

Thomas Johnson 1600 – 1644: Son of Selby : "Father of English field Botany"

Johnson was one of a team of 17th century botanists and apothecaries who were the first to systematically describe the native plants of England.



According to now-lost Selby Abbey records, Johnson was baptised in the Abbey on 7th September 1600, but went to London to study as an apothecary. Whilst to modern ears the word 'apothecary' might imply sweetly-smelling bath salts and quack medicines, in Johnson's time, an

apothecary was the most important medical man of the day. A visit to the apothecary then was like 'going to the chemists' is now.

When you go to the chemist (or more properly the pharmacy) today, you describe your symptoms and ask for a cure. The pharmacist might refer to a database and then supply you with pills or potions that are guaranteed to cure. Exactly the same conversation would have been had in the 1630s, only Johnson's "database" was a 1700-page long book called a "Herball", and he would have mixed all the necessary ingredients in the shop before presenting you with the 'medicine'. Only an trained apothecary knew the right herbs to use to cure all ills, and only an apothecary had the skill to blend and apply them correctly.

One of Johnson's claims to fame is his production, in 1633, of the most comprehensive and systematic Herball of the time.

Early life

Although it is now almost four centuries ago, we do know a little of Johnson's life before publication of the Herball.

His family seems to have come from the Driffield area. From an early age as he undertook expeditions to find what plants lived in certain environments. In one of his plant-hunting trips in 1626, he discovered clumps of a valuable plant called throatwort growing on the banks of the Ouse near Selby, as recorded in his introduction to the Herball .

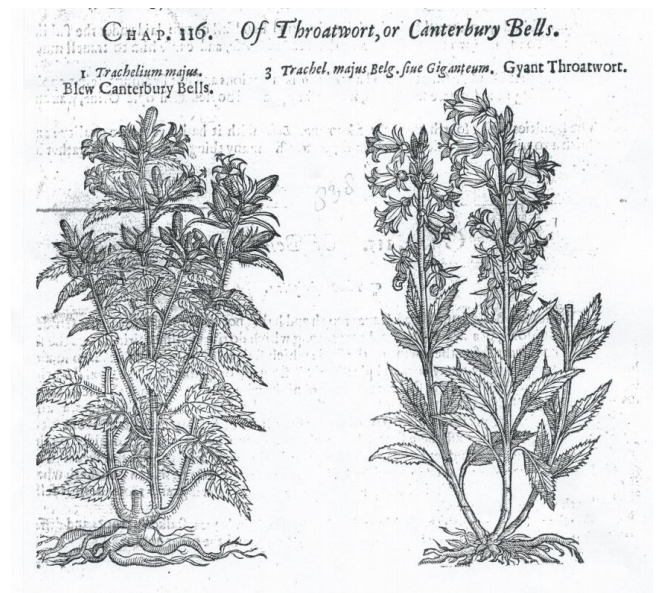
‡ 3 The third was kept by our Author in his Garden, as it is also at this day preserved in the Garden of Mr Parkinson: yet in the yeere 1626, I found it in great plenty growing wilde vpon the bankes of the Riuer Ouse in Yorkefhire, as I went from Yorke to visite Selby the place whereas I was borne, being ten miles from thence. ‡

It was valuable because a preparation from this plant was used to ease sore throats and coughs.

The flower is shaped like a bell - hence its common name of "Bellflower", and the name of the pub in Selby pictured above. Johnson's own woodcut image of the flower is to the left. It is related to the much more well-known plant, 'Canterbury Bells'. This guide does not recommend that you use any part of the flower to cure your ills!

Work in London

By the late 1620s, Johnson had moved to London, and become apprenticed to the Society of Apothecaries, and had a shop in Snow Hill, London, at the centre of the City of London, right next to the Old Bailey, St. Paul's and the spice-trading markets. The herbals he had to work with were inconsistent, often written entirely in Latin, and mixed what was considered scientific fact with old wives tales. Johnson set out to produce a much more systematic herbal, written in English.



He based his work on the 1596 herbal of John Gerard and undertook expeditions throughout England and Wales to improve the information. In the course of his travels he described the growing environments of around 1000 plants, many being so portrayed for the first time. The first edition was published in 1633, and proved so popular that a second edition came out in 1636. Selby Abbey proudly has a copy of that 1633 first edition. It is a real monster of a book – with over 1700 pages and more than 2000 engravings. The scientific importance lies in the fact that the contents is laid out systematically, the work of other contributing botanists is acknowledged and as much detail as possible is based on first-hand experience of collection and usage of the plants concerned.

For these ground-breaking botanical studies, Johnson is sometimes referred to as 'The Father of British Botany', and working with colleagues he continued his scientific classification of plants, leading to a 'Phytologica Britannica', or list of all native plants, being published in 1650, six years after Johnson's death.

Further claims to fame

Such a legacy might be sufficient to go down in history, but Johnson has two further claims to fame.

Bananas

As an apothecary, he would always be interested in arrivals of novel plants, herbs and spices 'from the Indies'. His house was close to the wharves at Blackfriars and he would regularly inspect new cargoes. In April 1633, one ship bringing spice back from Bermuda had some strange yellow fruit shaped, as Johnson put it "*like a giant beane*"(sic)

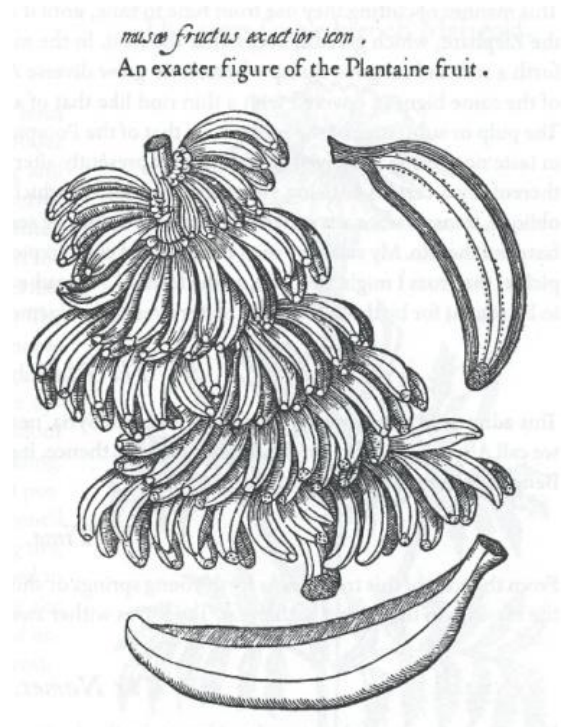
These were a form of banana, and Johnson records that he had them on sale in his shop in April. However, Londoners didn't take to them as they were still on display at the end of June!

Thus Johnson can be celebrated as the first man to sell bananas in England, although a closer study of his description means that they were more likely to be what we would today call plantains.

A soldier for the king

Johnson was also involved in the politics of the time. The 1640s were the time of the English Civil War. Johnson was a royalist, and London was for Parliament, so in 1643 he left the capital and joined King Charles at Oxford. There the King created him a 'Doctor of Physic' and he became a Lieutenant Colonel in his army. He spent most of the Civil War taking a leading part in the defence of the strategically-important Basing House, near Basingstoke, which was besieged by Parliamentary forces for many months. Whilst leading a sortie to try to break the siege in 1644, Johnson's men were caught in an ambush, he was shot in the shoulder and died of his wounds a fortnight later.

At a time when there was much ill feeling between the two sides, Johnson's greatness was reflected in the fact that both sides marked the passing of a learned and civilised man with sorrow. Fittingly, although he is not buried in a marked grave, his final resting place is with his men in what was the orchard of Basing House.





Notices concerning Johnson at Basing House (courtesy Hants CC) and the former orchard at Basing that contains his grave.

Johnson also has a species of lily, *Johnsonia* named after him, Johnson Street in Selby is named in his honour as were Science labs at Selby Abbey school in the 1930s.

Canon Solloway of Selby Abbey, writing in 1929, deemed him "a worthy Yorkshireman" - an epithet that would surely find resonance with residents of the 'Broad Acres'.

So, when a Gardener's Question Time expert talks about English plants, or you take a herbal remedy, or even when you eat a banana, think of that 'worthy Yorkshireman', Selebian Thomas Johnson.

Pain

The pleasure of walking among garden herbs and flowers was known to refresh the senses, but herbalists and physicians took things further by using plants to cure various illnesses. Perhaps the most famous Royalist soldier to lose his life at Basing was Dr Thomas Johnson, a London apothecary and the best herbalist of his day.

In 1633 Johnson had revised Gerard's famous book *The Herbal*, giving a description of plants, where they could be found and any medicinal properties they possessed. He also translated the surgical works of Paré, and the passages on the treatment of gunshot wounds must have been particularly relevant during his time at Basing, although he was unable to save his own life when wounded in the shoulder.

Shepherd's Purse
stays all bleeding

Ditanny
prevaileth much against all wounds

Solomon's Seale root
takes away bruises

Water hemp leaves
staunches wounds

Thyme, Basil and Feverfew
For soothing the troubled mind

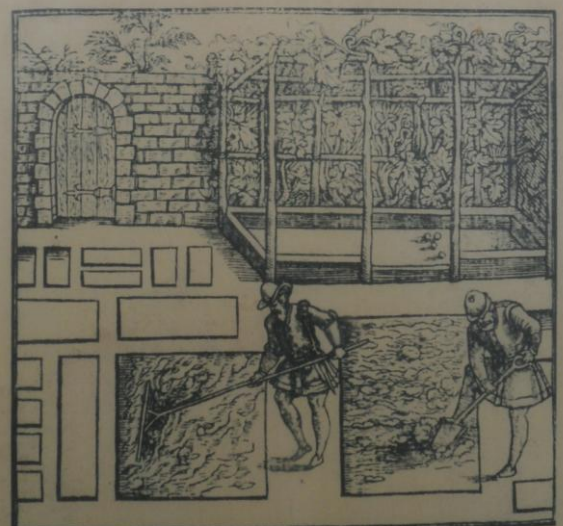
Strawberry juice and white wine
The most popular pick-me-up



Graves in the garden



Thomas Johnson, England's leading botanist, was killed here in 1644 while fighting for the Royalists. He was buried in the orchard to your left, along with many of his compatriots.



Taking it further

There are two biographies of Johnson :

Kew and Powell "Thomas Johnson : Botanist and Royalist" published 1932, long out of print but available at York University or via the British Library.

Lewis : "Thomas Johnson : Adventurer, Apothecary and Civil War Hero" : a 2013 updating of Kew and Powell's work, with colour images, maps and contemporary extracts, available in Selby library.

Selby Abbey has a copy of Johnson's 1633 edition of Gerard's 'Herball'

Selby Library also has a copy of Olivander and Thomas' "Gerard's Herbal : The General Historie of Plants", a selected reprint from 2008 of some of the more 'interesting' parts of the Herball. Their website is www.velluminous.com

Schribner's Complete Dictionary of Scientific Biography, has an account of his life from 1790 at

http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=4EECAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

The Society of Apothecaries' website is www.apothecaries.org . The archive department at the Society have been hugely helpful in supplying information about Johnson's life and times

Descriptions and maps of Johnson's plant-hunting expeditions, including the tale of Mr. Duck's sea-serpent, can be found in J.S.L. Gilmore's 1972 book "Thomas Johnson. Botanical Journeys in Kent and Hampstead"

The Viz character "Tommy Johnson and his big banana" is clearly based on our man!

Jane Borodale's novel "The Knot" is based on the life and times of early 17th century apothecaries.

Basing House is open for visitors, the site of the orchard can be visited and there are many displays concerning Johnson. The website is www.basinghouse.org.uk.

Several descriptions of the siege of Basing House can be found via Wikipedia.

