

**Take a map and follow this walk round the town in the footsteps of Thompson. Although the flowers themselves have their seasons, the feel of the localities can be enjoyed at any time of year and the story can then be appreciated.**

### **Tommy the Miller's Field and the Castle**

Thompson knew Berwick before the coming of the railway in the 1840's. The station stands on the ruins of the Castle. A burn ran between the Castle and the town with a water mill and grassy braes. The grassland known as 'Tommy the Miller's Field' is still outwardly much as it was, but the weedy areas round the Castle have gone or are planted with trees, scrub has increased, fertilizer has been used on part of the fields and the water feeding the wet areas has suffered enrichment. Nevertheless this remains an interesting area.

**Grass of Parnassus, *Parnassia palustris***, was first reported from here in Gerard's herbal 'Mr. William Broad observed it to grow plentifully in the Castle fields of Berwicke-upon-Tweed'. Mr. Broad had travelled from London c. 1630 on a tour in search of plants. It was lost when the railway came, but is still on the coast by the Needle's Eye.

**Wild Clary, *Salvia verbenaca***, possibly originally introduced as a medicinal plant, was found plentifully by the Castle by Thompson and Johnston. It has not been noted since 1938.

**Common Restharrow, *Ononis repens***, is a wiry-stemmed member of the pea family that is quite plentiful on dry banks and is typical of the many lime-loving plants that still grow here.

### **The Riverside above the White Walls**

The muddy riverside has, as in the past, plants that are typical of salt-marsh including:

**Sea Aster, *Aster tripolium***, This is an attractive plant that flourishes along the rivers edge as far as Castlehills, flowering in late summer.

Along the grassy banks are found:

**Hemlock Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe crocata***.

This fine umbellifer, which is poisonous to livestock, is rather frequent in wet places and may well be more widespread than in the past.

**Tansy, *Tanacetum vulgare***, once cultivated as a herb and long-established by the Tweed and Whiteadder Water.

**Russian Comfrey, *Symphytum x uplandicum***.

One of the prominent aliens of the Tweed river system, originally introduced as a fodder plant. It was unknown to Thompson but was probably the plant that Johnston, 1853, writes of under S. officinale as growing at the 'side of the Whiteadder, about half a mile from its mouth, with purple flowers'.

### **The White Walls and Postern Gate**

**Pellitory-of-the-Wall, *Parietaria judaica***, grows here. Native further south, but probably introduced at Berwick, this somewhat scruffy but intriguing plant has long been abundant around the walls and also occurs in the streets. It perhaps typifies the heritage of the town more than any other. It is rare elsewhere in the Borders.

### **The Riverside below the White Walls**

The section to the old bridge has trees on the banks and a rich variety of herbs by the path. Paintings and drawings of Thompson's time make it clear that banks below the ramparts and Tweed Street were bare with the sandstone rocks exposed, so the trees and ivy are more recent. The herbs by the path are not now cut in the summer, a policy which could be followed elsewhere in the town.

**Common Mallow, *Malva sylvestris***. A common and attractive feature of the riverside in the town as in Thompson's time; also present on the ramparts, as at Brass Bastion.

**Black Horehound, *Ballota nigra***. More widespread around the town in Thompson's time this herb has several colonies by the riverside. It is rare elsewhere in the Borders. Johnston notes: 'May 9, 1851. Saw an old man gathering the *Ballota*. He called it Horehound, and said that he mixed the dried herb with his tea, believing it to be a wholesome addition. He expressed a firm belief in its anti-asthmatic virtue'.

### **Quayside**

**Wall-rue, *Asplenium ruta-muraria*; Maidenhair Spleenwort, *Asplenium trichomanes* and Hart's-tongue, *Phyllitis scolopendrium*** grow here. It is difficult to appreciate that these familiar wall ferns, frequent around the town today, were just not there in Thompson's time, but were known only from deans and old ruined buildings at a distance. Dr P W Maclagan, Johnston's son-in-law, had however reported wall-rue on the ramparts in front of Wellington Place by 1853.

### **Ness Gate**

Home to some interesting wall plants:

**London-rocket, *Sisymbrium irio***. A rare alien which acquired its English name from its sudden abundance in bare areas in London after the great fire of 1666 and with a curious history in the town. It was first noted by the indefatigable John Ray in 1671 as growing on the walls of Berwick. Thompson knew it near Kings Mount; more or less where Johnston found it plentifully by Ness Gate, for Ness Gate was not opened until 1815 when the pier was being rebuilt. Here in 1834 it was gathered 'under the town walls' by Professor C C Babington of Cambridge, who stayed with Johnston, the beginning of a long and productive friendship. It flourished in new places following disturbance during the building of the railway but was lost to tidiness at some subsequent date.

**Ivy-leaved Toadflax, *Cymbalaria muralis***. A relatively recent but now familiar wall plant, where its fruiting stems twist about looking for crevices.

**Fairy Foxglove, *Erinus alpinus***, is another attractive plant that flourishes at Ness Gate.

### **Behind the Pier**

Here there is a small sand-dune with **Lyme-grass, *Leymus arenarius*** and **Marram, *Ammophila arenaria***. It is probable that the dune has enlarged since the building of the new longer pier was completed in 1821 and that these grasses and three other sand-dune species then colonised, as Thompson did not know them north of the river, though marram abounds from Spittal southwards. Here lyme-grass dominates towards the sea with a little marram behind, nearer the Lowry shelter.

### **King's Mount to Brass Bastion**

Thompson gives a long species list for the Ramparts so we know they were very different from today, with many common meadow species as well as more weedy ones, including unusual alien plants, some medicinal. Beyond Brass Bastion there is a short length of older wall which still has the original flora intact, elsewhere fastidious tidiness has removed most of the weedy species and severely depleted the meadow species:

**Henbane, *Hyoscyamus niger*.** Once cultivated as a medicinal plant, albeit a dangerous one, Thompson found henbane plentifully on the ramparts and ‘the wastes surrounding the town’. Johnston, 1853, notes ‘When the Castle banks were disturbed during the operations in making the Railway, the Henbane appeared in profusion, and it is still plentiful on those parts which are yet naked.’ Despite the long-lived seed bank which this demonstrates it was probably gone by 1900.

**Wild Onion, *Allium vineale*** is quite a weed in some parts of eastern England, but an uncommon plant in the north where it is probably an introduction though known to Thompson on the ramparts. It is still on the old wall by Brass Bastion and on The Ditches, but is more frequent on the sea braes and the riverside by the town. The variety present does not have flowers, with bulbils replacing them.

**Hedge Bindweed, *Calystegia sepium*** was quite unknown to Thompson, who could hardly have missed it, but by 1853 to Johnston had met it in the Ladykirk estate and by West Ord, though not in this area. Now it is very conspicuous in the autumn outside King’s Mount and in rough places about the town.

#### **Cumberland Bastion**

**Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*.** A common weed in Berwick, beautiful on banks near the coastguard houses, but most remarkable growing freely from the walls about Cumberland Bastion, all as known to Thompson. This becomes an uncommon plant north into Scotland, and may be an old introduction to the town.

## **BERWICKSHIRE NATURALISTS**

***Berwick has been home to some fine naturalists so the story of its wild flowers is as much about people as plants. Its leading botanists were:***

### **John Vaughan Thompson, 1779 – 1847**

He collected wild flowers around Berwick as a teenager. He then went as an army surgeon to Barbados. On his return he was given introductions to Dr J E Smith FRS (later Sir James) and James Sowerby FLS, the two leading botanists of the day. With their encouragement he published his ‘Catalogue of Plants growing in the Vicinity of Berwick upon Tweed’ in 1807. He moved to Cork in Ireland where he took up the study of marine biology with much success. It was he who found that by using a muslin bag small marine organisms could be collected and so he opened the world of plankton to the naturalist.

### **Dr George Johnston, 1797 – 1855**

Born of a farming family near Berwick he took up botany, like Thompson, during his training as a surgeon in Edinburgh and went on to publish his ‘Flora of Berwick-upon-Tweed’ in two volumes, 1829, 1831. He then founded the Berwickshire Naturalists Club and did much to promote the study of natural history. Like Thompson his own interests turned to marine biology and it was not until 1853 that he returned to botany to publish the first and, alas, the only volume of ‘The Natural History of the Eastern Borders’ before his untimely death. Professionally he was both doctor and surgeon and had a large practice in the town. He was prominent in civic life and was thrice mayor.

***A History and Guide to***

# **Berwick’s Wild Flowers**

