February 2026: Daffodils, vicars and piles

Monday, 2nd March was St David's Day (Dydd Gŵyl Dewi), when proud Welsh people everywhere wore a daffodil. Or maybe a leek:

> ***Fluellen***:*… And I do believe, your Majesty takes no scorn to wear the leek Upon Saint Tavy's Day.*
>
> ***King Henry***: *I wear it for a memorable honour,*
> *For I am Welsh, you know, good countryman.*

Shakespeare's play Henry V focusses on Agincourt, but here refers to the 1346 Battle of Crécy when Welsh long bowman fought in a field of leeks under a previous Prince of Wales, by then Edward III. But the leek tradition in Welsh folklore goes back to at least the 7th century when either St David or King Cadwaladr allegedly told Welsh Christian troops to wear leeks so as to be able to identify each other when fighting pagan Saxons. Of course these weren't the massive leeks you get from Asda (and tend to be worn on the modern stage), but rather wild leeks, originally brought by migrants from the Mediterranean in Bronze Age times, and now rare in Wales. Wild leeks are much smaller – looking perhaps more like modern chives with, in summer, a spray of purple flowers.

Daffodils seem to have started replacing leeks in the early twentieth century, a fashion encouraged by David Lloyd George. Nobody seems to know why there was a switch in floral attire, except there are more flowering daffodils around this time of year than flowering wild leeks (and they smell nicer). In Welsh, daffodils are called *cennin Pedr*, Peter's leeks – possibly after St Peter, but nobody is sure and St Peter's day is in July when the daffodils are long gone. There is, though, a tradition that daffodils, symbols of new starts, bloomed at the base of the cross, and Peter was the first (male) to see the risen Christ; and in the 15th century, daffodils were included in some crucifixion paintings.

In English they are sometimes called Lenten lilies (lent originally meant spring, but later referred specifically to Lent), but daffodils are no more lilies than leeks. Their scientific name, *Narcissus*, comes from the Greek νάρκισσος / narkissos, meaning a toxic plant, maybe a lily, based in turn on νάρκη / narke, which means numb, and from which we get the word narcotic. Narcissus, according to the Roman poet Ovid, intoxicated with his own reflection, wasted away, leaving behind only a flower (and, much later, a psychiatric term). Daffodil bulbs are, indeed, toxic if eaten and handling them can cause a skin condition known as 'florist's itch'. I have read that some Victorians wouldn't have cut daffodils in the house as they could induce madness.

Just to make things even more complicated, the English word daffodil only seems to have been around for about 400 years. Before that, they were called affodills; nobody is sure

where that initial 'd' came from. Most books suggest affodile is a corrupted form of asphodel (another group of plants to which daffodils don't belong). Some people claim the word comes from the Old English for 'early comer' – but I can't find the original source for that, and it doesn't fit with any Old English dictionaries (dile or dyle means… dill, the herb… rather than the dog). All this makes it very difficult to know what plant people are talking about in old manuscripts, books and translations.

However, we all know what we mean by daffodil nowadays, and mostly we agree that that whatever people in the past thought, they are cheerful harbingers of spring and full of hope – hence their adoption to the Marie Curie Daffodil Appeal. David Hockney, during covid lockdown in Normandy, published iPad drawings of daffodils, entitled 'Do Remember They Can't Cancel the Spring', while Picasso allegedly said that 'no one has to explain a daffodil... You never have to ask why.'

I suppose the most famous literary reference to daffodils has to be William Wordsworth's poem. I confess, though, that for me, while some lines are clever, some are real duds ('stars that shine/ And twinkle on the milky way'). Even at the time, the poem met a mixed reception and his close friend, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, apparently referred to it as 'that damned thing about daffodils.' The poem isn't really about daffodils, to be fair, but about the memory of seeing them on a blustery walk along Ullswater with his wife, Mary, and sister, Dorothy, a couple of years earlier, while in a bit of a grump. It was Dorothy who pointed out the cheerful daffodils to her brother. In her diary for Thursday, 15th April, 1802, she wrote:

> *It was a threatening misty morning—but mild. We set off after dinner from Eusemere…. The hawthorns are black and green, the birches here and there greenish but there is yet more of purple to be seen on the Twigs. We got over into a field to avoid some cows—people working, a few primroses by the roadside, woodsorrel flower, the anemone, scentless violets, strawberries, and that starry yellow flower which Mrs C. calls pile wort. When we were in the woods beyond Gowbarrow park we saw a few daffodils close to the water side. We fancied that the lake had floated the seeds ashore and that the little colony had so sprung up. But as we went along there were more and yet more and at last under the boughs of the trees, we saw that there was a long belt of them along the shore, about the breadth of a country turnpike road. I never saw daffodils so beautiful they grew among the mossy stones about and about them, some rested their heads upon these stones as on a pillow for weariness and the rest tossed and reeled and danced and seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind that blew upon them over the lake, they looked so gay ever glancing ever changing*

Nowadays, the UK is the world's biggest commercial grower of daffodils, of which there are about thirty species and thousands of varieties. Rev George Engleheart was a vicar, in Appleshaw, Hampshire, who bred over 700 varieties of daffodils, especially after he moved to Clarendon in Wiltshire to set up a daffodil nursery. Known as 'the father of the modern daffodil' he was also a keen archaeologist, particularly of the Roman era, so it's interesting that what we think of as native, wild daffodils (*Narcissus pseudonarcissus*) were probably introduced to Britain by the Romans, who planted them as memorials. We have both wild and cultivars of daffodils in the churchyard. The wild ones are particularly important for

pollinators in spring, as the garden varieties often produce little, or inaccessible, pollen. Of course, hybrids between the wild and garden varieties also arise – although it takes years for daffodils to grow from seeds.



Also in the churchyard are primroses (and garden primulas) and cowslips, both of which have been on and off in flower since the New Year but are really coming on now. As both grow together, and are closely related, we can also see some hybrids of the two, the so-called false oxlips. True oxlips look similar but are very rare and limited to a few places in East Anglia nowadays. Cowslips have their flowers all drooping to one side, whereas the false oxlips have their flowers more evenly distributed around the main stem.

The other yellow flower, just starting to bloom is the lesser celandine, a member of the buttercup family, with bright, shiny sun-like petals. It particularly likes damper areas in the shade, although it doesn't like rain, drops of which make its flowers close up.

'*Coming suddenly round a corner into a glade of silver birch trees Edmund saw the ground covered in all directions with little yellow flowers- celandines*,' wrote C.S. Lewis in the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, a sign of spring and the arrival of Aslan in Narnia.

Wordsworth thought 'humble celandines' his favourite flower, and worthy of three poems.

'There's a flower that shall be mine, 'tis the little celandine'

His memorial plaque, in St Oswald's Chapel in Grasmere, was supposed to have a lesser celandine carved into it, but the sculptor carved a greater celandine by mistake.

Interestingly, the lesser celandine's medicinal uses provide it with the alternative name, mentioned in Dorothy Wordsworth's diary entry, 'that starry yellow flower which Mrs C. calls pile wort.' Nicholas Culpeper, writing in 1653, claimed that '*…the virtue of an herb may be known by its signature; for if you dig up the root of it, you shall perceive the perfect image of the disease they commonly call the piles*.' Whether a poultice of powdered roots really works, I know not.