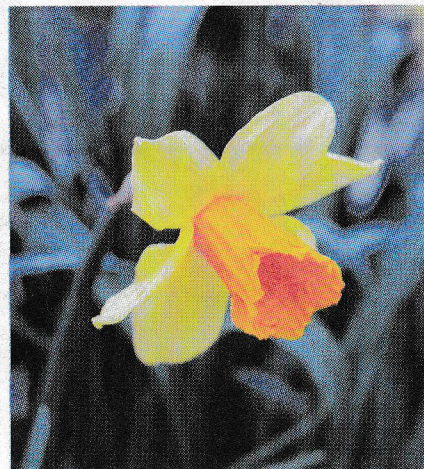


Clockwise from main:  
daffodils outside the  
walled garden; the  
path of cobblestones  
and crushed shells  
through a climber  
tunnel; young  
woodland; the ruin  
of a tomb; Narcissus  
Merkara; Duchess of  
Westminster; Sutton  
Court; a raised bed of  
rock plants





# Daffodils' DNA & broccoli soup

Andrew and Caroline Thomson have a mission to preserve Backhouse Rossie Estate's rich tradition of narcissus and vegetable cultivation

Words **Antoinette Galbraith**  
Photographs **Ray Cox**



he elegant tree-lined drive at Backhouse Rossie Estate in Fife, underplanted with a ribbon of daffodils, gives no clue as to

the rich diversity of plants and garden history in store.

It is not until you reach the newly established heritage centre and café with forgotten Tudor vegetables tucked among the flowers decorating the patio tables, that you begin to understand this estate takes its green legacy seriously.

This is home to Andrew and Caroline Thomson who bought Rossie 14 years ago with the intention of restoring the estate and the 1½-acre walled garden, until a chance remark by Caroline's mother, Lady Georgina Buchan-Hepburn, radically changed their course. Caroline, a sixth generation descendent of the renowned Backhouse family, the Darlington-based ethical banking and botanising family, explains: "My mother said: 'We have so much family history as well as the plants which

caused such a sensation in their day, it would be good if they were preserved together by someone in the family.'"

Although Caroline immediately recognised that she would be the bridge between the older and younger generation, "little did I realise this remark would set the tone for the plants and planting for the next ten years," she says. It also led to a National Plant Collection, a partnership with the RHS and the introduction of the Backhouse Rossie Heritage and Education Centre.

First came the research. Her mother and other family members confirmed that the Backhouse family were responsible for the introduction of a vast range of plants; from heathers, lavender, ferns and orchids to vegetables, including Caroline's ancestor James's Backhouse broccoli, which was used in Charles Darwin's scientific trials. The heritage centre at Rossie displays copies of Darwin's original handwritten notes and the café serves a traditional Backhouse family broccoli soup recipe.

The Backhouses were highly successful daffodil breeders. Their prize-winning blooms bred by successive generations of the family during the 19th and 20th



centuries on their Durham estates caused a sensation at the time. Tall and elegant, some with pink or red tinged trumpets, many of these daffodils are the ancestors of cultivars still widely known today.

Caroline's MA thesis on seed-based plant propagation helped her to embark on extensive research in London and internationally, giving her the necessary scientific background to research bulbs and plants. In her quest to assemble true Backhouse daffodils she travelled to the US to talk at the World Daffodil Conference, visit botanic gardens and meet international heritage daffodil experts. Further research in Australia is planned.

Slowly she assembled an astonishing collection of 89 authentic Backhouse cultivars, with more going through the identification process. Now daffodils with names such as Desert Fox, Merkara, Duchess of Westminster and Conspicuous thrive in the collection beds and are also to be found growing in the grounds. Explaining the importance of the early Backhouse bulbs, Caroline says: "It is their superior characteristics, such as strength and vigour, passed on to

their offspring, which made them such dominating and enduring specimens."

Andrew and Caroline's son, Hamish, is keenly involved in the family project, taking responsibility for photographing the collection and setting up a wedding venue on the estate.

Meanwhile, Caroline has employed the principles that guided her Quaker forebears to restore the Walled Garden organically and sustainably. Herbaceous and rose beds underplanted with daffodils are centred around a striking cobblestone path in the shape of a double helix inlaid with crushed white sea shells. "Andrew and I have joint interests as engineer and artist and our combined initials CGAT are the same as those which form the basis of DNA. This became the starting point for the garden design," says Caroline.

The Victorian glasshouses contain another Backhouse introduction: a collection of tree ferns. Here, Andrew installed a biomass boiler programmed by a computerised system attached to the old Victorian pipework. "Part of our philosophy is to be a self-sustaining unit where possible. Treading lightly is our aim," he says.

The couple gradually planted a spectacular display of 15,000 daffodils in the estate grounds and along the wild walk. These are followed by trilliums, bluebells and, in summer, tall Giant Himalayan lilies, *Cardiocrinum giganteum*. The recently planted nuttall features ten different varieties of cobnuts.

The history of the family and their daffodil breeding is illuminated in the Backhouse Rossie Heritage & Education Centre, a charitable enterprise, set up in the original garage and gardener's bothy. The aim is to provide education, volunteering, arts and heritage opportunities. Caroline is seeking horticultural book donations for this venture.

"The café is a useful place for learning things," she says, adding that one visiting couple recalled seeing fields of daffodils growing in Fife in the 1950s, not just in the Grampians as currently happens. "Ninety per cent of the world's daffodil requirements are met by the UK with the largest producer in Scotland just north of Rossie being Grampian Growers. Scotland's daffodil bulbs are wanted around the world as the cooler climate keeps them healthy."

Andrew and Caroline felt that it was time to celebrate all their work and last year established the inaugural Scottish Daffodil Festival at Rossie, assembling growers and producers from all over Scotland. Following its success, the annual festival is being held on 14 and 15 April.

"We hope people will come and enjoy the weekend, find out why daffodils are important in medicine, where they originate from, and discover the festival café, plus interesting stalls, talks and demonstrations," says Caroline.

"Our aim is for Backhouse Rossie and Scotland – as with the USA and Holland – to become a recognised destination for daffodil tourism."

*Scottish Daffodil Festival, 14-15 April, 10am-4pm. Enjoy the scented daffodil walk with carved bears from a fallen oak for children, nine hole putting, daffodil walk to the Covenanter's hidden woodland tomb, and see Backhouse's National Collection of Narcissus cultivars.*

*Rossie Estate, By Collessie, Near Ladybank, Fife KY15 7UZ, with free parking, [www.backhouserossie.co.uk](http://www.backhouserossie.co.uk)*