

WELLS OLD DEANERY GARDEN

Dr William Turner,
Dean of Wells 1551-1554, 1560-1568



"my garden at Wellis"

Through the door marked 9 Cathedral Green, step into one of the most ancient and secret gardens in Wells. There has been a garden here for more than 850 years, ever since Ivo the first Dean of Wells was provided with a house and grounds in the 1130s. The Deanery grew into a substantial residence, with a splendid north wing added by Dean John Gunthorpe in the late 1400s. The decorative carvings of guns are a pun upon his surname. Dean Gunthorpe was a personal friend of King Henry VII, who stayed here in 1491 and 1497. The extensive grounds are now much reduced. The present garden includes what was probably the Dean's walled privy (private) garden, accessible only from the house.

The Remarkable Dr Turner

This garden is famously associated with Dr William Turner, Dean of Wells in the 1550s and 1560s. Born c.1508 in Morpeth, Northumberland, the son of a tanner, he studied at Cambridge, and was caught up in the religious turbulence of the English Reformation. Always controversial, he wrote provocative theological pamphlets in support of the Protestant church. His first botanical book, *Libellus de Re Herbaria* (Little Book of Plants) appeared in 1538. He travelled in Europe, studying botany and medicine under the best Italian teachers. Turner became physician and chaplain to the Duke of Somerset, Protector to the young King Edward VI, mixing with leading statesmen and churchmen of the day. He was made Dean of Wells in 1551. Roman Catholic Queen Mary I (1553-58), banned his books as heretical. He was ejected from his Deanery and again travelled abroad. Queen Elizabeth I restored him to Wells. There is evidence that he still practised as a doctor while he was Dean.

William Turner, Botanist



Guilielmus Turnerus

Throughout the ups and downs of his life Turner pursued his interest in botany, studying, describing and classifying plants. He produced *The Names of Herbes* in 1548, followed by his major work, *A New Herball*, published in three parts 1551-68. In this, the earliest herbal written in English, he listed 238 native species, and plants he had seen abroad. He attempted to analyse plants scientifically, describing their appearance, habit and where they grew, with their medicinal and other uses. Turner wrote in English to enable ordinary people, and apothecaries whose Latin was poor, to identify and use plants safely. *A New Herball* was illustrated with fine woodcuts, like the strawberry plant which, with his signature, forms the 'logo' of the Wells Old Deanery garden project.

Turner sought out plants in Somerset, and elsewhere in England and abroad. He saw meadow saffron 'growe in the west cuntre besyde Bathe' and wrote that 'I have sene flax or lynt growyng wilde in Sommerset shyre wythin a myle of Welles'. He gives an early description of the famous Glastonbury Thorn: 'In Summerset shyre about six myles from Welles, in ye parke of G[l]assenberry there is an hawthorne which is grene all the wynter, as all they that dwell there about do stedfastly holde.' There is one in this garden. He makes passing mention of 'my garden at Wellis' as the only place he knew in England where heliotrope and a certain kind of barley were grown. He also made gardens at Cologne and elsewhere in Germany when in exile, and at his house in Crutched Friars in London, where he retired and died in 1568.

All Useful Plants

The term 'herbs' had a much wider meaning in the 1500s than it does today. To Turner, 'herbs' meant all plants useful to man, from trees to seaweed. Specialised garden plants were only just being developed, and the distinction between these, wild flowers and what we today call weeds, was much less precise than now.

Plants were valuable as medicines, as food, for dyeing fabrics and many other purposes. Turner, being a doctor, was most interested in their medicinal uses. Wild cresses were called sciatica cresses 'because the herbe is good for the sciatica', and mulberry leaves were useful for burns. He experimented: bog-myrtle 'is tried by experience that it is good to be put in beare [beer], both [by] me and by diverse other in Summersetshyre.' As for the wild strawberry, 'Every man knoweth wel inough where strawberies grow.' Many of Turner's plant names are charming: larkspur is 'Larkys hele', and wild pansy is 'Two faces in a hood'. Some names have religious overtones. Wood-sorrel is called 'Alleluya, because it appereth about Easter when Alleluya is song agayn', and Solomon's-seal 'is called in English scala celi' (stairway to heaven – in Latin), from its ladder-like leaf formation.

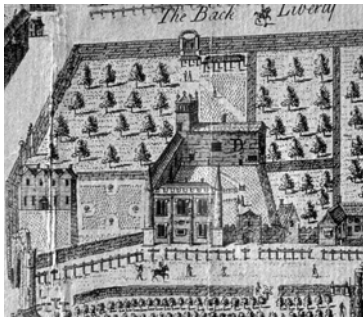
Through Tudor Eyes

Turner's garden cannot be restored or recreated, because we do not know what it looked like. The plants we grow, however, are mostly those mentioned by Turner in his writings. The formal paths, the box balls and the four great terracotta pots reflect the kind of garden he would have recognised. Labels give both the Latin name and Turner's English name (in his spelling) for the plant. Visitors have to see the garden through 16th century eyes, adjust to the small size and often gentle colour of the wild flowers, and study a plant's details as William Turner did with his precise descriptions of leaves, stems, flowers and roots.



The 'Chequer beds' flanking the porch, marked out with stone setts, contain some of his medicinal plants. He recommended hart's tongue fern 'against the bytings of serpents' and clove pinks 'for the

bytynge of a madd dogge'. For the 'windy colic' he prescribed a herbal bath of germander, thyme, saxifrage, mallow, hollyhock, hyssop, balm, feverfew and horehound all boiled up, added to 2 or 3 gallons of cows' milk and topped up with water as hot as the patient could bear. The Little Orchard features period fruit trees – black mulberry, early apple trees, medlar, quince and perry pear – and is



The earliest plan of the garden is a picture-map drawn by William Simes in 1735

underplanted with spring bulbs. Behind it runs an allée of espalier pears. The rampart walk gives a spectacular view of the West Front of Wells Cathedral. A path through woodland plants described by Turner leads to a hidden seat. A collection of ferns grows in the shade of Dean Gunthorpe's great hall, and the nearby Gunthorpe bed contains plants used in dyeing and cloth-making. Steps lead down to an 'Italian courtyard' where there are plants he saw on his travels. Under the great beech tree, wild cyclamen, which Turner called 'Sowesbrede', form a spreading carpet which is spectacular in autumn.

Reviving the Garden

A garden existed here 400 years before William Turner, 'the Father of English Botany', and more than 400 years after he was Dean of Wells it is still here. Its revival by a group of local volunteers has been made possible through the generosity of our visitors, whose donations have contributed to the Tudor paths, the garden furniture, the notice boards, the period fruit trees and many of the plants. In 2008 Wells received a special Certificate awarded by the Royal Horticultural Society for the garden as a community local history project. The work of reviving and maintaining the garden continues. Please come again to see how, year by year, it changes and develops.

In addition to our special advertised Open Days in spring, summer and autumn, the garden is open to the public on Wednesday afternoons during June, July and August, 1.30-3.00pm. Admission is free.

**Your donations all go to help our volunteers revive this garden,
and are greatly appreciated as essential to our work.
Thank you.**

**For more about the garden, pictures, opening times and events,
visit our website: www.olddeanerygarden.org.uk**