

ENGLISH FLOWERS  
FROM FOREIGN  
FIELDS

WHEN THEY CAME AND WHERE THEY WENT

Elizabeth Adlam

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## WHERE DID IT ALL BEGIN?

*God made the country and man made the town.*

William Cowper

The United Kingdom today is a largely urbanised society, self-assured in its increasing technological skills. The gap between us and the plant kingdom, with which we evolved, is also widening as we appear to be losing our past plant connections. The contact is still there though often sub-conscious. Comments such as ‘Just going for a walk in the park’ and ‘Must do half an hour in the garden’, show that there is still a bond. It can also be seen every weekend. The big cities empty as their inhabitants make for the peace and quiet of the countryside, and long queues wait to enter the car parks of the numerous garden centres where there are garden plants, pot plants and cut flowers for sale.

The kingdom of plants with its recurring annual rhythms has always fascinated man. Its beauty was here before he evolved and will be here when he has gone. It has associations with life itself, so it is not surprising that the world’s great religions, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, are inseparable from plants. ‘Say it with flowers’ is a modern advertising slogan, but man has been doing it since he first had time to appreciate his surroundings. The flowers in the Egyptian tombs and the Neanderthal burial sites are two well-known, historical examples of floral tributes.

In the beginning man fed on fruits and seeds, followed by the grains such as wheat, barley, and rye, which also fed his domesticated animals. Trees were cut down and burned to keep him warm and to provide fuel for cooking. They were made into houses as well as bows and arrows for defence and to kill animals for food. Man made clothing from cotton, flax, hemp and stinging nettles. Plant extracts were medicines for illness

and soothing the mind into sleep. Eventually the plants became a potent power over our minds and bodies, for they became credited with powers of good and evil. The good powers are often seen in their names such as 'eggs and bacon' and 'town hall clock'. A plant often associated with both good and evil is mistletoe due to its growth on a tree with no apparent roots.

It is possible to view some of England's social and economic history through the plants which are grown today for food. A good place to begin is the traditional Christmas meal. Before the festive meal a drink is served. Pimm's is popular, especially when garnished with borage which arrived here with Iron Age Man and was used as a fever cure. On the menu for the main course are potatoes, parsnips, peas, swedes, and turkey, served with a variety of herb stuffings such as sage, parsley, rosemary, thyme and sweet chestnut. Not many items on this list are native English food. The potatoes and the turkey are from the New World, whilst parsnip, sage, rosemary, sweet chestnut, and culinary thyme are all native Mediterranean plants and Roman introductions. On the dessert menu there is fresh fruit salad containing cultivated cherries, apples and pears which have non-native Mediterranean ancestors, usually Roman in origin native hybridised raspberries, strawberries with red or black currants. Cream if necessary would come from locally raised European breeds of cow.

This example shows that the plants which are grown here for food have several non-native origins. The sweet chestnut is one of the many introduced food plants which left the safety of the garden to become naturalized in the wild. The frontispiece of the *Origins of English Wild Flowers* shows the usual classification of the English flora by origin, clearly indicating where the details of our past history can be found. Plants have arrived here by many different means becoming naturalized with our native flora. As a result it becomes clear that the history of our

flora is a multi-coloured strand with numerous threads.

When artificial hybrids from native plants are included in this history, the effect is even more intriguing. Where would gardeners be without those hybrid wallflowers, which were bred from the alien, casual, adventive plant of Mediterranean origin, which arrived here from the Caen region of France on building stone? Then there is the native Cheddar pink, which was crossed with the Roman carnation, giving a huge range of hybrid, brightly coloured, frilly-petalled flowers which fill every florists' shop. Natural hybrids also appear, for example the crosses of primroses and cowslips as well as natural 'sports' or 'rogues', recorded since Elizabethan times. These have become the basis of the huge range of the modern brightly coloured polyanthus.

A multi-coloured strand like this will only hold together if it has a good glue. Here the adhesive is the climate of north-western Europe. It is a soft climate although at times it may not feel like it producing the best environment for the growth of temperate zone plants. There is rain throughout the growing season and almost twenty hours of daylight in the summer months. Although England is on the same latitude as Moscow and Winnipeg, there is no long, cold winter. The westerly air streams bringing in the warm oceanic air, combined with the gentle heating effect of the North Atlantic Drift, contribute to the mild climate and ice-free coastal waters of western Europe.

Even with this relatively stable climate there have been some fluctuations. Since the end of the last Great Ice Age our climate has oscillated around an average not unlike the average for the twentieth century. The Bronze Age was a time of warm dry weather which was followed by a period of damp, cool weather prior to the Roman invasion. It was hotter and drier here in Roman times allowing the extensive cultivation of vines at the peak in the fourth century AD. Probably this warm period, in England as well as Europe as a whole, started the

downfall of the Roman Empire. Nomadic people in drought areas of eastern Europe, migrated west searching for food. These invading hordes produced the Roman withdrawal of manpower from their northern and eastern provinces, since the troops were needed to defend Rome. Eventually the whole civilisation fell under this pressure as well as the internal wrangling and power struggles.

There were little Ice Ages in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which produced Frost Fairs on frozen rivers such as the Thames and the Dickensian snowy Christmas. This century the cold winters of 1962-3 and 1978-9 were nowhere near as severe as the little Ice Ages, nor were the hot summers of 1921, 1976, and 1995 comparable to the fourth century warm period. As far as can be estimated, the general overall effect of these climatic variations was not devastating. Fossil and written evidence would suggest that few if any plants have been recorded as completely lost, though the distribution of many species at the edges of their range was frequently reduced.

It is possible to determine whether a plant existed on a site even if there is no written evidence. Fortunately many soils, especially peat ones, have a low level of oxygen which means that the rate of plant decomposition is very slow and the preservation of readily identifiable plant material. Microscopic analysis of these soils produces a range of macro and micro fossils. The macro fossils are fragments of plants such as seeds, roots, and twigs approx. 0.5-0.1mm. Pollen and spores form micro fossils of 10-150  $\mu$  m and are less fragmentary.

Pollen is extremely reliable evidence for a plant's existence, for its shape and markings are as unique and individual as a set of fingerprints, allowing accurate identification. Due to its very light weight pollen is very easily blown about, so occurrence is not always an indication of plant distribution.

RELATIVE PROPORTIONS OF SELECTED POLLENS  
IN A PEAT CORE

