as life.

The NFU's massive purple bucket and huge green watering-can were overshadowed by a ten-foot yellow rabbit — not always the farmers' best friend. Spalding corporation, no doubt with municipal parks in mind, was represented by two giant marigolds — made, of course, from tulips.

The Young Farmers had built a replica of Noah's Ark. Its inhabitants wore animal costumes. Christina Tyrell was dressed as what she described as a large ape. Roger Whitfield, with the jocular agreement of his friends, described himself as a pig. They were accompanied by a lion, a tiger and several exhausted looking penguins.

**L**IKE most of the other participants in the parade, they had spent the previous day and most of the night covering their tableau with tulip heads — each one fastened in place by a single pin. The Young Farmers — they announced with pride — always make their own floats from start to finish.

Other entrants, with more ambitious ideas, have the frames of their tableaux built and designed professionally. Jackie Barnes — for most of the year a water taxi pilot who ferries passengers between Spalding and Holbeach — has spent most of the time since Christmas putting the skeletons together ready for the covering of flowers.

One of them was 'A Hundred Years of Scouting' made for the Holbeach and District Scouts and Cubs. A huge 'bust' of Robert Baden-Powell — a remarkable likeness to the first chief scout — was perched in the stem of a tulip-covered boat. His uniform was made of moss, but the rest of him was pure tulip.

Moss — essential for a khaki uniform — provided a striking contrast to the colours which are the tulip's special appeal. The whole parade was a blaze of red and yellow, purple and orange, pink and blue.

Douglas Braybrooks, a retired tulip grower and historian of the parade, explained that, even 50 years ago, more Lincolnshire acres were devoted to daffodils than to tulips. But daffodils, although the flower of poets, never had the colour which attracted visitors to Spalding. Tulips did.

Nobody who was in the town last Saturday could doubt how great that attraction was.