



©Peter Williams

***Narcissus*
‘Weardale
Perfection’
– a tale of
discovery,
loss and
resurrection**
Peter Williams

Fig. 1 *N.* ‘Weardale Perfection’

New plant introductions are like politicians – they come and they go. Sometimes they stay for decades and are of great importance, at other times they appear to great acclaim then swiftly vanish without trace.

Even well-loved and highly successful plant cultivars and varieties can disappear over time. The reasons are usually a combination of factors that may include becoming susceptible to pests and disease, being replaced by better forms, or simply falling out of fashion and being dropped from nurserymen’s lists. Recently introduced cultivars often disappear because their novelty is short lived or because the debutantes are just not as special, or as reliable, as the raisers had claimed. The nursery trade relies on new introductions to boost incomes and we Hardy Planters are

enthusiastically complicit in this activity, as indeed gardeners have been throughout time.

In the early days of modern gardening, newly introduced species were collected around the world by planthunters and sold for fortunes. Plants in great demand included orchids, lilies, rhododendrons and camellias. The hybrids that resulted both naturally and by

deliberate breeding offered an even greater choice of new introductions. The tulip madness of the 17th century is well known, but less well-known episodes occurred: in mid-Victorian times there was first an obsessive interest in ferns, then a mania for daffodils; today there are many galanthophiles and, to a lesser extent, hosta, hepatica, heuchera and hellebore enthusiasts.



©HPS Library/Trevor Walton

Fig. 2 *N.* ‘King Alfred’

This story concerns daffodils and examines the history of one of the most famous daffodils of the late 19th century. This is not, as you might expect, *Narcissus* 'King Alfred', which indeed has a fascinating story of its own, but the now largely forgotten *N.* 'Weardale Perfection' (fig. 1 & front cover).

Daffodils were highly fashionable in the late-Victorian and Edwardian period and the work of the early hybridisers, both amateur and professional, led to the development of huge numbers of named cultivars. Indeed, creating new forms became so popular that in April 1900 the Birmingham Daily Post, reporting on the Midland Daffodil Society show in Edgbaston Botanic Gardens, wrote: 'As for the daffodils themselves, the craze of cultivators for new varieties has become so embarrassing that show judges have declared their

intention to pass over any seedlings, however good they may be individually, which do not show some distinctly progressive features'.

New daffodils fetched high prices and when, for example, *N.* 'King Alfred' (fig. 2) was marketed for the first time by Barr and Sons in 1900, approximately 100 parent bulbs were sold for six guineas each. A year earlier, three bulbs of 'Will Scarlett', bred by Rev. George Engleheart and featuring an intensely red corona, were sold for £100 to J Pope of Kings Norton. The new owner was reported to be 'well satisfied' with the results of his transaction. It's only when you consider that at this time the wage for a head gardener on a large estate was about £2 for a 60-hour week, that the relative cost can be appreciated.

My interest in early daffodils was prompted by a gift in autumn 2016 of

what my friend described as "a few old daffodil bulbs you might be interested in growing." There were five bulbs of *N.* 'Empress' (figs 3a & 3b) and five of *N.* 'Weardale Perfection'. The hand-written labels informed me that 'Empress' was raised by William Backhouse (fig. 4) in 1865 and was the first triploid cultivar, and that 'Weardale Perfection', also bred by William Backhouse, was the first tetraploid narcissus and had flowered for the first time in 1872. I was intrigued by this information and decided to look into the history of early daffodils. I quickly discovered the pivotal role that William Backhouse and his descendants played in daffodil breeding: over three generations they released more than 950 named cultivars. Fewer than 20 are commercially available today, but fortunately many more can be found in national collections.

©RHS Lindley Collections



Fig. 3a

Fig. 3a *N.* 'Empress' from two albums containing 172 paintings (c. 1900) of named *Narcissus* cultivars commissioned by William Fowler Mountford Copeland (1872-1953), a grower and breeder of daffodils and an exhibitor at the Midland Daffodil Society and the RHS.

©Peter Williams



Fig. 3b

Fig. 3b *N.* 'Empress'

'Empress' together with 'Emperor' (figs 5a & b), another triploid, were possibly the most desirable daffodils in the 1860s. A major factor in their success was that their triploid status made them larger and more vigorous than the common diploids from which they arose. Peter Barr (fig. 6), who developed the most famous daffodil nursery of the period and became known as the 'Daffodil King', noted in *Ye Narcissus or Daffodyl Flowre, and hys Roots* (1884) (fig. 7) 'that amongst hybrid Daffodils ... Emperor and Empress even yet reign supreme'. By 1900, however, 'Emperor' was being described as an old-fashioned cultivar in flower-show reports.

When my Backhouse bulbs flowered in spring 2017, I was delighted by both cultivars but especially by 'Weardale Perfection'.

This truly lovely daffodil is tall, elegant, delicately bi-coloured, and holds its flowers strongly above the foliage. My delight turned to astonishment when later I investigated the history of this cultivar and found how its fortunes had changed over time, and how it had been rescued from oblivion by a small number of dedicated enthusiasts.

The donor of my bulbs was Dr David Willis (fig. 8). I knew David as a professional horticulturalist, the person responsible for the introduction of *Euphorbia characias* Silver Swan and, years before, for formulating Vitax Q4, the first general fertiliser with chelated trace elements. But until I received the daffodil gift, I didn't know that David's research interests included early daffodil developments or that he had played an important



Fig. 4 William Backhouse

role in the conservation of 'Weardale Perfection'. I would like to acknowledge the help and material he gave me in the preparation of this article.

The story begins with William Backhouse who was a Quaker, a wealthy Darlington banker, and the leading hybridiser of daffodils from 1855 until his death in 1869.



Fig. 5a N. 'Emperor', Copeland Albums of Daffodil Paintings



Fig. 5b N. 'Emperor'

His country home was at St John's Hall, Wolsingham in Weardale, County Durham. During the flowering season he undertook plant breeding in the early morning before catching the train to Darlington to start his day's work. Unfortunately, William died before the cultivar that was to become 'Weardale Perfection' first flowered in 1872. His son Charles James Backhouse witnessed the event and named the plant 'Weardale'. However, the new cultivar was not an instant success and Charles James is reported to have said in 1900 "Nobody cared a rap for daffodils in those days, and so it was never developed until the latter parts of the eighties, when it flourished rapidly. Mr. Barr, the well-known Covent Garden seedsman, took it in hand, and it has long since become known as one of the finest daffodils

in existence." This change in fortune for 'Weardale' was associated with its being awarded the prestigious First-Class Certificate by the RHS Narcissus Committee in 1894 then having its name changed to 'Weardale Perfection'.

In the late 1880s and early 1900s, a single 'Weardale Perfection' bulb cost up to £12, the equivalent of £1400 today. Despite its very high initial cost, it was quickly distributed among daffodil enthusiasts and appeared in daffodil shows throughout England where it was often singled out for special mention. It was also widely planted by wealthy gardeners. In 1899 it was one of the attractions at a daffodil event at Totley Hall near Sheffield. This was the home of W A Milner, a great friend of Backhouse and a fellow Quaker and

daffodil enthusiast, for whom he named the dwarf daffodil 'W P Milner' in memory of his father. This cultivar is still available today and is widely recommended for rockeries and pots. The Totley Hall event was so popular that 4000 people visited the grounds on Saturday 6th May 1899, when the Midland Railway Company put on two special trains to carry the visitors.

The outstanding characteristics of 'Weardale Perfection' meant that it was extensively used in daffodil breeding programmes and many excellent new cultivars were developed. Within a few years its rarity, popularity and price declined, and by 1910 the cost had fallen to five shillings (25p) per bulb, and by 1940 it had disappeared from nursery catalogues altogether.

©RHS Lindley Collections



Fig. 6 Peter Barr, the Daffodil King

©Jennifer Harmer

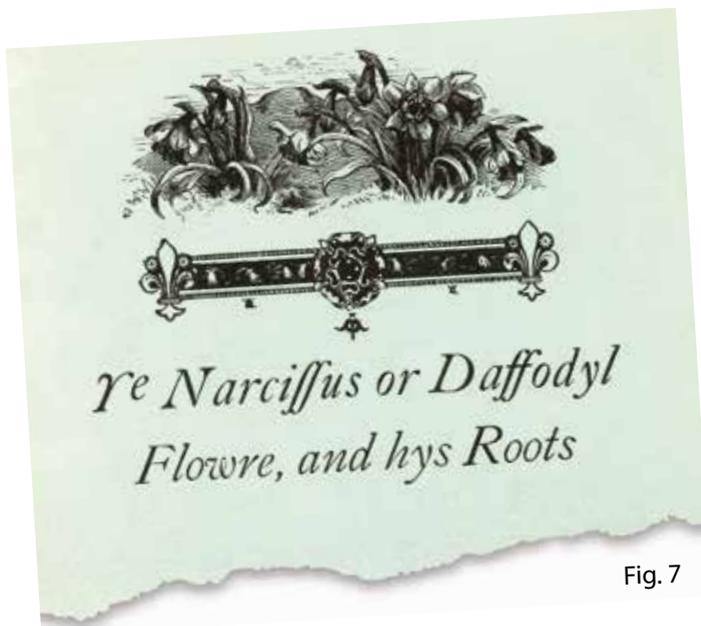


Fig. 7

In 1939, its last appearance in Barr and Son's catalogue, bulbs were offered for five shillings per dozen.

This story re-emerged when a Wolsingham resident, Margaret Keyte, read about 'Weardale Perfection' and thought that an excellent millennium project for the Weardale Society might be to rediscover and preserve the daffodil for posterity. She had been collecting daffodils she hoped would be confirmed as 'Weardale Perfection' from the local area for a number of years, then in 1998 sought professional help from David Willis. David knew of 'Weardale Perfection's' origin and subsequent demise because he had studied breeding records of early daffodil cultivars. Indeed, for a number of years he had been looking at catalogues from around the world and had tried, without success, to obtain the variety. The idea behind the millennium project was to visit sites in the Weardale region associated with the Backhouse family to see if the daffodil was still growing. The aim would then be to isolate and bulk-up stock that could be planted out to celebrate the millennium. Searches of likely sites did not reveal any plants that could be identified with certainty as 'Weardale Perfection', but there was a breakthrough when Margaret Keyte heard

that the cultivar was still growing in a garden in Wolsingham. The house had previously belonged to district nurse Jessie Young, who had been known to grow the daffodil in her garden. The present owner was convinced there was a single bulb of 'Weardale Perfection' growing in a mixed tub of bulbs, but the flower had long since faded and identification was impossible. She kindly offered the tub to David Willis and he took it to his home near York.

The following spring, daffodils appeared in the tub but not 'Weardale Perfection'. However, in spring 2000, a flower emerged that David was convinced was the cultivar he sought. It matched his list of 21 criteria put together from a study of detailed descriptions found in old catalogues. While David was virtually certain

that the bulb he'd obtained from Nurse Young's garden was a true 'Weardale Perfection', he was delighted to be supplied with information in 2008 that removed any trace of doubt. The evidence linked Nurse Young to the garden of Bedburn Hall where 'Weardale Perfection' was known to have grown (and still does). Nurse Young had visited the Hall over many years and, even in retirement, returned as a child minder. The current owner of Bedburn Hall, Mrs Bonas, had known Nurse Young from childhood and had employed her to help with her own children when they were born. She remembered Nurse Young admiring 'Weardale Perfection' growing by the lake at Bedburn Hall and giving her a few bulbs. The source of the bulbs at Bedburn Hall was Charles James Backhouse who,



Fig. 8 Dr David Willis looking at a bed of euphorbias, Silver Swan towards the back

Fig. 9 *N. 'Sleek'*Fig. 10 *N. poeticus*

along with other prominent Weardale Quakers, was known to have visited the Hall for Sunday lunch in the latter part of the 19th century and probably brought the bulbs as a present on one of these occasions.

After flowering in David Willis's care in 2000 the daffodil grew well, and when the bulb was lifted in summer 2000 it was found to have produced a

detachable daughter bulb. This daughter bulb was used for twin-scaling (a rapid propagation method that involves taking slices of the bulb with a section of the basal plate and at least two segments of bulb scales) and by November that year there were ten new bulbils. Over the next few years, further twin-scaling was performed and the bulbs grown on, so by summer 2007 500 bulbs had been produced. After discussion of various possible planting locations, 450 bulbs were planted in the grounds of the Parish Church of St Mary and St Stephen in Wolsingham, and the others in recorded sites around Wolsingham. Having multiple planting locations was a safeguard in case disease struck. The project had missed its millennium target but the date coincided with the 200th anniversary of William Backhouse's birth. I was so taken with the story of this remarkable bulb that I visited the church in April 2017; the front cover and Fig. 1 show that 'Weardale Perfection' is thriving.

Seeing this elegant cultivar at Wolsingham, I found it difficult to imagine how such a lovely plant could have been abandoned. Fortunately, 'Weardale Perfection' has been saved and distributed among botanic gardens and daffodil enthusiasts,

but many other important early varieties have sadly disappeared. Some succumbed to virus disease or eel worm infestations; others 'disappeared' when their labels were lost or gardens changed hands or bulb fields were ploughed in the Second World War to grow food for the war effort; and many more were lost because of competition from the relentless introduction of new cultivars. Daffodils interbreed easily and, although it takes a few years from crossing to flowering, many potentially interesting new varieties may arise from a single cross. The scale of the competitive pressure from new arrivals, and the difficult decisions facing plant conservationists about which daffodils should perhaps be conserved, can be judged by consulting the *International Register and Classified List* (2008) of daffodil cultivars. In that edition there are over 30,000 validated cultivars and the number of new registrations is now running at more than 200 each year. Of these new registrations, many are miniature varieties which are currently very popular with daffodil enthusiasts. Indeed, the modern record for the price of a daffodil bulb is £225 for a single bulb of the dwarf daffodil 'Sleek' (fig. 9), sold in 2018 on a web-based auction site.

In more mainstream daffodil circles today, large commercial bulb companies may offer two hundred daffodils in their annual catalogues and the 2018 *Plant Finder* lists around 1900 varieties. With such a large choice of cultivars, is there any need to actively conserve daffodils? I believe there is. The histories of many of the early daffodils are fascinating and give an insight into the gardening world and social attitudes and conditions of their times. The plants themselves hold irreplaceable combinations of genetic material that must be worth saving for reference and potential future breeding. The 'Weardale Perfection' story suggests that it is likely that there are other important early cultivars growing anonymously in gardens throughout Britain. The chances of discovery and identification are not great at present, but the very recent elucidation

(November 2018) of the genetic makeup of *Narcissus poeticus* (fig. 10) offers hope that future genetic analysis will help greatly with cultivar identification and conservation.

Thankfully, we have a number of national collections of daffodils with owners who are safeguarding known cultivars and actively seeking out others to conserve for future generations. Scotland is well served with daffodil collections, including the Rossie Estate which specialises in Backhouse-family cultivars and Croft 16 where the Donald family conserve and sell mainly pre-1930s heritage varieties. The National Trust for Scotland is responsible for Brodie Castle where conservation work is ongoing and where the former owner, Ian Brodie, the 24th laird, bred over 400 new cultivars in the early 20th century. In England,



©RHS Lindley Collections

Fig. 11 *N.* 'Weardale Perfection', one of 31 paintings in the Barr & Sons Album of daffodils, early 1900s.

Broadleigh Gardens in Devon hosts the Alex Gray hybrids and the Springfields Horticultural Society in Lincolnshire holds a national collection. All these places offer an opportunity to observe and compare cultivars, but most of all to enjoy them. 🌷

Peter Williams appreciates the value of national collections to conserve endangered plants; he's thinking about starting a national collection of heritage gardeners.

Post script

After completing this article in January 2019, I was made aware of a daffodil collection which housed a *Narcissus* cultivar also thought to be an original 'Weardale Perfection'. The source was unconnected with David Willis and was from a garden where, unusually, records of the bulb planting schemes had survived.

It would be intriguing to undertake genetic analysis on both cultivars and the known descendants of 'Weardale Perfection' to see how they compare or are related. Genetic analysis is the only way in which cultivars and relationships may be identified with certainty, as comparison using old photographs and descriptions will always be somewhat subjective. Hopefully, this intriguing study might be possible in the near future.