

## Quest for The Towton Rose (part 2)

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I wrote an introduction to the story of 'The Towton Rose' in the last edition of *The Towton Herald*. This article attempts to document the different accounts and provide a critical analysis of them. Many of the sources are not readily available so I have reproduced the relevant passages here with their references so that other researchers can follow them up if they wish.

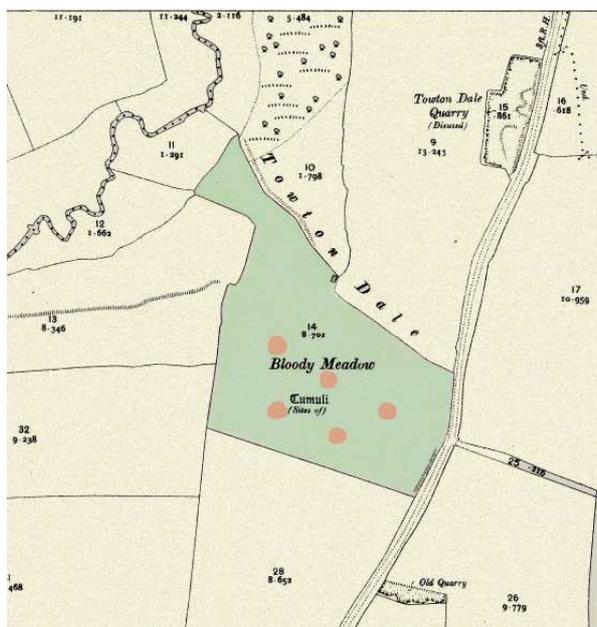
Original descriptions of 'The Towton Rose' identify it as a form of the native wild rose species *Rosa spinosissima* (also known as *Rosa pimpinellifolia*), whose vernacular names include Scots Rose, Scotch Rose, Burnet Rose and Cat Rose. Later, its identity became confused with other native species and a cultivated rose, *Rosa gallica* 'Versicolor' (often known as 'Rosa Mundi').

The battlefield area is on the rock formation known as the Magnesian Limestone. Although *Rosa spinosissima* is probably most widespread on coastal sand dunes, it does occur inland, particularly on limestone. It favours the Magnesian Limestone areas of Yorkshire and is still widespread but it has disappeared from some of its former sites (probably including the battlefield) and is less abundant on others having been destroyed by ploughing, herbicides and other agricultural activity over the last 150 years or so.

The Rev. G. F. Townsend, Vicar of Brantingham, Yorkshire wrote the earliest published account that I have found of the Towton Roses (Townsend, 1848). He had visited the battlefield in July 1846 and collected slips (cuttings) of the roses:-

*“ The place is called Towton Dale or Tardingdale, and a road runs between two stone quarries, which are said to be, with no ostensible improbability, the scene of slaughter. .... It is reported that the soldiers were buried in large mounds on the field of battle, and that the Yorkists, either in affection or in triumph, planted some rose-trees on the tombs of their fallen countrymen. These mounds through the lapse of four centuries have worn nearly down to the level surface of the soil; but you may yet see a kind of circles in the field, above the quarry which I have mentioned; and these circles are covered with patches and clusters of rose-trees. The rose is white, and now and then on the appearance of a pink spot on the flower, the rustic, happy in his legendary lore traces the blood of Lancaster. I brought away some few slips of the roses, in testimony of the truth of the tradition, and any lady or gentleman is welcome to take them, in remembrance of this anniversary”.*

The mounds or 'tumuli' are marked on an Ordnance Survey map of sixty years later. The roses were probably growing there quite naturally but they may have grown more thickly on the disturbed well-drained soil of the mounds than the surrounding land.



**Ordnance Survey map of 1906 that I have enhanced with colour showing The Bloody Meadow between the two quarries and location of the ‘tumuli’.**

Townsend’s account seems to have precipitated increased interest in the battle and the roses. Grainge (1854) provided additional information on the appearance of the roses and documented the fact that they were already being dug up as souvenirs of the battle:-

*“Another most beautiful and fanciful notion is, that the dwarf rose, which grows abundantly in a grass field, that formed part of the battle ground, flourishes profusely here, and will not grow elsewhere; and that Providence has caused it to spring from the blended blood of the victims of the red and white rose factions, which are typified in its white petals slightly tinged with red, and in the dull bloody hue of the leaves of the older wood. This pleasing piece of superstition has caused many of those diminutive shrubs to be removed from their native soil and carried far away to other places”.*

The “white petals slightly tinged with red” but also “dull bloody hue of the leaves” on the mature stems of “diminutive shrubs” is fully consistent with an identification of *Rosa spinosissima*. This rose is a very variable species but can occur as low-growing spreading shrubs growing only a foot (30cm) or less high. Other forms may be much taller; some European and Asiatic forms growing to over 2 metres high. The flowers are normally white but individual plants or populations of plants in which the petals have a ‘tinge’ of pink or red on the petals or more marked ‘marbling’ of the petals, have been recorded in many populations of this species in Britain and Europe. The first published record of such a form was in Scotland in 1684. *Rosa spinosissima* also often exhibits good autumn colour, the leaves changing colour to a “dull bloody hue” or other variation on the themes of purple, red, scarlet, orange or yellow in different forms. The intensity of colour may vary from one year to another. This year has been particularly good for autumn colour in my collection of ‘Scots Roses’.



**A form of *Rosa spinosissima* in my own collection with the flowers ‘tinged’ with red - possibly similar to The Towton Rose**

Whellan (1855) recycles the words of Townsend and Grainge but also provides additional information:-

*“Patches and clusters of these rose trees in full blow [bloom] may be seen every year; and it appears very difficult to eradicate the plant, for whilst the least portion of the root remains in the soil, it will, in due time, shoot forth a plant”.*

This is typical of *Rosa spinosissima*, which spreads laterally by underground suckers (root-shoots) rather than adding greatly to its height and volume at one point like most roses and other shrubs. This allows it to flourish in tough wind-swept conditions and stabilise the soil on unstable hillsides and sand-dunes. Suckers, collected in Autumn (October/November) or spring (March/April), are the best way to propagate the species. Most attempts to grow the Towton Rose were probably made by souvenir hunters digging up plants when they were showing their flowers in May or June. In most cases, they would be unsuccessful and this would support the myth that they would not grow anywhere but on the battlefield!

Most writers seem to have visited the site of the battle only once and may not have seen the roses in flower - depending instead on the accounts of local people and others. Even, Richard Brooke who visited the Towton battlefield almost every year for nine years between 1848 and 1856 in preparation for his book *Visits to Fields of Battle, in England of the fifteenth century* (1857) does not seem to have seen them himself. However, he described the site in detail and refers to the location of the roses:-

*“The battle of Towton was fought on the spot now occupied by the large meadow and valley ... (on the west side of the road), the depression called Towton Dale, the fields extending a considerable distance to the eastward of the road, and the ground in the neighbourhood of the stone quarry”.*

*“The large meadow is remarkable for producing rich rank grass, and also for three or four extensive irregularly shaped patches of very small wild dwarf rose-bushes, which I was told, were both red and white; it forms the west end of Towton Dale. The meadow is not unfrequently called the Bloody Meadow, and was, according to tradition, a scene of great slaughter, and it is said that considerable numbers of the dead were buried there. The distance across the fields, from the public road at that spot to the turnpike road leading from Ferrybridge, is about a mile, and the whole tract of ground between them is enclosed and cultivated”.*

In 1858, Lady Caroline Wilkinson wrote about a long tradition of planting roses on graves in *Weeds and Wild Flowers: their uses, legends, and literature* referring to the Towton Rose as an example of this custom:-

*“But the most touching instance of this application of the rose is yet to be seen on the battle-field of Towton ... On that field ..... the roses which were planted by the survivors on their sepulchral mounds still grow and bloom, breathing out, untended and unheeded, silent lessons never yet taught by the blazoned shields and marble trophies which mark the conqueror's tomb. We might almost fancy that the well-known "York and Lancaster" rose, the old fashioned rose of our childhood, whose red and white petals bear, peacefully commingled, the colours of the contending parties, might have sprung from this ungenial soil, and drawn its beauties from the field of civil fight to exhibit an undying reproof to ages yet unborn”.*

The language is very ‘flowery’ and also confusing. It should be noted that Lady Wilkinson is not saying that the Towton Rose is the same as the ‘York and Lancaster Rose’ (sometimes misnamed ‘Rosa Mundi’) – she is saying that “we might almost fancy” that the ‘York and Lancaster Rose’ arose in such a way. She went on to refer to another battle, Roncevalles (Roncevaux) [A.D.778] where myth stated that red and white roses arose spontaneously after the battle.

While it is not inconceivable that people chose to plant suckers of the Towton Roses on the sites of burial at Towton, the roses were growing there already and any suckers in the loose soil mounded over the bodies in late March or early April 1461 would have grown well in the loose ‘fertilized’ soil when the warmer weather arrived. In fact, the mounds on Bloody meadow, thought in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to be associated with the battle, predated the battle by hundreds of years. [CHECK]

A poem by Jane Williams about Towton Roses, called ‘On Receiving some cuttings of rose-trees from Yorkshire’ is included as an appendix of Wilkinson’s book. This is the final part:-

*And heaped in many a lofty mound,  
By pitying victors then,  
That battle-field gave burial ground  
To forty thousand men;*

*And on those mounds the Roses twain  
Of civil strife, were set,  
To mark the parties of the slain,  
With symbols of regret.*

*Almost four centuries have fled  
Since that disastrous day,  
Each proud Plantagenet is dead,  
Their race has passed away.*

*Scarce can the characters be read  
Which edge Lord Dacre's tomb,  
Yet still the roses, White and Red,  
On Towton's ridges bloom.*

*And thence a wandering Cymo's hand  
These tiny cuttings sent,*

*Which may, perchance, yet live to stand  
Their poet's monument!*

Did the cuttings grow? Did they and others survive as plants to the present day?

The late 1850s was a period when the production of poetry about the battle and the roses peaked and also in 1858, Walter White first published a poem about it in the first edition of *A Month in Yorkshire*. The last verse of this was probably the verse most quoted by later writers in reference to the Towton Rose:-

“Palm Sunday chimes were chiming  
All gladsome thro' the air,  
And village churls and maidens  
Knelt in the church at pray'r;  
When the Red Rose and the White Rose  
In furious battle reel'd;  
And yeomen fought like barons,  
And barons died ere yield.  
When mingling with the snow-storm,  
The storm of arrows flew;  
And York against proud Lancaster  
His ranks of spearmen threw.  
When thunder-like the uproar  
Outshook from either side,  
As hand to hand they battled  
From morn to eventide.  
When the river ran all gory,  
And in hillocks lay the dead,  
And seven and thirty thousand  
Fell for the White and Red.  
\* \* \* \*  
When o'er the Bar of Micklegate  
They changed each ghastly head,  
Set Lancaster upon the spikes  
Where York had bleached and bled.  
\* \* \* \*  
There still wild roses growing,  
Frail tokens of the fray -  
And the hedgerow green bear witness  
Of Towton field that day.”

The playwright James Robinson Planché (1794-1880) visited Towton in 1858 but the short account of this visit and a poem that he wrote at the time was not published until 1872 in his autobiography, *The Recollections and Reflections of J. R. Planché* :-

*“In the summer of 1858, being, with my son-in-law, Mr. Whelan, on a visit to Lord Londesborough, at Grimston Park, near Tadcaster, Yorkshire, I was present at a grand entertainment given by his lordship to his principal tenantry in that county. It was a day fete, the company assembling about noon. There was a sumptuous dejeuner, or early dinner, in the riding-house, and a large marquee erected for dancing in the park, on the confines of which is a field called Battle Acre, being the place, according to tradition, where the*

*Lancastrians made their last ineffectual stand against the forces of the rival house of York in the decisive conflict of Towton Field. During the dancing, I strolled down into "the Acre" which is celebrated for a singular natural curiosity. A quantity of wild white roses annually spring up and blossom in a particular portion of it, and all attempts to destroy them by the farmers of the land had failed up to that period. The general opinion appeared to be that they had been originally planted by the victorious party in commemoration of the triumph of the White Rose, and probably on a spot where a pile of their slain had been buried. Lord Londesborough had used his endeavours to prevent their extirpation after he became possessed of the property, and at the time I speak of they still continued to make their annual appearance. The following verses, suggested by this interesting fact, were strung together on the spot, and a copy of them given to Lady Londesborough the next morning at breakfast. As they have never been printed, the singularity of the subject will render excusable their introduction here".*

***The Flowers of Towton Field***  
*A Ballad of Battle Acre*

*"There is a patch of wild white roses that bloom on a battle-field,  
Where the rival rose of Lancaster blush'd redder still to yield;  
Four hundred years have o'er them shed their sunshine and their snow,  
But in spite of plough and harrow, every summer there they blow;  
Though rudely up to root them with hand profane you toil,  
The faithful flowers still fondly cluster round the sacred soil;  
Though tenderly transplanted to the nearest garden gay,  
Nor cost, nor care, can tempt them there to live a single day!  
I ponder'd o'er their blossoms, and anon my busy brain  
With banner'd hosts and steel-clad knights repeopled all the plain.  
I seem'd to hear the lusty cheer of the bowmen bold of York,  
As they mark'd how well their cloth-yard shafts had done their bloody work;  
And steeds with empty saddles came rushing wildly by,  
And wounded warriors stagger'd past, or only turn'd to die,  
And the little sparkling river was cumbered as of yore  
With ghastly corse of man and horse, and ran down red with gore.  
I started as I ponder'd, for loudly on mine ear  
Rose indeed a shout like thunder, a true old English cheer;  
And the sound of drum and trumpet came swelling up the vale,  
And blazon'd banners proudly flung their glories to the gale ;  
But not, oh! not to battle did those banners beckon now —  
A baron stood beneath them, but not with helmed brow,  
And Yorkshire yeomen round him throng'd, but not with bow and lance,  
And the trumpet only bade them to the banquet and the dance.  
Again my brain was busy: from out those flow'rets fair,  
A breath arose like incense—a voice of praise and prayer!  
A silver voice that said, " Rejoice! and bless the God above,  
Who hath given thee these days to see of peace, and joy, and love;  
Oh, never more by English hands may English blood be shed,  
Oh, never more be strife between the roses white and red.  
The blessed words the shepherds heard may we remember still,  
Throughout the world be peace on earth, and towards man goodwill."*

It is interesting that while the local farming tenants considered the roses a nuisance, Lord Londesborough “had used his endeavours to prevent their extirpation” since he took over ownership of the estate. Planché refers to “a patch of wild white roses” but “where the rival rose of Lancaster blush'd redder still to yield” may be referring to the ‘blush’ of red on some of the otherwise white flowers. However, if he was visiting the site in summer, he would not have been too late to witness the roses in flower. Was ‘Battle Acre’ the same as ‘Bloody Meadow’ or another site of *Rosa spinosissima* close to the house? It is over 2 miles ‘as the crow flies’ from Grimston Park to Bloody Meadow but it might have been considered to be within easy walking distance there and back “during the dancing”. However, he could have been referring to another site.

The year following Planché’s visit, in 1859, a writer only signed R\_ but thought to be Lord Ravensworth (see Wheater 1884), wrote an article called ‘The Field of Towton Moor’ in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*. He included a paragraph on the Towton roses:-

*“When, or by what hand, planted, or how they came, is not known, but in the field where the bones of the brave thus repose, white and red roses grow in great abundance. They are the small wild Scotch rose. The owner of the field has repeatedly tried to get rid of them by burning and mowing, but in vain; they still spring up again. According to popular belief, these roses will not bear transplanting, but refuse to grow on any soil except that consecrated by the remains of those valiant men, who there fell the victims of a senseless national quarrel”.*

The poem accompanying the article included the following verses:-

*“Oh, the red and the white Rose, upon Towton Moor it grows,  
And red and white it blows upon that swarthe for evermore -  
In memorial of the slaughter when the red blood ran like water,  
And the victors gave no quarter in the flight from Towton Moor:*

*When the banners gay were beaming, and the steel cuirasses gleaming,  
And the martial music streaming o'er that wide and lonely heath;  
And many a heart was beating that dreamed not of retreating,  
Which, ere the sun was setting, lay still and cold in death:*

*When the snow that fell at morning lay as a type and warning,  
All stained and streaked with crimson, like the roses white and red  
And filled each thirsty furrow with its token of the sorrow  
That wailed for many a morrow through the mansions of the dead.*

*Now for twice two hundred years, when the month of March appears,  
All unchecked by plough or shears spring the roses red and white;  
Nor can the hand of mortal close the subterranean portal  
That gives to life immortal these emblems of the fight.*

*And as if they were enchanted, not a flower may be transplanted  
From those fatal precincts, haunted by the spirits of the slain;  
For howe'er the root you cherish, it shall fade away and perish  
When removed beyond the marish of Towton's gory plain”.*

Ravensworth’s article is the first time that the rose is named as *Rosa spinosissima* (the ‘Scotch Rose’) although the previous descriptions are sufficient to identify it as that species.

Although the poem suggests that the roses would flower in March (the anniversary of the Battle of Towton), the roses would not be flowering so early. They would not even be in leaf. *Rosa spinosissima* is probably the earliest of Britain's native rose species to flower but that would be expected to be in late May or June, at the latitude and altitude of Towton - with the flowering period of other native roses starting later but overlapping with them.

In the poem, the colour of the flowers is referred to in relation to the snow, which fell during the battle, being "stained and streaked with crimson, like the roses white and red". Were the roses 'tinged' with red like a Scots Rose in my collection (not from Towton) or did they have streaks or irregular markings of red on the petals?

Subsequent references to the roses over the following few years do not add any new information and most writers repeat what had already been written by others.

John Pickford MA of Bolton Percy, near Tadcaster wrote an article on 'Towton Field' in 1870. He describes the location of the roses as follows:-

*"... the battle was fought in a large meadow, through which the little river Cock winds. Grass grows in rich luxuriance there; and at this day groups of wild dwarf rose-bushes are seen, traditionally said to have been planted on the mounds under which the slain were buried ... The people in the neighbourhood firmly believe that these rose-bushes will alone grow in the "Bloody Meadow," and that attempts to plant them elsewhere have always been unsuccessful"*.

Reference to the roses in Hookham (1872) merely reproduces the account in Townsend (1848).

In 1884, Wheater provided a summary of the Towton Roses story (as well as quoting several poems already mentioned):-

*"On a part of the field where the final death-struggle and rout of the Lancastrians took place grow many small rose bushes, which, tradition says, sprung from the mingled blood of the rival rose-bearers shed on this fatal field. They grow on this soil only, says the legend, and if transplanted to any other place they quickly wither and die. When in bloom the petals are a mingled red and white, and when the leaves become old they are of a dull red hue on the under side. These bushes grow in the only grass field between Towton and Saxton, which slopes down to the valley of the brook Cock, and has apparently never been under the plough, This pleasing piece of superstition has caused many of those diminutive shrubs to be removed from their native sod, and carried far away to other places, and the report of the villagers is that they have much decreased in number of late years. The plant is the *Rosa spinosissima* [spinosissima] or burnt [burnet] rose, which only attains to about a foot in height. It certainly grows in many other places besides Towton Field, but its favourite habitat in the inland parts of Yorkshire is the magnesian limestone"*.

*"The principal growth of these roses is near a place where great numbers of the dead have been buried, in the narrow dry valley down which the Lancastrians rushed to escape the pursuit of their pitiless enemies, soon to be engulfed in the marshes by the sides of the small, crooked, slow-flowing river Cock"*.

Again, the rose is identified as a form of *Rosa spinosissima* growing to about a foot (30cm) high with flowers having petals of "a mingled red and white". This suggests what is known as a

'marbled' form. The leaves became red as they aged. The "narrow dry valley" is Towton Dale, flanked by Bloody Meadow with its 'tumuli', as indicated on the 1906 Ordnance Survey map.

At least two Yorkshire plant nurseries (John and George Telford of York; William and John Perfect of Pontefract) sold coloured Scots Roses (forms of *Rosa spinosissima*) as early as the 1770s. They sold a 'marbled' Scots Rose (probably 'Ciphiana') and a red Scots Rose as well as the ordinary white flowered form. While it is conceivable that the roses at Towton had been planted from cultivated forms, there is no evidence that the Towton roses were anything but natural.

The Rev. Thomas Parkinson confuses the story in 1888 by stating that the rose is "commonly known as the 'York and Lancaster rose'" :-

*"This rose, whose petals are variegated with mingled white and red, is said to have sprung up where the blood of York and Lancaster was so plentifully mingled. The bush (so it is said) refuses to grow elsewhere. If transplanted to other soil, it either fades away or the flowers revert to a single colour - white or red".*

The name 'York and Lancaster Rose' is often given, mistakenly, to the garden rose *Rosa gallica* 'Versicolor' ('Rosa Mundi') but the true 'York and Lancaster Rose' is a quite different rose. It is certainly not a name applied properly to any form of *Rosa spinosissima*! Forms of *Rosa spinosissima* with tinged or marbled flowers may be variable within a plant and the extent or intensity of colour may vary from one year to another. The rose illustrated here from my collection, varies in appearance from year to year. Some years the red tinges on the buds and petals give a very striking effect but, in other years, the flowers are predominantly white. Flower colour may also vary to some extent according to the fertility and mineral content of the soil in which they are planted. The mineral content of the Magnesian Limestone soil of the battlefield may have had an effect. However, it is also worth noting that the cultivated rose 'Rosa Mundi' (which has large 'striped' flowers) will often revert to the pink *Rosa gallica* 'Officinalis' of which it was a 'sport'. That is a different issue.

In 1891, Alexander Leadman gives a misleading description (corrupted from earlier descriptions) of the roses in *Proelia Eboracensia* :-

*'I cannot conclude this story of Towton Field, without an allusion to the little dwarf bushes peculiar to the 'Field of the White Rose and the Red.' They are said to have been plentiful at the commencement of this century, but visitors have taken them away in such numbers that they have become rare. Such vandalism is simply shameful, for the plants are said to be unique, and unable to exist in any other soil. The little roses are white, with a red spot on the centre of each of their petals; and as they grow old, the under surface becomes a dull red colour".*

This description of the flowers as "white, with a red spot on the centre of each of their petals" sounds too symmetrical to be true compared with earlier descriptions and he may be applying the colour change of the leaves with that of the petals!

However, a reader of *The Daily News* (where Leadman's account had been reproduced) asked for an identification of "the little dwarf rose" in the *Journal of Botany* (1891). The botanist William West replied in the *Journal of Botany*, v. 29, November 1891, p. 346:-

*" I have no doubt that this is Rosa spinosissima. I have seen it all along on the Permian limestone about Towton".*

Until this, all the accounts of Towton roses that I have mentioned were made by historians, poets and ‘travel writers’. Botanists did not specifically mention the roses at Towton in *The Flora of Yorkshire* (Baines 1840) and subsequent supplements because *Rosa spinosissima* was nothing unusual. However, in 1888, *The Flora of West Yorkshire* by Frederic Arnold Lees (in which the vernacular name for *Rosa spinosissima* is given as ‘Cat-rose’) includes an observation by Mr John Emmet of Boston Spa in which he states that it was **THE** rose on Towton field.

Harry Speight displayed sound botanical knowledge in his book on *Lower Wharfedale* (1902) and clearly knew *Rosa spinosissima* well at Towton and other localities. He showed more common sense than many earlier gullible writers and also includes some fascinating information on the commercial value of the rose to some local people:-

*“Much has been made of a local belief, that a certain dwarf rose-bush, once plentiful on the Field of Towton, has produced roses white and red ever since the great battle. There are people foolish enough, even in our own days, to believe in a miracle, which, had it originated in the Middle Ages, might be excused, but as it is wholly a modern invention, the notion of this floral oddity must be discountenanced in the light of scientific fact. These bushes, no doubt, grew about Towton long before the White and Red fight between King Edward and King Henry, and produced the same kind of roses then as they do now. The plant is the little Scotch Burnet Rose (*Rosa spinosissima*) which grows not only at Towton, but all over the great belt of magnesian limestone which divides our county in half, from north to south. I have found it in many places just the same as at Towton. The plant is common to this formation, and its blossoms vary, like all roses, according to age, soil, and situation, from pure white to flesh -colour, that is, with more or less pink or red in the bud or open flower”.*

*“The run on these roses at Towton has been tremendous, especially within living memory, and a man at Saxton once told me that he had got as much as 2s. 6d. a root for them within the last ten years! Very few now remain; nearly all having been stubbed up; more the pity, for there is nothing in the least peculiar about these Towton roses, and no botanists, before the 19th century, have commented upon them. Furthermore, we have been told in prose and poetry that the "blooms do fade and the tree doth wither and die" when removed from its native heath! Exactly; so will most flowering bushes when removed at the wrong time of the year or planted in uncongenial soil. In Saxton gardens the plants may be seen thriving vigorously, but it is useless attempting to grow them in Leeds, Manchester or Bradford. Scores of songs and poems and magazine articles have been written on this aspect of the Towton blooms; but the following beautiful verse must suffice as a fair example of this popular fallacy”.*

He followed this paragraph with part of Planché’s poem ‘Flowers of Towton Field’ as the example. I fully agree with most of what Speight says except I am pretty sure that the roses would grow in Leeds, Manchester or Bradford today. The heavy acidic air pollution in those places, at the time he was writing, might have been unfavourable!

One of the best known writers about Towton is Edmund Bogg who wrote *The Old Kingdom of Elmet the land ‘twixt Aire and Wharfe a descriptive sketch of its ancient history* (1904). His prose is rather ‘romantic’:-

*“No monument marks the site of battle, yet there is one beautiful memorial on the field which the villagers tell us cannot be effaced above where the warrior sleeps, white and red*

*roses bloom, emblems of the fatal feud. How they came thus is not known, but they do not grow well on other soil than that on which was poured out old England's noblest blood".*

He follows this paragraph with the poem 'The Field of Towton Moor' published previously in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1859.

Bogg gives a description of the flowers and an interesting account of another attempt by farmers to destroy the plant:-

*"The peculiar variety of wild white rose, tinged (not streaked) with red, formerly plentiful on the battlefield, has been cut and uprooted until now it is very scarce. There was formerly a large bed in the field known as Towtondale, or bloody vale; here a farmer told the writer that he netted the bed of some thirty yards square, and made it into a sheepfold, which was the means of destroying the plants. The country people attribute the rich red tinge of the roses to the soil being impregnated with blood at that fatal fight. Botanically speaking, Dr. Arnold Lees informs me this cannot be the case. The 'field,' being glacial drift over limestone, is rich in species of wild flowers, four different kinds of roses growing there. The white York rose, a spiny neat-leaved plant, is always creamy-hued. The common dog-rose, the Lancastrian, is a blush pink, more or less deep. The field rose is also white, not very prickly, and easily destroyed; it has been found with the petals streaked with pink probably from hybridization but very rarely".*

Bogg's descriptions are a little problematical and his paragraph is rather confused. He seems to have confused the coloured roses that were formerly abundant as dwarf bushes within the open field and the 'field roses' which probably grew in hedgerows and sometimes show some pink on the white petals. No-one else had suggested that the 'Field Rose' (which would be *Rosa arvensis*) has anything to do with the fabled Towton Rose and later, in Bogg's book, Dr Lees does not refer to it and suggests that 'The Towton Rose' was a mixture of two species (see below). The scrambling mode of growth of *Rosa arvensis* is not consistent with other descriptions of the Towton Roses as dwarf plants forming large patches within the meadow.

Part of the paragraph (not reproduced here) on the possible effects of iron on plant growth from blood shed on the site, is partly confusion and part nonsense. Besides any other scientific considerations, any effect of blood that was shed on the site would have been short lived. The blood from the fallen could probably have been washed off the sloped soil surface or out of the soil into the Cock Beck within a year or two and much more quickly if there had been heavy rain in the weeks after the battle. It seems an extremely remote possibility that there would have been any affect on roses growing there four hundred years later in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century! However, if the dead were buried in shallow graves, the bones could have had a longer-term affect on soil chemistry, maintaining a favourable alkalinity and providing phosphates plus other nutrients that could encourage the growth of *Rosa spinosissima*.

Bogg's rather confused description of the roses found on the battlefield seems to be based on the account of Dr F. Arnold Lees (medical doctor and botanist) that was published as part of a separate section titled 'The Wild Flowers of Elmete' in Bogg's book:-

*"First there are the roses, white of York, excessively spiny, forming impassable thickets in places, a low branching bush with profuse creamy blossoms, never a tinge of Lancastrian red on their velvety petals a rose whose motto might well have been that of its County-men: "Touch me not " (Nemo me impune lacessit). It is abundant at Towton, although also found in many other parts: it is no calcifuge [lime-hating] as is the foxglove (quite a rare flower in*

*Elmete*), for it will grow and spread on seashore sand, but it clearly has a preference for the dry soil that mostly prevails above limestone rock. Still, in *Elmete*, the downy red rose of Lancaster (scientifically *Rosa tomentosa*) is not unfrequent, with the paler open-blowing and pink-flushed dog-rose, and all three sorts grow on Towton Field; but the folk-lore conception that the mingled blood of the combatants is typified in the mingled hues of the rose-bloom is, of course, botanically a fable”.

Lees chose to refer to what is clearly “excessively spiny” *Rosa spinosissima* as “roses, white of York” and *Rosa tomentosa* as “the downy red rose of Lancaster”. He seems to have believed that the white and red Towton Roses were two native species symbolizing the Houses of York and Lancaster – not one species with ‘bicoloured’ petals. He had probably not seen plants of the bicoloured Towton Rose as they were already rare by that time or it was not a season in which they showed. This symbolic association that Lees implies with these two native species should not be confused with the two cultivated non-native species that were then and are now traditionally associated with the Houses of York and Lancaster (*Rosa alba* and *Rosa gallica*).

During a visit to part of the battlefield that that I made in July this year, I did not see any *Rosa spinosissima* plants but plenty of *Rosa arvensis* plants on one part of the site, some of which were nibbled short by grazing cattle. The non botanist might confuse them with *Rosa spinosissima*. However, *Rosa arvensis* has white flowers in clusters - unlike *Rosa spinosissima* in which the flowers are normally arranged singly along a shoot. The individual flowers of *R. arvensis* have an elongated group of styles (stigma) shaped like a pin head in the centre of each flower, whereas they form a low mound in the centre of a *R. spinosissima* flower. The stems and leaves are also very different.



***Rosa arvensis* flowers (photographed at Towton) showing the erect stigmas**

It seem very likely that *Rosa spinosissima* no longer occurs in the Bloody Meadow area of the battlefield. Its destruction has been brought about by human action:-

- 1) collecting by souvenir hunters who preferentially collected plants of *Rosa spinosissima* that displayed red on the petals – this may have left a population of the rose in which the normal white flowered forms predominated.
- 2) the concerted efforts of farmers to destroy the roses because they were considered to ‘infest’ their land, lower the value as grazing land, create practical difficulties for hay-making on other meadows and the value of hay gathered.

- 3) Ploughing of land during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War when every available piece of land was brought into arable production. Aerial photographs of the battlefield area taken in the late 1940s show areas such as Bloody Meadow ploughed but with the ‘shadows’ of the tumuli still showing. Since then small fields have been consolidated into larger fields, so that even many hedgerows and field margins existing then have been lost.



**Bloody Meadow rising to the left (formerly a stronghold of The Towton Rose) – now a barley field with Towton Dale on the right leading down to Cock Beck (Photographed in July 2010).**

The Towton Battlefield Society has recorded an additional agricultural reason and probable date for destruction of the last Towton Roses in the late 1940s. The following information was quoted by Martin Hickes in his article for the *Yorkshire Post* earlier this year.

In 1969, a local farmer Mr. Albert Bailey (79 years old at the time) stated:

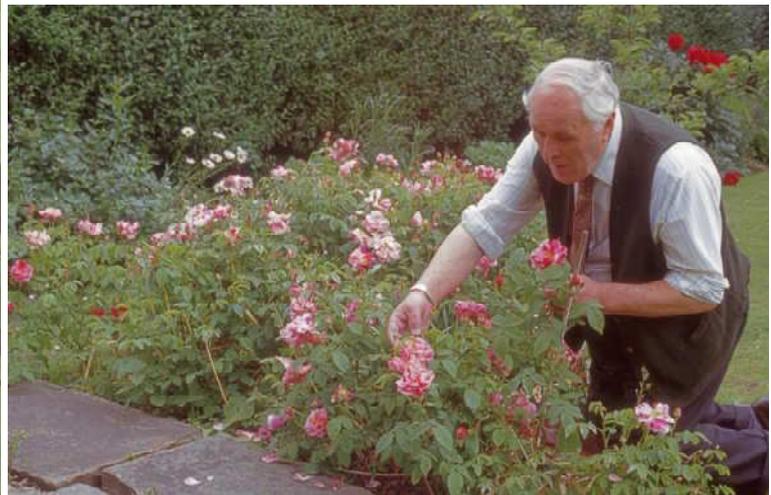
*“... we were plagued with battle roses. They were small wild roses, red and white, and they grew all over the battle ground. The roses became a nuisance as in summer people invaded the field to dig up the bushes and every time someone left the gate open and the cattle got out. In the end we had a blitz on the roses and dug them all up. I haven’t seen one now for over twenty years. It is a funny thing, scores were dug up by visitors but, as far as I know, they would never grow away from Towton.”*

In spite of extensive searches in the battlefield area in 2010 by me, Peter Algar, Graham Darbyshire, Scowen Sykes and others no wild *Rosa spinosissima* has been found. As I recorded in my previous article, some non-local forms have been planted in the Towton-Saxton area – a practice to be discouraged. It is still to be hoped that original local *Rosa spinosissima* has survived in the wild in the area but it now seems more likely that the bicoloured Towton Rose has only survived in a garden somewhere.

The publicity of the search this summer led to several people making contact. Unfortunately, everybody who thought that they had the true Towton Rose growing in their gardens had *Rosa gallica* ‘Versicolor’ (“Rosa Mundi”) and not *Rosa spinosissima*. Several elderly people who grew the rose said that a member of their family no longer alive had collected the rose as cuttings or a plant in the early 1900s, on the site of the battle. This can only be explained by local people (or others) having planted ‘Rosa Mundi’ at some time on the site - in the same way that people have

planted *Rosa spinosissima* on the battlefield within the last fifteen years or so. This may have happened after the Rev. Thomas Parkinson wrote his misleading account referring to the ‘York and Lancaster Rose’ in 1888 and may have been a genuine but misguided attempt to commemorate the battle by planting the cultivated red and white rose on the site. However, we know from Speight (1902) that local people sold plants of the Towton Rose and I have been told that Yorkshire newspapers from the early 1900s advertised Towton Roses (Scowen Sykes, personal communication). ‘Rosa Mundi’ may have been sold as the Towton Rose and also planted on the site to support the ‘scam’. The owners of ‘Rosa Mundi’ have happily believed for a hundred years that they had the true Towton Rose.

One story of interesting pedigree regarding these ‘faux’ Towton Roses was sent to me by former photo-journalist Tom Montgomery. He had interviewed and photographed 74 year old Sam Hood of Aberford in 1981. Sam Hood had been given the roses many decades before by his father’s cousin who claimed to have collected cuttings from a plant growing on the battlefield. Mr Hood was Deputy Lord Mayor of Leeds in 1961 when he presented a plant of what he thought to be the Towton Rose to the Bishop of York at a ceremony commemorating the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Battle of Towton. The rose was apparently planted in the garden of the Bishop’s Palace in York with a plaque. The Bishop of York at that time was Michael Ramsay. He became the 100<sup>th</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury in the same year and a plant of the rose may have been taken to Canterbury as well! I had great hopes that a rose with this pedigree would turn out to be the true Towton Rose but when Tom Montgomery kindly sent me two of his photographs, it was ‘Rosa Mundi’ again!



**The late Sam Hood’s ‘Towton Roses’ (actually ‘Rosa Mundi’)  
[photographed by Tom Montgomery in 1981]**

I am not giving up the quest and still hope that a plant of the true Towton Rose still survives somewhere – probably unrecognised.

In spite of everything that was written about The Towton Rose in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I have also not yet been able to trace a 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century illustration or herbarium specimen of the true

Towton Rose. There is a good chance that an old watercolour, photograph or herbarium specimen may still come to light because I have not exhausted the possibilities.

Please contact me if you think that you may have a plant of the true Towton Rose. Remember that it will be quite low growing (although, in a garden, it may grow larger than the foot high [30cm] it grew at Towton) with white five-petalled flowers about 2 inches (5cm) or less across, 'tinged' or 'marbled' with red, small leaves and dark purple or black hips in autumn - unlike the red hips of all other native roses. The stems would be covered with a mixture of narrow prickles and bristles – not broad-based prickles like other roses. Once one has seen *Rosa spinosissima*, it cannot be mistaken for anything else. The rose planted at the base of the cross on the battlefield is not true Towton Rose but closer to native *Rosa spinosissima* than those planted in Saxton Churchyard. If you want to familiarise yourself with wild *Rosa spinosissima*, it grows abundantly on other sites in Yorkshire such as the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust Reserve at Burton Leonard (SE3262) where it is described as “particularly aggressive” (Abbott, 2005).

Please also contact me if you know of the whereabouts of an original 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century painting, photograph or herbarium specimen of the true Towton Rose. Victorian ladies are likely to have painted it and such a painting may exist in a museum, art gallery or private collection.

I would like to be able to illustrate it in my book *Scots Roses, Rosa spinosissima and other Pimpinellifolias* (due to be published by The Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh and the Royal Horticultural Society in 2012).

I would also like to preserve plants of it in my National Collection of Scots Roses and propagate it so that plants of it can be made available for planting on appropriate approved sites in the Towton area.

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