

## ANCIENT ROSES

Roses have long been an iconic symbol. All medieval and later literature is full of the beauty and fragrance of the rose and the legend of white roses spotted with blood is not limited to the Towton Rose. An old Hellenic legend declares that the rose was originally white, till Eros, dancing among the gods, upset a goblet of nectar upon Venus' flower, which thereupon became red. Christian legend, on the other hand, would have it that the Crown of Thorns was woven of the Briar-Rose, and how the drops that fell from the thorns became blood-hued blooms. In medieval times the most common cultivar was Rosa Gallica, or the Apothecaries rose. Its red colour (deep pink) represented the blood of early Christian martyrs. The fragrant petals of this rose were dried and rolled into beads and strung into what became the rosary, from which the *rosary* got its name.

Sweet smelling roses were certainly highly prized. Shakespeare wrote:

*The rose looks fair, but fairer we it deem  
For that sweet odour, which doth in it live.  
The canker blooms have full as deep a dye  
As the perfumed tincture of the roses,  
Hang on such thorns, and play as wantonly  
When summer's breath their maskèd buds discloses:  
But, for their virtue only is their show.*

The canker blooms he refers to are Rosa Canina, the common hedgerow rose which has little or no scent and is derided as being showy. Scented roses, on the other hand, were of value because they were used in ceremonies for their sweet odour and for making rosewater. More interestingly, they were used at funerals with other plant material like box leaves, to line coffins. This has been verified by analysing pollen remains in graves. Mourners would throw roses and rose petals into the grave. Following this act, an old saying goes "and Death will at once be hungry for more of the rose-thrower."

So, from the medieval perspective, the proliferation of roses on the site of Britain's bloodiest battle cannot have gone amiss. Peter Boyd, the worldwide expert on Rosa spinosissima, said by some to be the Towton Rose, is of the opinion that it would be sweet scented. The fact that roses were symbolic, had valuable commercial properties and were used for funerary purposes is indeed tantalising and leads to some justifiable speculation.

We know that there was a garden, with a viewing mound no less, at the medieval village of Lead. The chantry and later chapel at Towton would quite possibly have a garden – there are accounts in 1460 of a chantry at Bridport, submitting expenses for a "scythe to cut the weeds in the orchard, and the penny paid for mending the wheel-barrow." So, we have the possibility of there being both cultivated roses and scented wild roses at Towton and Saxton, which would have been of great value to the monks.

As we all know from Edward IV's attainder list, some important families lost their loved ones at Towton and this in an age when religion was foremost in the mind. Detailed attention was given to observing funerary rites – wills were not made solely to bequeath wealth but also to dictate how the funeral and remembrance services should be conducted. Imagine

the wrench when someone is killed in battle and thrown into an unmarked mass grave, when he had previously planned and paid 20 shillings or more for candles, mourners, incense and such for his burial ceremony. What would happen to his soul? Surely it would spend longer in purgatory if these rites had not been conducted. One can imagine grieving relatives visiting Towton in an effort to learn of the final resting place of their loved ones. Even if they could not determine precisely where they had fallen, they would still want to have masses said for them, have their names read out on the bede roll and perhaps plant roses to commemorate the passing of their life on this earth.

In later years, Robert Herrick, born in 1591, wrote a poem called *The Funeral Rites of the Rose*.

*THE rose was sick, and smiling died;  
And, being to be sanctified,  
About the bed there sighing stood  
The sweet and flowery sisterhood.  
Some hung the head, while some did bring,  
To wash her, water from the spring.  
Some laid her forth, while other wept,  
But all a solemn fast there kept.  
The holy sisters, some among,  
The sacred dirge and trentall sung.  
But ah ! what sweet smelly everywhere,  
As heaven had spent all perfumed there.  
At last, when prayers for the dead  
And rites were all accomplished,  
They, weeping, spread a lawny loom  
And clos'd her up, as in a tomb.*

So given this background, it has been interesting to discover that of all the roses we have identified as being removed from the battlefield, were the same species – the *Rosa Mundi*. There is the possibility, of course, that they were planted there as a hoax. We know that enterprising Saxton villagers sold souvenir rose plants for half a crown at the turn of the last century. This does not necessarily explain why these *Rosa Mundi*'s were still found there in the 1940's and had been growing there for centuries. This is a striking rose with beautiful colouring and a heady perfume – you would not plant it out in the middle of a field for fear of someone taking it, if you were so commercially minded. Perhaps even more tantalising is the fact that *Rosa Mundi* was named after the Fair Rosamund, an ancestor of John Clifford who died so spectacularly at Dintingdale. If you ever get the chance to visit the private garden at Skipton Castle there are no prizes for guessing what variety of roses are planted out in the old walled garden there.

The search for the legendary Towton rose, or the Battle rose still continues and I am ever hopeful that the leads will keep coming in. Most of the reference material I can find for the Towton Rose is of the Victorian period but we cannot rule out the possibility of earlier documents being found and, if anyone has anything to add to the archives, either anecdotal or factual, I would certainly be glad to hear from you.

G Peter Algar  
Contact: [gpalgar@gmail.com](mailto:gpalgar@gmail.com)