

Tale from the Garden!

The Cowslip (*Primula Veris*) is a cousin of the Primrose and is also an early spring flower. Formerly a common plant of traditional hay meadows, ancient woodlands and hedgerows, the loss of these habitats has caused a serious decline in its populations and now fields coloured bright yellow with its nodding heads are a rare sight.

The Cowslip is a very distinctive little fellow, with a flat rosette of wrinkled leaves and deep yellow, cup-shaped flowers that nod in bunches at the end of tall stems.



Its cultural history suggests that it was once as common as the Buttercup. However, it suffered a decline between 1930 and 1980, mainly due to the loss of the grasslands where it grows. Its dramatic decline in the 1950s was due to the relentless advance of modern farming, particularly the ploughing of old grassland and the extension of the use of chemical herbicides. Fortunately, it is now showing signs of recovery and has begun to return to unsprayed verges and village greens as well as colonising the banks of new roads. It has probably been assisted by the scattering of wild flower seed mixtures. Vast masses have reappeared in Hertfordshire where grazing pressures have eased. And I've seen a few growing in gardens here in Stokesley – one in Meadowfield & another on Northfield Drive.

Did you know?

- It is the county flower of Northamptonshire, Worcestershire and Surrey.
- In the 'Language of Flowers' it symbolises comeliness and winning grace.
- Cowslip allegedly means cowpat! Our ancestors noted that they tended to flower where a cow had 'slipped'.
- As an early spring flower, it is closely associated with much English folklore and tradition, including being strewn on church paths for weddings and adorning garlands for May Day.
- Its scent is not dissimilar to that of an apricot. Richard Mabey (writer & broadcaster, a pioneering voice in modern nature writing) describes the scent as 'faintly fruity and dill-like.'
- Tea made from the flowers is meant to be good for insomnia, headaches and nervous tension. The scented flowers also make delicious wines.
- Some of the many enchanting vernacular names include freckled face, golden drops, bunch of keys, fairies' flower, lady's fingers, long legs and milk maidens. Welsh names include dagrau Mair, 'Mary's tears'.
- In Norse mythology, the Cowslip, with its beauty-enhancing qualities (creams and lotions from its flowers are said to smooth wrinkles and blemishes) is attributed to Freyja, goddess of love, beauty and fertility. It's told that the flowers represent the keys to open the door to her secret hall, and the treasure of inner knowledge. For this reason the flowers are often associated with unlocking secrets.
- Another equally interesting legend that pertains to the cowslip is its association with fairies. The flower is said to be extremely precious to fairies and is used to find their hidden treasures and gifts. And so the cowslip also means "adventure" and "mischief" which comes from this particular fable.
- In Shakespeare's day Cowslips were associated with magic and with fairies, in some places they were known as Fairy Cups. The character Ariel in 'The Tempest' happens to be "an airy spirit." And we'll all recollect this line from the same play, "Where the bee sucks, there suck I: In a cowslip's bell I lie" (The Tempest, Act V, Scene I)
- In Shakespeare's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' they are compared to the Gentlemen Pensioners of Queen Elizabeth's court, a guard of fifty of the handsomest men from the noblest families, who would accompany the Queen during her royal engagements. The Gentlemen Pensioners

were known for their fine and elaborate dress that was embroidered in gold and attached with jewels. The “rubies, fairy favours”, means favours from the Queen. The men were also known to wear pearls in their ear, hence the phrase to “hang a pearl in every Cowslips ear.”

“The cowslips tall her pensioners be;

In their gold coats spots you see;

Those be rubies, fairy favours,

In those freckles live their savours:

I must go seek some dew drops here

And hang a pearl in every Cowslips ear.”

(A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Act II, Scene I)

The Queen’s ‘Gentlemen Pensioners’ were originally a brotherhood of men originally created by her father the Great Henry VIII called “spears”. The “spears” were not only Henry’s body guards but also, his companions in times of war. They were also the principal participants of the Royal tournaments & martial combats, & became a courtly finishing school for the sons of Nobles and the gentry.

Under Elizabeth the brotherhood of Gentlemen Pensioners retained many of the same qualities as their predecessors focusing mainly as her Majesty’s elite bodyguards. Charged and sworn to give their lives in protection of the royal person they attended and escorted her Grace wherever she went. Under arms they were an extension of the Queen and although the brotherhood was assembled from the high born to the low, they served as one with the same attention to their surroundings, to her Grace, and were alert for any situation or dangers that might have caused her Majesty harm.

The band's original role was to provide a mounted escort, armed with spear and lance, to protect the Sovereign in battle or on progress around the country. After 1526 the Corps began to do duty at court on foot, carrying a battle-axe, as they still do today. The Gentlemen at Arms last acted as a Royal bodyguard in battle in the Civil War of 1642-9.

Although their first duty was as bodyguards to the Queen, the Gentlemen Pensioners were much like the Queen’s Yeoman of the Guard who were responsible for guarding the interior of the monarch’s palaces. They were the individuals to first come in contact with her people. As her escorts even under arms, they were the first face of the Monarchy and as such were proud & strong.

This Sunday we reflect on the Ceremonial Royal Funeral of the Duke of Edinburgh which took place on Saturday 17 April 2021 at 3pm in St George’s Chapel, Windsor. The Funeral Service began with a National Minute’s Silence at three o’clock. The service was preceded by a ceremonial procession inside the grounds of Windsor Castle. The plans for the funeral were in line with The Duke of Edinburgh's own personal wishes, and the occasion recognised and celebrated The Duke’s life and his more than 70 years of service to The Queen, the UK and the Commonwealth.

The Duke of Edinburgh was devoted consort (companion to the Sovereign) for over 60 years, from Her Majesty’s Accession in 1952 until his death.

“He has quite simply been my strength and stay all these years, and I, and his whole family, and this and many other countries, owe him a debt greater than he would ever claim, or we shall ever know.”

(The Queen, in a speech to mark the couple's Golden Wedding Anniversary)

But while The Queen readies herself for life without him, we can be sure that she will be well looked after – with the strength & support of her family, her household staff & those deigned to serve her in all Royal duties.

Our Queen has a Body Guard of the Honourable Corps of Gentlemen at Arms to accompany her at all ceremonial occasions. Members of the Corps attend the Sovereign at State arrivals of foreign Heads of State, the Garter service at Windsor, the State Opening of Parliament, and the evening reception held by the Sovereign for the Diplomatic Corps. In addition, the Corps is on duty when the Sovereign attends services of the Orders of Chivalry. The Gentlemen at Arms also attend The Queen's garden parties, where their task is to form the lanes through which the members of the Royal Family walk.

The Honourable Corps consists of five Officers (the Captain, the Lieutenant, the Standard Bearer, the Clerk of the Cheque and the Harbinger) and 27 Gentlemen. The senior Officer is the Captain, a political appointment who is now always the Government Chief Whip in the House of Lords.

The uniform is that of a Heavy Dragoon Guards officer of the 1840s. It has a skirted red coat with Garter blue velvet cuffs and facings embroidered with the Tudor royal badge of the Portcullis. Helmets with white swan feather plumes are worn when on duty, even in church. Officers wear gold aiguillettes and carry sticks of office which they receive from the Sovereign on appointment. Cavalry swords are worn, and long ceremonial battle-axes, over 300 years old, are carried by all the Gentlemen. Since 1856, when the award was instituted, twelve Gentlemen at Arms have been holders of the Victoria Cross, the highest award for gallantry and conspicuous bravery in the field. The Honourable Corps of Gentlemen at Arms was instituted by King Henry VIII in 1509 and celebrated its 500th anniversary in 2009. At a parade and luncheon to mark the anniversary, The Queen paid tribute to her 'nearest guard':

'The evils against which the Sovereign required protection in 1509 have, I expect, changed a little over the years but the loyalty of the Body Guard remains undimmed.'

These words are echoed in this Easter message & while they were spoken on behalf of the Catholic Church, we can certainly relate to them in our Methodist Ministry.

“We are an Easter people: our faith in the Risen Lord remains undimmed.” – Bishop Francis Duffy

In his message for Easter 2021, Bishop Francis Duffy, Catholic Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise, recalls a year of the Covid-19 pandemic in which we have witnessed the wonderful courage, sacrifice and kindness of so many people.

Bishop Duffy said, “We have also seen suffering in a variety of different ways, front line workers exhausted and those in hospitals and nursing homes without visits. The closure of businesses has led to considerable worry. Many have spoken to me about the sad contexts in which funerals take place. Those who stand in silence as a funeral passes are standing with and alongside the bereaved family, acknowledging the family and community loss. It is a heartfelt stance of solidarity and support. We have lots of Good Samaritans, ever watchful for those who are in need.”

With all the restrictions on public worship, Bishop Duffy said, “Although our physical attendance at Mass is curtailed and at times not possible, we have a rich variety of ways to nourish our faith and our daily living. Private prayer, including reading scripture passages or the Mass readings, is very supportive. The ‘domestic Church’ is the family gathering around the kitchen table, in prayer and following Mass online. The ‘domestic Church’ has gained a new importance. The traditional Rosary, and the visits to church, are familiar practices. These are not substitute ways of worship, they are tried and tested routes that nourish our faith in the risen Lord. While streamlined Masses keep us connected to worship in a virtual way, and while the opportunity to do so is very much appreciated, it is not the same as being present in a church. We long to be back in church for Mass and the celebration of the sacraments. We look forward to the temporary measures being eased and lifted and returning to public worship. I think of our priests whose pastoral work has been curtailed by restrictions and cocooning. I thank them for keeping in touch and reaching out in a variety of pastoral ways. I thank you for your generous support of clergy, both moral and material, at this very difficult time.

Over the last year the Church has played its part in this crusade of caution. I thank our clergy and all the committees and volunteers who do so much to keep our churches open and safe. All the planning and sanitising and the stewarding is very much appreciated as it keeps people safer and gives great reassurance.”

Concluding his message Bishop Duffy focused on the joy of the Resurrection. He said, “The resurrection of Jesus Christ is our reassurance that He continues to walk alongside us. It holds out the ultimate hope that God loves each of us, no matter what. **We are an Easter people; our faith in the risen Lord remains undimmed.** It is a faith that tells us, yes these are difficult times, but the Lord walks with us, encouraging us and giving us the wisdom to keep going in a positive and life enhancing way and to be especially supportive and protective of those around us. We look forward to the day when we can worship freely and meet up again with family, friends and neighbours with joy in our hearts.”