The rich history of the Daffodil

The nodding yellow or orange trumpets now in your garden or neighbourhood have a rich history - spiritual, military and symbolic.

BY PETER SHIRLEY

Here we are in Lent, hence the old name for daffodils: Lenten lilies. For many they are the first truly spring flower, appearing just after the winter snowdrops and crocuses. There are thousands of cultivars and varieties, but public authorities seem to favour the
largest sorts, their big yellow trumpets festooning road verges, traffic islands and local
green patches. Wordsworth’s ‘Host of golden daffodils’ was the much smaller and less
pretentious wild daffodil.

Being the most abundant and conspicuous flower now it is not surprising that they figure
in many of the season’s traditional activities. They are part of many Easter celebrations,
including the practice of decorating churches and churchyards with daffodils on Palm
Sunday. And they make up many a child’s Mothering Sunday bouquet.

Daffodils are, of course, associated with Wales. This is probably because they are
closely related to, but much more attractive, than an older Welsh symbol, the leek.
Another name for them is Peter’s Leek. The leek’s status was secured during an ancient
battle, when, presumably lacking any sort of uniform, the Welsh soldiers each wore a
leek to distinguish them from the enemy. According to Shakespeare this tradition was
continued at Agincourt, where the Welsh archers wore leeks. Daffodils also
conveniently start to flower round about the 1 March, St David’s Day.

Well known personalities have helped to secure the daffodil’s place in Welsh life. David
Lloyd George, our only Welsh Prime Minister, advocated their use as a national symbol,
and the future King George V wore a daffodil at his investiture as Prince of Wales.
These days the current Prince of Wales, through the Duchy of Cornwall, levies rents of
one daffodil for lands in the Scilly Isles, rather than the more usual ‘peppercorn rent’. He
obviously does not know the old superstition that it is bad luck to give but a single
daffodil. More usefully, daffodils are grown commercially in Wales to provide the drug
galantamine, used to treat Alzheimer’s disease.

Their scientific name of Narcissus comes from the Greek for deep sleep and is related
to the word narcotic. This is because the bulbs contain a toxic alkaloid which gives relief
from pain and induces unconsciousness. It is said that Roman soldiers carried daffodil
bulbs to chew on to mask the pain if they were wounded.
So, those nodding yellow or orange trumpets now in your garden or neighbourhood
have a rich history - spiritual, military and symbolic.