

Birthwort at Godstow, 2003-2013, and as featured in a 17th-century poem set in Oxford

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Summary

A brief account is given of the occurrence of Birthwort (*Aristolochia clematitis*), as monitored between 2003 and 2013, at the site of the ruins of Godstow Abbey near Oxford. In addition, a 17th-century link between Birthwort and Oxford is described in a didactic poem by Abraham Cowley (1618-1667), written in Latin, entitled *Plantarum Libri Sex* ('Six Books of Plants'). Part of this long poem (Book II) features Birthwort as one of several personified medicinal herbs that assemble within the Oxford Botanic Garden one night to hold a debate, during which each herb recommends its own merits for relieving the particular medical afflictions of women.

Introduction

For a period of ten years (2003-2013), I was responsible for monitoring the occurrence of Birthwort (*Aristolochia clematitis*) at the site of the ruins of the nunnery at Godstow, near Oxford. This monitoring work was carried out for the Rare Plants Group (now known as the Oxfordshire Flora Group), which is associated with the Ashmolean Natural History Society of Oxfordshire. In this article an overview is presented of my observations on the occurrence of Birthwort at Godstow. In addition, an account is given of how Birthwort features in a 17th-century work of literature which is set in the Oxford Botanic Garden, namely Book II of *Plantarum Libri Sex* ('Six Books of Plants') by the English poet Abraham Cowley (1618-1667).

Birthwort in Britain

Birthwort is not a native species in the British Isles. It was introduced from Continental Europe, at some time in the Middle Ages, as a plant for medicinal purposes. The active substance was derived from its rhizomes (i.e. swollen roots). It was grown in medieval herb gardens, especially those of monastic establishments. Birthwort is described in the *New Atlas of the British and Irish Flora* (Preston et al. 2002) as 'a scrambling or trailing perennial herb found as an escape or relic of cultivation in waste and rough places, often by old abbeys or nunneries, and in churchyards, woods and on grassy banks. It spreads by rhizomes [...]. This species was grown for its medicinal properties. The date of introduction is unknown, but it was recorded in the wild from Cambridgeshire in 1685. It is now rarely cultivated, and is gradually declining'. While it is widely naturalized in many parts of Continental Europe, Birthwort has a limited distribution in the British Isles: it is to be found at about 15 sites in Lowland England, and one in South Wales. According to *The Flora of Oxfordshire* (Killick et al., 1998), Birthwort was first recorded in the county in 1794, but it is said to be 'now no longer plentiful at Godstow Nunnery'.

Birthwort was used during the Middle Ages and Early Modern period as an herbal remedy, mainly to aid women in childbirth. It was also used to induce abortions. This medicinal use of Birthwort was connected with the supposed morphological resemblance between its funnel-shaped yellow flowers and the human uterus. Although this is clearly a fanciful connection, Birthwort certainly does have pharmacological properties, and these were already well recognized by the Ancient

Greeks and Romans (Scarborough 2001) and by Arab physicians of the medieval period. (It is now known, however, that Birthwort can be extremely toxic, and its use as herbal treatment may lead to kidney failure.) A description of several varieties of Birthwort and an account of its 'Virtues' as a medicinal herb are given by John Gerard in *The herball, or Generall Historie of plantes* (first published in 1597).

Birthwort at Godstow, 2003-2013

Birthwort was found to grow among the ruins of Godstow Abbey near Oxford and monitoring was begun by the Rare Plants Group of the Ashmolean Natural History Society of Oxfordshire in 1996. Godstow is situated about 4 km to the north of the city of Oxford. The Abbey was built in the 12th century for Benedictine nuns; it was dissolved in 1539, as part of the nation-wide Dissolution of the Monasteries instigated by Henry VIII. The Abbey precincts consisted of an inner and outer court, with various buildings within its walls. Although these buildings have all disappeared, parts of the walls around the former courts, and around one former chapel, are still standing.

Birthwort must have been planted in a herb garden within the Abbey precincts, and has evidently continued to grow on the site ever since. Some years ago, Birthwort was growing in the open space within the Abbey near the former well. A shoot of Birthwort at this spot is shown in a photograph in Richard Mabey's *Flora Britannica* (1996), but 1996 was the last year in which Birthwort could be seen growing at this precise location. Since then Birthwort has been observed growing alongside the medieval drainage ditch that runs westwards along the southern boundary of the Abbey. More recently, since 2011, I have observed Birthwort growing along a stretch of ground immediately to the north of this ditch, and alongside part of the nearby surviving wall running east-west across the site of the former Abbey. In addition, in 2011, I have seen Birthwort growing on a roadside, next to a garden hedge, in the village of Wytham, about 1 km to the west of the site of Godstow Abbey.



Figure 1. The author (wearing hat) with her assistant, Caroline van Gelder, monitoring Birthwort at the site of Godstow Abbey, August 2006. Photo: by Jan Dijk.

Between 2003 and 2013 I visited the site of Godstow Abbey, usually two or three times a year, and mostly during the summer months, to monitor the occurrence and distribution of Birthwort. As Birthwort is an herbaceous plant, it is only clearly visible during late spring, summer and early autumn. On each occasion when I visited the site, the number of individual shoots of Birthwort was counted, and the number of shoots that were in flower was noted. Previously, between 1997 and 2002, the maximum number of shoots counted varied between 139 and 175. From 2003 to 2013, larger numbers of shoots were counted each year, especially from 2005 onwards. In August 2012 there were a total number of 535 shoots, the largest number ever recorded between 1996 and 2013. The counting of shoots was not always easy, as the Birthwort plants were often growing among hawthorn scrub and clumps of stinging nettles. Moreover, some of the shoots had occasionally been nibbled, presumably by cattle, when livestock had been put out to graze at the site. All figures for the numbers of shoots counted are therefore a conservative estimate, and the actual number of shoots present was probably somewhat higher. While the number of shoots may indicate the success of the proliferation of Birthwort at Godstow, it should be remembered that the plant spreads by means of rhizomes, so there may be only one extensive plant at the site, or perhaps several individual plants.



Figure 2. A shoot of Birthwort in bloom alongside the ditch at the site of Godstow Abbey, June 2011. Photo by Sheila Ottway.



Figure 3. Birthwort in bloom (in foreground) growing close to the E-W running wall at the site of Godstow Abbey, June 2011. Photo by Sheila Ottway.

Since 1997, Birthwort at Godstow has flowered during the months of June, July and August. Very occasionally, some of these flowers developed green fruits during the later part of the summer. This was observed during the years 2011 (one fruit) and 2013 (three fruits). It is possible that the general trend of warmer summers during the past few decades has been responsible firstly for the wider distribution of Birthwort (originally a plant native to the Mediterranean region) at Godstow, and secondly for the formation of fruits on several of the plants in recent years.



Figure 4. Birthwort (at bottom of hedge) growing on a roadside in Wytham (Oxfordshire), June 2011. Photo by Sheila Ottway.



Figure 5. Alongside the ditch at the site of Godstow Abbey: a shoot of Birthwort bearing a well-formed fruit (c. 2.5 cm in diameter) as well as two small, shrivelled, undeveloped ones, August 2013. Photo by Sheila Ottway.

Birthwort as featured in Abraham Cowley's *Plantarum Libri Sex*

In 2003 I was completing a Master's Degree in Garden History at the University of Bristol, with the final task of writing a dissertation on John Evelyn (1620-1706) and his connections with European Gardening. In the course of my research for this dissertation, I became aware of the friendship and shared interest in gardening and botany between John Evelyn and the poet and essayist Abraham Cowley. Nowadays, Cowley is best known as a poet who wrote in English, but like many other poets of the 17th century, he also wrote works in Latin. I was fascinated to find out that Cowley had composed a long poem in Latin verse about various kinds of plants, including Birthwort, entitled *Plantarum Libri Sex* ('Six Books of Plants') (also known as *De Plantis libri sex*, 'Six Books on Plants'). This is apparently the longest Neo-Latin poem written by an English poet, with a total of 7104 lines. It is a work that was admired by John Evelyn. Part of the work (Books I and II) was published in 1662, during Cowley's lifetime, under the title *A. Couleii Plantarum libri duo* ('A. Cowley's Two Books of Plants'). The work in its entirety, i.e. all six 'books' of plants, was published in 1668, the year after Cowley's death. It was not long before an English verse translation appeared in print: Cowley's *Six Books of Plants* was first published in 1669. The translation was made by several different authors, including Nahum Tate. As many as five editions of this translation had been published by 1795.

Cowley's *Plantarum Libri Sex* is essentially a literary work, in which the author displays his poetic and linguistic virtuosity, and his ability to write in the style of classical authors such as Ovid, Horace and Virgil. At the same time, it provides insight into 17th-century ideas on mankind's relationship with the natural world, in particular with plants, as part of a universal divine order. Each of the six so-called books ('chapters' or 'cantos' might be a more appropriate word today) of the *Plantarum* consists of several hundred lines of verse. Books I and II have to do with medicinal herbs, Books III and IV with garden flowers, and Books V and VI with trees. We are concerned here with Book II, in which Birthwort makes its appearance, interestingly in an Oxford setting. The translator of this book or part of the poem is simply referred to by his or her initials, 'J.O'. Perhaps this was the poet John Oldham (1653-1683).

Abraham Cowley studied physic, or medicine, and he would therefore have had a detailed knowledge of the healing power of plants. In 1637 he became a scholar at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he was made a minor fellow in 1640. In 1643 Cowley was ejected from Cambridge, on account of his Royalist leanings, and he then made his way to Oxford, where he lived for at least a year. After the Battle of Marston Moor (1644), Cowley fled to Paris, with Queen Henrietta Maria, and he remained in royal service there for some 10 years. In 1654 he returned to live in England, and in 1657 he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Physic at Oxford. According to the latest edition of the *Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), it was at this time that he seems to have gathered the materials for the *Plantarum Libri Sex*. In the late 1650s Cowley fled to Paris; he subsequently returned to England after the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660. In 1665 he retired to a house in Chertsey, where he lived until his death in 1667.

The poem of Book II of the *Plantarum* is in the form of an imaginary debate between different kinds of medicinal herbs, including Birthwort, that are personified as female creatures with the ability to speak. The debate is held on a moonlit night in Spring in the Oxford Botanic Garden (at that time known as the Oxford Physic Garden). The following quotations are all from the English translation of Cowley's poem, made by 'J.O.', and all line references are to this translation.

*'Twas midnight' (whilst the moon, at full, shone bright
And her cheeks seem'd to swell with moisten'd light)
When on their loosen'd roots the Plants that grow
In the Oxford Gardens did to Council go
(...)
They met upon a bed, neat, smooth and round,
And softly sat in order on the ground* [lines 55-62]

The plants that have gathered together at this 'Council' are all medicinal herbs that are used for treating ailments suffered specifically by women. One herb, Mugwort (*Artemisia*), acts as president of the council, and the different herbs each speak of their powers of healing, so that one may be chosen as the most eminent. Ten herbs speak in turn, each one declaring her effectiveness in curing or relieving the particular afflictions of women. These herbs are named in the poem as Mugwort (*Artemisia*), Penny-royal (*Pulegium*), Dittany (*Dictamnus*), Plantain or Way-bred (*Plantago*), the Rose (*Rosa*), Laurel (*Laurus*), Birth-wort (*Aristolochia*), the Mastick-tree (*Lentiscus*), Savin (*Sabina*), and Myrrh (*Myrrha*). (All of these Latin names are those given by Cowley in the Latin version of the poem.) In 114 lines of verse (lines 613-726), Birthwort describes her own specific virtues as a herbal remedy for women in childbirth, calling herself 'patroness of the womb'. She also states that she is useful in 'pulling darts from deepest wounds' and that her berries are poisonous to fish. Birthwort emphasizes that while she and the other herbs present aid women in giving birth, the actual process of generation is controlled by God:

*'Tis true, both I and you, my Sisters, share
In this great work, and humble Handmaids are,
But God (you know) performs the chiefest part;
This work is fit for the Almighty Art.
He to the growing Embryo bids the womb
Extend, and bids the Limbs for that make room.
He parts the meeting Rocks, and with his hand
They gently forth at open order stand.* [lines 699-706]

These lines highlight the miracle of the process of childbirth, for which, of course, God, as the creator of all things, is held to be responsible. Birthwort plays her part, being herself created by God, specifically in helping women in labour. The poem concludes without any final resolution of the debate between the herbs: while the plant Myrrh is speaking, she is interrupted at the crack of dawn by the sudden appearance in the Garden of a human being, named Robert. A footnote in the English translation of the poem explains that this is 'The name of the gardener of the Physic-garden in Oxford'. This 'Robert' may be a corruption of the name Bobart, as Jacob Bobart the Elder was *Horti Praefectus* (Keeper or Superintendent) of the Oxford Physic Garden between 1642 and 1679. In the poem, the reason why Robert the gardener comes into the Garden at such an early hour is because his wife has suddenly been awoken by the pangs of childbirth, and consequently he

*Came hither Sowbread, all in haste to gather,
That he with greater ease might prove a father.* [lines 1238-1239]

So one of the herbs, Sowbread (evidently a species of *Cyclamen*) turns out to be the best remedy for the woman who is about to give birth. As for the other herbs, including Birthwort:

*Without tumultuous noise away they fled
And every plant crept to her proper bed.* [lines 1244-1245]

This is the end of Book II of Cowley's *Plantarum Libri Sex*. However fanciful the poem may seem to a modern reader, with its portrayal of plants as animate female creatures capable of partaking in a debate, this literary conceit allows the poet to engage in a discussion of contemporary ideas about menstruation, conception, gestation, parturition, and lactation, and of the part played by various herbs in regulating these natural processes. For a more detailed discussion of these ideas in a literary context, with specific reference to links between Books I and II of Cowley's poem and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, see a recent article by the Neo-Latin scholar Victoria Moul (2015).

Birthwort in the Oxford Physic Garden in the 17th century

In connection with the appearance of Birthwort as a 'character' in Cowley's poetic work, *the Plantarum Libri Sex*, one might wonder to what extent Cowley was influenced by his personal experience of plants growing in the Oxford Physic Garden. This Garden had been founded in 1621, although systematic planting did not take place until the 1640s (Harris 2017). As mentioned above, we know that Cowley was in Oxford for some time between 1643 and 1644, and later in the mid-1650s. As he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Physic in 1657, we may infer that Cowley was closely familiar with the Oxford Physic Garden in the mid-1650s. Birthwort was certainly one of the plants grown in the Oxford Physic Garden in the 17th century, as it is listed in each of the three 17th-century catalogues.

In the earliest of these, the *Catalogus plantarum horti medici Oxoniensis*, which is anonymous but is thought to have been compiled by Jacob Bobart the Elder, one kind of Birthwort is listed, namely as '*Aristolochia Saracenicica*' in Latin, and as 'Saracens Birthwort' in English. In the second catalogue (compiled by Philip Stephens and William Browne), entitled *Catalogus horti botanici Oxoniensis alphabetice digestus* (1658), two kinds of Birthwort are listed, namely '*Aristolochia saracenicica*' ('Saracens Birthwort') and '*Aristolochia Clematitica*' ('climbing or running Birthwort'). In the third catalogue (compiled by Jacob Bobart the Younger), produced in 1676 but never published, these same two sorts of Birthwort are listed (personal communication, Stephen Harris and Serena Marner 2018). However, from close inspection of specimens of these two sorts of Birthwort as preserved in the Herbaria of the Oxford Botanic Garden (kindly carried out by Professor Stephen Harris), these two specimens are in fact the same species, namely the plant that is now referred to as *Aristolochia clematitica*. The listing of the different names for Birthwort in the three 17th-century catalogues as compared with names for Birthwort in the collections of specimens in the Herbaria of the University of Oxford is given in a recent publication by Professor Harris (Harris 2018).

One wonders, why two kinds of Birthwort were distinguished in the catalogues for the Oxford Physic Garden produced in 1658 and 1676. There may well have been some morphological variation in the different plants in the Oxford Physic Garden, which could have led to the listing of two different sorts of Birthwort. (I hesitate to use the word 'species' for the Early Modern period, although this is what is really meant here.) The listing of two kinds of Birthwort in the two later 17th-century catalogues could have been prompted by the description of several different kinds of Birthwort in well known Herbals of the period, such as Gerard's *Herbal*, first published in 1597. In the 1636 edition of this work (now available online) there is a chapter entitled 'Of Birthworts' (Book 2, Chapter 311), describing six different kinds of Birthwort, including five from Europe and one from North America. Each of these different kinds of Birthwort is illustrated in drawings reproduced as woodcuts. Of the five European kinds of Birthwort described, one is called Saracens Birthwort, and another Winding or Climbing Birthwort.

Birthwort was clearly a plant that was thought to be worthy of inclusion in the Oxford Physic Garden when it was first planted there in the 1640s. The original plant in the Garden may well have been collected at Godstow, although there is no evidence for this. Whether or not this was the case, the longstanding survival of Birthwort at Godstow and the listing of Birthwort in all three of the 17th-century catalogues for the Oxford Physic Garden indicate that Birthwort is a plant that has had a special connection with Oxford and its immediate surroundings for several hundred years.

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