

FAMILY HISTORY

*Tracking down the Backhouse daffodils
bred by her ancestors has become a lifetime's
work for Caroline Thomson*

WORDS MATTHEW BIGGS PHOTOGRAPHS JASON INGRAM

In her garden in Fife Caroline Thomson and her husband Andrew have planted out more than 15,000 daffodils and hold the National Collection of Backhouse cultivars. ▶

Narcissus 'CJ Backhouse'

Named by William Backhouse for his son, Charles James. It is large cupped with a narrow, ribbed cup of glowing orange red and an irregularly frilled straight mouth. The floral segments partly overlap and have wavy margins. Mid season.



Twelve years ago, my mother said, 'someone in the family needs to collect Backhouse bulbs and plants, and record their history before they are lost forever,' says Caroline Thomson, founder of the Backhouse Heritage Exhibition & Education Centre based at her home in Fife. "At the time I didn't realise that this would become a lifetime's work for myself and my husband Andrew."

Caroline's mother is Lady Georgina Buchan-Hepburn, a direct descendant of the Quaker Backhouse family, and the plants in need of collecting that have taken over Caroline's life are the famous Backhouse daffodils bred by three generations of Backhouses, starting with William Backhouse (1807-1869).

William was a banker from Darlington whose passion for hybridising daffodils revolutionised daffodil breeding. In 1865 he raised two cultivars, 'Emperor' and 'Empress' that were among the first triploid daffodils (with three sets of chromosomes) to be raised in the UK. This higher chromosome count (normal diploid daffodils have two sets: one male; one female), conferred both greater size and vigour and amazed growers. When William's son Henry first showed these daffodils to the editor of *The Gardener's Chronicle* he almost fell off his seat in amazement. But William's greatest achievement came some years later when he raised the UK's first tetraploid daffodil, with four sets of chromosomes. This

bi-coloured daffodil boasted an impressive 12.5cm- diameter flower atop a 60cm stem. William died in 1869 before he could see the flower from the final-stage of his hybridisation, but when his son Charles saw the daffodil his father had provisionally called 'Weardale' in full bloom he re-named it 'Weardale Perfection'.

Both Henry and Charles continued their father's hybridising work, with Henry raising several new cultivars, including the white 'Niveth', but it was their younger brother Robert Ormston who is most closely associated with the Backhouse cultivars. With his wife, Sarah Elizabeth Dodgson, Robert was responsible for breeding around 57 daffodils, including 'Backhouse's Giant', 'Lune De Miel' and the beautiful double 'Glowing Phoenix' – as well as the famous Backhouse lilies. Sarah (after whom the pink daffodil 'Mrs RO Backhouse' is named) was an outstanding hybridiser in her own right, and a keen breeder of everything from colchicums and hyacinths to Siamese cats, but she is best remembered for raising red-cupped cultivars. When one of these cultivars, 'Dick Wellband', was launched in New York in 1921 it was displayed in a shop window against a black, velvet drape. "Starlets appeared in the same way to advertise their movies," says Caroline. "I believe the daffodil drew larger crowds." Sarah's fame was secured when she won an RHS Bronze Floral Medal in 1905 for a Group of Daffodils and the Daffodil ▷



N. 'Emperor'

Bred by William Backhouse in 1865 and probably a hybrid between *N. bicolor* and *N. pseudonarcissus*. One of the first triploid daffodils, it has greenish-yellow incurving flowers with wavy inner segments and a loosely ribbed, vivid-yellow corona. Mid season.



N. 'Dick Wellband'

A beautiful, large, white-flowered daffodil with an open, bright orange-red cup that was bred by Sarah Elizabeth Backhouse. In 1931 it was given an Award of Merit from the Royal General Bulb Growers Association in the Netherlands. Mid to late season.



N. 'Niveth'

White flowering with two downward-facing milky flowers per stem. Guy L.Wilson, in *The American Daffodil Year Book* for 1937, noted: 'Niveth would be a very charming subject in a small border of choice bulbs, or at the edge of a larger border, or on rock work'. Mid to late season.



N. 'Eagle Rose'

A William Ormston Backhouse introduction with white flowers over 11cm wide displaying a long, pale amber-yellow cup with a broad, deep-pink band at the rim. It was not registered until five years after William's death. Mid season.

N. 'Harrison Weir'

A long-cupped trumpet daffodil with incurving wavy margined flowers and a flared, flanged cup. The bright-yellow cup suffuses into the white flowers which are stained yellow at the base. Mid to late season.



▷ Society's Peter Barr Cup in 1916 for 'services to daffodils' – something unheard of for a woman at the time.

Such stories fascinated Caroline long before her mother suggested preserving the Backhouse daffodils. She had grown up hearing about their history and remembers as a child visiting the home of Robert and Sarah's son William Ormston, a Cambridge-educated geneticist who carried on the family tradition, producing the first Division 1 red trumpet daffodil 'Brer Fox'. "I remember lots of daffodils in his Herefordshire garden, flowering in the lawn and borders," says Caroline. "I feel very honoured to be caring for and developing the work of such a talented man."

Caroline's quest to find the Backhouse daffodils hasn't always been easy. The RHS Daffodil Register lists 956 Backhouse-bred cultivars, but many were lost to eel-worm after the First World War, and several cultivars thought to be Backhouse daffodils turned out not to be true cultivars. Luckily, many have been found, some in family gardens, some have been donated by institutions from around the world. Most, though, have been tracked down thanks to Caroline's determination.

"Andrew and I have driven thousands of miles searching for plants and clues," says Caroline. "We once drove over 500 miles, through the night to collect a true 'Mrs RO Backhouse'. Another time I visited a friend at her new house for a cup of tea and

noticed a true N. 'Niveth' cultivar in the garden and later discovered that the property was once a Backhouse family home."

Today Caroline and Andrew's collection, which in 2016 was awarded National Collection status, contains 84 confirmed Backhouse cultivars that have been planted throughout the gardens – most in neat, labelled, rows in the walled garden – but the couple are still on the lookout for more. "I consult experts and family diaries. I speak to older relatives who have memory of the daffodils and I've collected contemporaneous images and descriptions of those no longer available, to ensure the cultivars are authentically named," says Caroline. "It has taken five years research and growing specimens for comparison to find what I believe to be the true 'Dick Wellband'. I would love to re-discover 'Flaming Sword', 'Lune De Miel' and 'Moonbeam'. They must be out there, somewhere." □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Address Backhouse Heritage & Education Centre, Rossie Estate, Collessie Ladybank, Fife KY15 7UZ. **Tel** 0844 414 5803.

Website backhouserossie.co.uk **Open** 1 April – 30 September, Wednesday – Sunday, 10am-4pm. The garden will host the Scottish Daffodil Festival on 14-15 April 2018, 10am-4pm.

Turn the page for more Backhouse cultivars



N. 'Sunrise'

Bred by Sarah Elizabeth Backhouse before 1901. The white perianth has a suffusion of pale yellow that spreads out from the yellow-red-edged cup. It is excellent for cutting with half-open buds developing their full beauty indoors. Mid to late season.



N. 'Conspicuus'

A dainty William Backhouse introduction, which opens to deep yellow, gradually fading to sulphur, the orange-stained cup is ribbed, with a bright scarlet-orange rim. A robust plant for borders or grass that spreads rapidly and flowers even in crowded clumps. Mid to late season.



N. 'Weardale Perfection'

The first tetraploid cultivar ever bred in the UK; it changed daffodil breeding forever in this country. The additional chromosomes (four sets rather than the more usual two) created a robust, vigorous plant whose features were larger than anything seen before. Mid to late season.



N. 'Monique'

Bred by Sarah Elizabeth Backhouse, this large-cupped daffodil has white flowers with a yellow cup and orange rim. It won an Award of Merit in 1936 and the Forcing Award in 1939 from The Royal General Bulb Growers Association in the Netherlands. Late season.



N. 'Empress'

A beautiful flower, just over 10cm wide, of almost perfect proportions with white petals and a long, bright-yellow cup with a lightly fringed mouth. One of two early triploid daffodils by William Backhouse. It is similar to 'Emperor' but slightly smaller. Mid season.