In these days of increasing commercialism in retail plant sales, with an often-associated reduction of availability or choice of cultivars, my plea is for seriousness to be given to the conservation of garden plants in general and the daffodil specifically.

Conservation is not easy; plants are ephemeral things, easily disappearing almost overnight, due to causes such as pest or disease attack. The rapidity with which cultivars come and go is perhaps more evident in *Narcissus* than any other genus, and the loss of those that form important links in the conservation chain, which may not be felt immediately, will certainly be felt in years to come.

So why am I expressing these concerns? The answer is very simple: I am a direct descendant of the Backhouse family, and three generations of my Quaker forebears introduced 956 daffodil cultivars over 100 years from around the mid 1800s to the mid 1900s. However, the *RHS Plant Finder 2015* shows only thirteen Backhouse-bred daffodil cultivars remaining in commerce today. Sadly, daffodils, like many other bulbs which fail to do well in the catalogue lists, become relegated to the ‘briar patch’, and many cultivars were lost to time decades ago. They might still be growing happily somewhere, but they risk never being recaptured and authentically re-identified.

It was my mother who first raised conservation concerns, during renovation in 2008 of our walled garden at the Rossie Estate in Fife, suggesting that someone from the family should collect the remaining plants bred or introduced by her Backhouse forebears, record the family
The Backhouse Centre

history and gather together associated family ephemera. Hence ‘The Backhouse Centre – Living Heritage’ came into being. The daffodils my husband Andrew and I now collect, conserve and celebrate were raised by William Backhouse (1807–1869), his son and daughter-in-law Robert Ormston Backhouse (1854–1940) and Sarah Elizabeth Dodgson (1857–1921), and their son William Ormston Backhouse (1885–1962). Much has been written about the significance of their achievements, notably by Michael Jefferson-Brown (1951), Jan Dalton (2010) and David Willis (2012). The following concise outline touches on an alternative perspective, with a brief insight into my Quaker ancestors’ personalities and their daffodil hybridizing work, using some examples from family papers.

William Backhouse

William Backhouse born in 1779 was a botanist of some note, but it was his son William born in 1807 who was the first of the Backhouse daffodil-breeding dynasty. Among the many cultivars that the younger William introduced, three are of particular importance: ‘Emperor’ and ‘Empress’ were two of the first triploid daffodil cultivars raised in this country (21 chromosomes) and ‘Weardale Perfection’ was the first known tetraploid cultivar (28 chromosomes). William would not have known the words ‘chromosome’, ‘triploid’ or ‘tetraploid’, because the underlying science remained undiscovered. However, he consciously isolated better plants by selecting them for their strength and vigour.

Entries in a diary kept by William’s niece Mary Backhouse mention a remote house in Westmorland that was occasionally used by the family; thousands of wild daffodils grow across the area. We know from William’s work and hobbies that he was a detailed, observant and persistent man, who often hunted for plants with his first cousin James Backhouse of the James Backhouse & Son Nursery, a knowledgeable plantsman and respected botanist. It seems very likely that William was equipped with the personality and skills to persist in his search for bigger and better specimens, including those in the sea of daffodils in Westmorland, to use in his hybridizing and make significant steps forward. His contribution was recognised by the RHS when they named a section of daffodils ‘Section Backhousei’. Modern daffodils with the lineage of ‘Emperor’ and ‘Empress’ in their pedigree still dominate divisions 1 and 2 and are strongly present in division 3, as evident in the *International Daffodil Register and Classified List* (2008). There has long been a debate about their parentage, indeed there is a letter from renowned daffodil breeder WFM Copeland to William’s daughter-in-law in 1901 asking her this very question. (The Copeland family archives hold no letter of reply). However, it is generally accepted that the account in *The Floral Magazine* of 1869 by William’s cousin James Backhouse is correct and the parentage was *Narcissus bicolor* and *N. pseudonarcissus* (Backhouse & Son, 1869). We are now able to determine that William succeeded in increasing their chromosome count from diploid (only 14 chromosomes) to triploid (21).

William Backhouse’s greatest daffodil legacy, although now superseded by its children and grandchildren, was ‘Weardale Perfection’, the
tetraploid cultivar, its bicoloured flower more than 130mm (5in) in diameter and its stem at least 60cm (2ft) tall. William named it ‘Weardale’ but when his son C.J. Backhouse saw the flower he called it ‘Weardale Perfection’ – lost to time, it has recently been reclaimed and I believe now grows in some of the gardens in Weardale.

Robert Ormston Backhouse
Robert Ormston Backhouse, the third son of William Backhouse was born in 1854 and continued in the daffodil-raising tradition. Robert met his future wife Sarah Elizabeth Dodgson at a Quaker meeting during the period he worked in the Stockton-on-Tees branch of the family bank. They married in 1884 and removed to Brighton, then two years later moved to a house near Robert’s cousins in Herefordshire. As the couple’s daffodil hybridizing and bulb business increased, the cousins, who employed a full staff in the house and garden, began to care for rows of Backhouse seedlings in their walled garden (sadly all gone). They took a great interest in the daffodils, walking up and down the rows with Robert and his young cousin – my mother, Lady Georgina Buchan-Hepburn. Their garden opened in spring for the daffodils but the Backhouses’ own garden remained private (and still is). Robert was the first in the family to pursue the creation of a division 1 daffodil with a red trumpet; in his diary, he calls his attempts his ‘7/8ths’. His son WO Backhouse mentions that he later used these seedlings in his own breeding programme. Robert continued to hybridize daffodils (and lilies) after his wife died in 1921, registering his last success, ‘Backhouse’s Giant’, not long before he himself died in 1940.

Robert’s brothers C J Backhouse and Henry Backhouse also raised daffodils, the latter best known for his Narcissus triandrus ‘Niveth’.

Mrs RO Backhouse
Sarah Elizabeth Dodgson was born in 1857. She was descended from an old Quaker family with roots in Cumberland and a connection to Swarthmore Hall, the home of Margaret Fell and George Fox, who were considered to be the mother and father of Quakerism.

After her marriage to Robert, the couple visited William Backhouse at his home in Weardale regularly and Sarah began to use her father-in-law’s seedlings in her own daffodil...
hybridizing. The names Sarah gave to her registered cultivars offer insight into family, people and places important to her and evidence her Quaker values. They also indicate she was well read, with considered opinions on politics and the social problems of the day. Her knowledge of George Fox's Quaker Journal (Penney, 1911), which talks of sowing seeds in people's souls, is indicated in her naming of 'Flaming Sword' – ‘Now was I come up in a spirit through the flaming sword into the paradise of God . . . ’ are the words of George Fox. 'Brighter London' is after Jacob Bright, born into a Quaker family, a Liberal MP considered an ‘advanced radical’, a peace campaigner, Chartist supporter and supporter of women’s suffrage. ‘Ghandi’ is for Mahatma Ghandi, preeminent leader of Indian independence through non-violent civil disobedience, who raised awareness of oppressive practices. Sarah's involvement in hybridizing and naming her daffodils was a very natural way for her to share her hopes. It is perhaps fitting she was known for her fiery red-cupped daffodils, a possible reflection of her inner passion for social change. The names of some of her daffodils, whether consciously or subconsciously, often carry this same sentiment of sowing seeds for inner change.

Sarah amazed the daffodil fraternity with her flowers with scarlet and scarlet-orange cups in divisions 2 and 3, such as ‘Hades’, ‘Scarlet Leader’ and the colour burst of ‘Sunrise’. She achieved national fame, gaining an award from the RHS in 1901 for ‘Moonbeam’, a Bronze Medal in 1905 and the Society's Peter Barr Memorial Cup in 1916. The Reverend Engleheart, himself a giant in the daffodil world, wrote in a memorandum on her death that it was possible for people to discern in her work 'the vast difference between talent and genius' (Engleheart, 1921). Sarah is still remembered through her namesake daffodil ‘Mrs R.O. Backhouse’, the most widely known and grown pink daffodil for over 90 years.

William Ormston Backhouse
William Ormston Backhouse was the only child of Sarah and Robert Backhouse, born in 1885. He too continued in the daffodil breeding tradition set by William Backhouse, his grandfather. He was a trained geneticist, qualifying from Cambridge University, working first at the Cambridge Plant Breeding Station for five years then at the John Innes Institute. During this period his parents sent daffodil bulbs that formed the basis of his early hybridizing work. In 1921 he departed for South America to become the Agricultural Advisor for the Argentine Railway. On a move to Patagonia, he set up improved methods of large-scale apiculture and fruit growing, then, returning to his former position, he raised a new variety of rust- and disease-resistant wheat, ‘MA38’.

It was not until returning to England in 1947 that William Ormston began his hybridizing work in earnest, initially using his parent's hybrid crosses and particularly his father's red-trumpet seedlings (his 7/8ths). We can see in the small notes on Mendelian theory left between the pages of his diary that he was considering the transmission of elements governing heritable traits in his own plants. He was well placed to
carry out extensive pioneering work in raising a division 1 red trumpet, a colour break in this kind of daffodil for which many breeders had tried but more often than not without success. William Ormston on the other hand was very successful, and he registered several of these uniquely coloured trumpet daffodils. ‘Brer Fox’ was first shown at the RHS London Show in 1965, attracting much attention and priced at £400 for 3–4 bulbs. ‘Sutton Court’, ‘Red Curtain’ and ‘Desert Fox’ have a similar depth of pigmentation in the trumpet, with no colour bleed into the perianth segments. These cultivars grow well with us in very free-draining soil, retaining their colour until the last days of flowering.

William Ormston died in 1962. People say he had bright blue eyes which missed nothing. As a child I remember visiting him with my grandmother, which was enjoyable and then as for most children became – boring! He was kind enough to notice and suggested playing outside. As an adult I feel very privileged to be caring for the legacy of this talented man.

Collecting and identifying Backhouse daffodils
Family members are working together to collect, analyse and research a set of living specimens of Backhouse daffodils, making every effort to ensure that the cultivars are authentically named and that we create a definitive collection, a Museum Collection of Backhouse Heritage Daffodils. Our intention is also to keep herbarium specimens, so that a benchmark is available.

Andrew and I have driven thousands of miles in search of the missing Backhouse daffodils, made maps, taken photographs, double-labelled and (always with permission) dug a few bulbs where possible, which have been nearly 45cm (18in) deep on occasion! Because of our unique family relationships, we have been permitted access to the private, now fragile former gardens of the daffodil raisers themselves, as well as the homes of our most elderly relatives. Finds have been carefully transported in the green to Rossie, where they are quarantined for two flowering seasons.

We have now collected 90 ‘true’ Backhouse cultivars, as we believe, as well as numerous seedlings for which we have very probable working names. The latter remain under review for now, awaiting further research and information. We also grow on cultivars that have the same name but were received from several different sources, until, with the help of family information, reference material and images that we hold, we can authenticate the ‘true’ Backhouse raising.

Our task in identifying ‘true’ cultivars is much helped by a collection we have of Backhouse garden notes and diaries showing daffodil locations and/or garden ins and outs lists. These records, as well as the older family members’ first-hand knowledge of identification, why a daffodil bears its name, where it was planted, or by whom and when, allow us to feel more confident that we have recaptured an actual Backhouse cultivar. Approximately 80 per cent of the Museum Collection has been found in this way. Cultivars sourced from the family gardens are always strong, vigorous plants, stamped all over with clear Backhouse traits, and of course they mean more to us because they were touched by the hand of our daffodil forebears.

Images gathered from archives held by the RHS Lindley Library at Vincent Square, by
RHS Garden Wisley and by the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh Archive Library have proved invaluable in aiding visual identification. Descriptions in nursery catalogues researched at the RHS and Edinburgh, as well as libraries at the Linnean Society Archive and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, have further helped to substantiate the family diaries. If the location in the raiser’s garden is recorded in the diaries, that and an image and/or catalogue description take us closer to identification. With ‘Dick Wellband’, for example, Sarah Elizabeth’s diary description of the cup as ‘red’ allowed us to watch out for daffodils in that area of the garden she mentioned that were flowering with a ‘red orange’ cup. Then over the years and at different seasons we found only one cultivar of this colouring there, and it was flowering when ‘Dick Wellband’ was supposed to. We have grown ‘Dick Wellband’ from four different sources over four flowering seasons, researching and observing to be sure we have identified the correct cultivar. It is an appropriately eye-catching daffodil to have enticed Mr Wellband, one of the biggest names in the Spalding bulb trade, to take Mrs RO Backhouse’s bulbs. We are feeling confident in adding it to the Backhouse Collection in 2017.

Ultimate verification of authenticity often comes from older family members’ memories, and the following brief story perhaps illustrates this. After a long April day in the Backhouse Centre, Andrew and I called in to see my mother. She regaled us with the story of when her cousin RO Backhouse brought a gift of the famous pink daffodil ‘Mrs R.O. Backhouse’ to be planted in the garden. She was only a child at the time, but remembers her grandfather, the head gardener and her cousin walking through the grounds of the family estate until the right location was found for planting, which, my mother said, was ‘near enough the east wall to be sheltered from the wind but not so close as to be in the shade. The head gardener himself dug the bulbs in.’ We talked about the location and garden landmarks until we could almost visualise the flowers and the scene in front of us. Later that evening we said goodbye to my dear mother, jumped in the car and drove 400 miles through the night from Fife to the old home. We arrived in the early hours of the morning, only to find with much shock and horror that the area had been completely reconfigured, with no daffodils to be seen. We tried to remember the fixed landmarks that my mother mentioned, started to re-orientate ourselves and began to walk towards where the site must have been. And then we saw them, a large clump of ‘Mrs R.O. Backhouse’. With permission some of these bulbs now grow with us in the Backhouse Centre here at Rossie and are much loved; the rest are being looked after by the family.

William Backhouse and daffodil names
Because the names of most of William Backhouse’s daffodils did not come to attention until the daffodils themselves were put on the market after his death, it has been supposed that they were not applied by him. However, by cross-referencing the different sources of information, a clear picture of names emerges that reflects William’s own life as a caring family man and a committed Quaker with a solid business network. Some names may have been given to his father’s daffodils by CJ Backhouse, but it is most unlikely that any commercial bulb firm would know of William’s significant connections to close family or of his business associations or Quaker connections. William’s connections can be seen reflected in some of the names we believe he gave to his own daffodils. (Research is ongoing to underpin current findings.)

The name ‘Mrs Langtry’, often assumed to be that of the actress and courtesan (although she was only 16 when the daffodil was registered), has a more likely source in the Backhouse connection with the family of George Langtry, a shipping magnate with many business interests whose third son Richard, a keen naturalist, took over from him. Richard’s wife Elizabeth, who was a devout Quaker, is the more likely source of the name.

Similarly, the paintings which hung on my mother’s wall indicate the origins of daffodil names, including those of Mary Backhouse for
William’s ‘Mary’. A significant proportion of William’s daffodils now registered can be traced back to his and his son CJ’s family and interests. Daffodil ‘Madge Matthew’, as another example, must recall William’s early connections, for that was the name of a local lady the family met when they stayed in Westmorland.

**Backhouse contribution across many genera**
The Backhouse family made other botanical contributions across many genera, which are reflected in the exhibition and garden plantings at the Backhouse Centre. For example, the Scree and Rock Garden includes *Erica carnea* from the Backhouse Coronation Commemorative Catalogue 1911. The Walled Garden and its environs include *Dicksonia antarctica* from original plant spores sent back on empty convict ships from Australia by James Backhouse; *Lavandula angustifolia* ‘Backhouse Purple’ introduced in 1888 (the first purple lavender); and a Backhouse martagon hybrid lily ‘Mrs R.O. Backhouse’. On the north wall, the Fern Border includes *Polypodium vulgare* ‘Trichomanoides Backhouse’ and other ferns introduced by our forebears. *Backhousia* is a genus in the family Myrtaceae named after James Backhouse in acknowledgement of his botanical observations in Australia – and the scented leaves of *Backhousia citriodora* flavour our lemon teas served in the Backhouse Cafe.

**The future**
We recently went to the 10th World Daffodil Convention, held in St Louis, USA in 2016, invited to speak on the Backhouse Daffodil Collection. There we met many fellow enthusiasts, who reinforced the value of what we were trying to achieve in the concatenation, preservation and maintenance of our family’s living daffodil heritage. In the future, Hamish, our medic son with a particular interest in the scientific side, has agreed to look after the Collection. If and when he is no longer able to, we have agreed on an assenting institution. We seem to have entered into a lifetime’s commitment to our family’s history and horticultural legacy and specifically to the beautiful Backhouse daffodils. It is uplifting and exciting work which has engaged the interest of many able people over the years, who have greatly contributed to the project’s success. Hopefully our forebears look down approvingly on our efforts at the Backhouse Centre to conserve, celebrate and continue the family’s work.

**Caroline G Thomson** MA, a direct descendant of the famous Quaker Backhouse family, is Director of the family’s Heritage Centre and Curator of the Backhouse Heritage Daffodil Collection

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**REFERENCES**

- Dalton, Jan (2010). See www.backhouserossie.com or visit the information area at the Backhouse Centre for Jan Dalton’s Backhouse family history.