



NEWS

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Hardy pioneer who saved daffodils from extinction



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BANNERS in the streets which proclaim that Saturday will be a charity's Daffodil Day have stirred from the loose compost that passes for my memory the name of Peter Barr.

Although reminders of who he was and what he did seldom surface, always they arrive about now.

Peter Barr was the Daffodil King. So golden an enthronement is even more exotic than it looks. For young Barr was a son of Govan. However kingly he grew to be, he kept his Clydeside roots. Although he became rich and world-famous, Govan was never taken out of the plain way he spoke nor from his canny way with money.

He was one of the hardy pioneers who saved daffodils from extinction. He rescued them from being treated like weeds. There may never have been singled-minded flower power such as Peter Barr's.

Yet of all Govan's claims to fame, his contribution is the bright one that history has trampled on.

Before it built boats Govan was green. Living there can be made to seem idyllic. Everybody either wove cloth or mowed meadows. Before Fairfield became a shipyard it was what its name says.

James Barr, who was Peter's father, was a weaver who grew tulips around the family cottage.

But what else my memory could unearth about the Daffodil King was flimsy. Frivolous comes nearer it. Such recollection as came to mind had to do with Barr's odd, or very Govan, way with beds - not the flower kind but beds in hotels.

On his world safaris in search of daffodils Peter Barr travelled alone. He came to hate innkeepers who treated him as if he was two people. They insisted they had only double rooms.

Barr's revenge was to rise in the night and climb on to the other mattress so that both beds would have to be made in the morning. When he slept through, he never forgot to rumple the unused sheets.

Aside from how a careful way with his bawbees explains a part of his success as a nurseryman, that night-life glimpse does little to illuminate Peter's progress to regality. Somebody needed to do some digging, meaning, I hoped, somebody other than me.

Reviving daffodils and making them popular again, as Barr did, needed a phenomenal change of fashion. Around the middle of last century they had few admirers. Nobody now seems sure why they had so wiltingly fallen from favour. For whatever reason, yellow had ceased to be a modish colour.

Horticultural snobbishness may also have done for daffodils. They were



Their shape hardly makes sense like a daisy's or a tulip's. They looked designed for disaster. They die untidily.

Their lovely merit is to enjoy rain. For another magic virtue they thrive on neglect. But Peter Barr, presumably along with other enthusiasts, must have been right up against it to make their spring yellowing welcome again. Just how, though?

For local knowledge the question was laid at the feet of members of the Govan Reminiscence Group, a band of 20 or so mature loyalists who meet every week in the town hall for a natter about old times and to swop shared memories.

My Barr inquiries were passed by them from one to another, but gently like precious bulbs.

Maniacal prices were paid for some gems in Peter Barr's time (1826-1911). Around the start of this century yellow-trumpeted King Alfreds fetched #10 a bulb. Cult fans pushed Will Scarlets, with their narrow twisted petals, to nearer #40. Later, daffodilmania priced Fortune varieties at #50 a go. Such blooming business facts I exhumed all by myself. (That was a loamy diversion.)

Eventually, back-to-Barr queries were diverted by his fellow memorists to Jack Simpson, author of three books about Govan. In his History of Govan the Daffodil King reigns for half a page.

Hating the dust and indoor darg that went with his father's trade, Peter Barr ducked out of weaving for fresh-air employment. For a while he worked for a seedsman in the Argyll Arcade, Glasgow. He tried Ireland. After several business ventures, not all successful, he had a flower nursery which was Dutch in its vast dimensions at Covent Garden, London.

But the real adventure lies in his foreign travels. His search for new or forgotten varieties took him even to China. Aged 73, he set out on a world tour that lasted seven years.

Jack Simpson, aged 77, added to the half-page in his Govan history book an example of the sturdy, cussed romance of Barr's achievement. He recalled: ``On one trip through Spain he climbed alone to the top of a 7000ft mountain where he found a daffodil that had not been cultivated for 250 years."

He agreed there must be much more to find out: ``Really, we only know enough about him to remember his name."

Finding out more would be good. Fortunately (for me), Peter Barr has outgrown this allotment of the page, leaving room for a more scholarly attempt. Let it be for some more distant daffodil day, though, because much arduous slog of deep digging is sure to be involved.

Perhaps, when the daffs are out at last would be a suitable time. This year that looks like taking long enough.



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15 hrs ago