

## Towton Roses: fact and fable (Part 2)

Peter D. A. Boyd

Until the latter [in part 1], all the accounts of Towton roses referred to 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, *The Flora of West Yorkshire* (1888) 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 fanciful 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 "blossoms 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 by Lord Ravensworth 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".*

It is interesting that Bogg makes a point of describing the rose as "tinged (not streaked) with red" like my illustration in part 1. However, the rest of his account is a little confused. He seems to have mistaken the 'field roses' (which often grow in hedgerows and sometimes show some pink on the white petals) with the bicoloured *Rosa spinosissima* that was formerly abundant as dwarf bushes within the open field. No-one else had suggested previously that the 'Field Rose' *Rosa arvensis* or another hedgerow rose has anything to do with the fabled Towton Rose and later, in Bogg's book, Dr Lees does not refer to such an association. Lees suggests that 'The Towton Rose' was a mixture of two species (see below). The scrambling mode of growth of *Rosa arvensis* or tall shrubby growth of other hedgerow species is not consistent with other descriptions of the Towton Roses as dwarf plants about one foot (30cm) high forming large patches within the meadow.

Part of the Bogg's paragraph on the possible effects of iron on plant growth from blood shed on the site (not reproduced here), is also a mixture of confused science and nonsense. Besides any other scientific considerations, any effect of blood that was shed on the site would probably have been short lived. The brown oxidised blood from the fallen (it would not have remained red very long) 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 with snow melt or if there had been heavy rain in the weeks after the battle. It seems an extremely remote possibility that there would have been any nutritional or other scientifically valid effect 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 on the site, it is possible that the bones could have had a longer-term effect on soil chemistry, maintaining a favourable alkalinity and providing phosphates plus other nutrients that could encourage the growth of *Rosa spinosissima*.

Bogg's 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 is clearly referring to *Rosa spinosissima* in the "roses, white of York", "excessively spiny", "will [also] grow and spread on seashore sand" and he refers to *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 year 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 x alba* and *Rosa gallica*). Incidentally, *Rosa x alba* is probably a hybrid including *Rosa arvensis* and *Rosa gallica* in its makeup.

A local rosarian, Norman Lambert of Fulford, Yorkshire wrote about the story of the Towton Rose in 1931. Most of his article in *The Rose Annual* was an account of the battle and the legend of its origin. Although he knew the site of the battle well and provides a description of the roses of the area, it seems to be based on that of Lees:

*"One of the first things I can remember was a story told by my grandfather of the Red and White Roses that were to be found growing on Towton battlefield, which was about eight or nine miles from our home. He related how he had tried to transplant some of the trees in his garden, but that they had refused to grow, as others who had tried the experiment had found, away from their native heath. The Roses were white streaked with crimson".*

*"I have visited Towton field many times since. There are wild Roses still growing there, low branching bushes sometimes forming a thicket, almost impassable on account of their abundant spines, and crowned with creamy white blossoms in June. This is the Rose of York. Here and there the Rose of Lancaster (*Rosa tomentosa*) is found with its downy red flowers, and the common Dog Rose grows in plenty. Occasionally a creamy white bloom is tinged with red or pink - the result of cross-fertilisation by insects - and it is quite reasonable to suppose that some variations have been streaked in colouring. I have met and talked with natives of the district, contemporary with my grandfather, and they refuse to accept any theory other than the legendary one".*

The creamy white flowered 'Rose of York' was probably *Rosa spinosissima* that still existed on the site in the early 1930s (if not in its bicoloured form). It is a pity that he did not confirm the identity by its scientific name – vernacular names are open to misidentification!

More recent writers have confused other roses that they have seen on and around the battlefield with the true Towton Rose. Eric Houlder (2004) misidentified a hedgerow Dog Rose (*Rosa canina* or a related species) as the Towton Rose but he suspected that he might have done so at the time. Many common tall growing Dog Roses and other wild rose species have pale pink or dark pink flowers with a white centre. This is different to the 'tinged' or 'marbled' flowers of the true Towton Rose.

It is likely that the dwarf form of *Rosa spinosissima* that was the true Towton Rose would only survive in an open situation. It might survive some mowing or grazing but, in its dwarf form, it could probably not survive being shaded out by lush taller-growing shrubs and herbaceous plants in a hedgerow.

During a visit to part of the battlefield that that I made in July 2010, I did not see any *Rosa spinosissima* but plenty of *Rosa arvensis* of which some plants on one part of the site were nibbled short by grazing cattle. The non-botanist might confuse such plants with *Rosa spinosissima*. However, *Rosa arvensis* has white flowers in clusters - unlike *Rosa spinosissima* in which the flowers are normally arranged singly at the end of a shoot or side shoot. Each individual flower of *R. arvensis* has a columnar group of fused styles (appearing to be a single 'stigma') shaped like a thick pin and head in the centre of each flower, whereas the styles/stigmas in a *R. spinosissima* flower form a low mound in the centre of the bloom. The stems and leaves are also very different and the flowers of *R. arvensis* produce ovoid red hips - unlike the rounded black hips of *R. spinosissima*.



**The clustered flowers of *Rosa arvensis* showing the erect 'stigmas'(photographed at Towton by Peter Boyd)**

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 before that too was destroyed.;
- 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 1948 show areas such as Bloody Meadow apparently ploughed but with the ‘shadows’ of ring ditches from the tumuli still showing. Since then, small fields have been consolidated into larger fields, so that many hedgerows (and field margins in which the Towton Rose might have persisted) 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 by Peter Boyd in July 2010). See the map in Part1.**

The Towton Battlefield Society has recorded an additional agricultural reason and probable specific date for destruction of the last Towton Roses in the late 1940s. The following statement made in 1969 by a local farmer Mr. Albert Bailey (aged 79 years old) was quoted by Martin Hickeys in his article for the *Yorkshire Post* in 2010:-

*“... we were plagued with battle roses. They were small wild roses, red and white, and they grew all over the battleground. 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 first article on The Towton Rose (Boyd 2010a), some non-local forms of *Rosa spinosissima* 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 [see part 1] 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'. Many owners of 'Rosa Mundi' have happily believed for a hundred years that they had the true Towton Rose.

One story of particularly interesting pedigree regarding these 'faux' Towton Roses was kindly sent to me by former Yorkshire photojournalist Tom Montgomery. He had interviewed and photographed 74 year old Sam Hood of Aberford (about three miles from Towton) in June or July 1980:

*"He was the former village butcher who had been Assistant Lord Mayor of Leeds in 1977/78. He was also a keen local historian. He had 16 of the rose bushes and had been given them by his father's cousin. They had been in his family for over a hundred years and had been moved several times. He believed they were the only ones left and was firmly convinced they were the 'Towton Rose'. They flowered freely for about a month at the end of June and the beginning of July. He said they would grow in other parts if cultivated properly. But a lot had been taken from the area when they were flowering without permission. As it was the wrong time to transplant they died perpetuating the myth they would only grow in the Towton area. Mr Hood said he had tried to re-establish them near the battlefield but people took the bushes. They had even stolen them from Saxton churchyard. Mr Hood believed that any Towton rose bushes in the area would have come from his stock".*

*"He gave the Bishop of York, who preached at the 500th memorial service to the battle in 1961, two bushes. One went into the gardens of Bishopsthorpe Palace in York, I understand, and the other went with him when he became Archbishop of Canterbury shortly afterwards".*

*"There is a footnote to this. In 1992 I was asked to do a piece on the Towton Rose by a paper and I spoke to Mrs Florence Middleton of, would you believe, Rose Cottage, Saxton. She had lived in the village for 67 years and said she had never seen the rose growing wild. But "a gentleman who had it in his garden used to bring me a bunch every summer. If I wasn't in he would tie them to the door handle. But he died a few years ago and I don't know where it can be seen now" she said".*

Unfortunately, I do not know if the lady at Rose Cottage in Saxton was given the true Towton Rose or 'Rosa Mundi'.

The Bishop of York in 1961 was Michael Ramsay. He became the 100<sup>th</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury in the same year. When Tom Montgomery first contacted me, I had great hopes that a rose with this pedigree would turn out to be the true Towton Rose and it was a disappointment to find that it was 'Rosa Mundi' again when I received the photographs! However, I am very grateful for his permission to reproduce the photographs and for a delightful account of this chapter in the social history of these roses.



**The late Sam Hood's 'Towton Roses' (actually 'Rosa Mundi')**  
[photographs by Tom Montgomery]

I am not giving up the quest and still hope that a plant of the true Towton Rose still survives somewhere – probably unrecognised. Unfortunately, tidy gardeners taking over an old garden who did not like its spreading habit and did not know its significance, might well have grubbed it out.

In spite of everything that was written about The Towton Rose in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I have 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. I have not exhausted all the possibilities however so there is still a good chance that an old watercolour, photograph or herbarium specimen may still come to light.

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 late summer - 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 you have seen *Rosa spinosissima*, you are likely to recognise it again. 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 can be seen on other sites in Yorkshire such as the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust Reserve at Burton Leonard (SE3262) where it grows abundantly and 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 or Edwardian ladies or gentlemen are likely to have drawn, painted or photographed it and such a picture may exist in an archive, museum, art gallery or private collection.

I would like to be able to illustrate it in a future article and 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 have assembled the official National Collection of Scots Roses (about 300 forms) and I would like to be able to preserve living specimens of the true Towton Rose and propagate it so it can be made available for planting on appropriate approved sites in the Towton area and to individuals who would like to play a part in perpetuating it.

Peter D. A. Boyd  
Curator (Shrewsbury Museums),  
Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery,

Tel.: 01743 281208  
Email: [peterboyd@btinternet.com](mailto:peterboyd@btinternet.com)  
Website: [www.peterboyd.com](http://www.peterboyd.com)

### References and further reading

Abbott, P. P. 2005. *Plant Atlas of Mid-West Yorkshire*. Yorkshire Naturalists Union.

Baines, Henry. 1840. *Flora of Yorkshire*. Longman, Orme, Brown, Green and Longman. London.

Bogg, Edmund. 1904. *The Old Kingdom of Elmet the land 'twixt Aire and Wharfe* .

Boyd, P.D.A. 2010a. A Quest for 'The Towton Rose'. *In The Towton Herald* (the newsletter of the Towton Battlefield Society). Issue 51, pp. 6-8. Online at <http://www.peterboyd.com/rosapimp16.htm> .

Boyd, P.D.A. 2010b. Towton Roses, Fact and Fable: part 1 (early history). *In The Towton Herald* (the newsletter of the Towton Battlefield Society). Issue 52 (Winter 2010-2011), pp. 3-11. Online at <http://www.peterboyd.com/rosapimp17.htm> .

Boyd, P. D. A. 2004-2010. Various other published articles on *Rosa spinosissima* and Scots Roses may be accessed as online versions at [www.peterboyd.com/scotsroses.htm](http://www.peterboyd.com/scotsroses.htm) .

Hickes, Martin. 2010. Search for the Towton Rose stirs echoes of carnage *The Yorkshire Post* 14<sup>th</sup> June 2010 (including quotes by Peter Boyd, Peter Algar and others).

Houlder, E. 2004. The rose of the wars. *Dalesman* (September 2004). vol. 66 No. 6.

Lambert, Norman. 1931. The white rose and the red: memories of a famous fight. *In Rose Annual* 1931. The National Rose Society.

Leadman, A. D. H. 1891. *Proelia Eboracensia: Battles Fought in Yorkshire, treated Historically and Topographically* . Bradbury, Agnew and Co.

Lees, F. A. 1888. *Flora of West Yorkshire*. Lovell Reave & Co. London.

Lees, F. A. 1904. The Wild Flowers of Elmete. *In* Bogg (1904).

Parkinson, Rev. Thomas. 1888. *Yorkshire Legends and Traditions*. Elliott Stock. London.

Planché, J. R.. 1872. *The Recollections and Reflections of J. R. Planché* . vol. 2. Tinsley Brothers. London

Ravensworth, The Earl of [Liddell, Henry Thomas]. 1859. The Field of Towton Moor. In *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 1859 Vol. LXXXV. January 1859.

Speight, Harry. 1902. *Lower Wharfedale: Being a complete account of the history, antiquities and scenery of the picturesque valley of the Wharfe*. Elliot Stock. London.