

# SCOTTISH SNOWDROP CONFERENCE

## ‘Snowdrops, Spring Bulbs and You

### ... a celebration of spring’



Winter must end sometime. In 2011, for keen Scottish gardeners winter ended at 10.00am on Friday 18<sup>th</sup> February, the start of a busy gardening weekend. More than 80 galanthophiles gathered at Edinburgh’s Royal Botanic Garden for the biennial Scottish Snowdrop Conference. As soon as the nurserymen started to unpack their wares folk were picking up pots and packets of snowdrops. ‘What does this look like?’, ‘Is that bigger than Little Ben?’ and ‘I really have enough snowdrops already but I will just take these three!’ were a few comments overheard.

Eventually someone asks ‘Will that grow up here in Scotland?’ That is the key point about snowdrops. Unless you provide them with the conditions they like, they might just decide that, ‘No, I don’t want to grow in this garden’. They don’t like to be disturbed during the summer; they don’t like to be baked; conversely they mustn’t be waterlogged. Just look at where they thrive in the countryside, at where they seed themselves around and are obviously happy. Snowdrops seem to be happiest in Scotland growing under deciduous trees, in nice leaf mould, often on a warm slope where their bulbs are happy in cool open humus which never dries out. The trees provide shade in summer and keep the ground cool. Every autumn a new crop of leaves builds up on top. They are often found in old cemeteries, where they have been planted on graves. You won’t find many in neatly tended cemeteries where the grass is mown regularly. Rather than being bulbs for the lawn



they thrive best in unkempt areas, often beside hedges or under trees near the edges, where their foliage can grow to maturity before dying down for the summer. Think daffodils! You don't cut their leaves off and expect them to love you.

So if you are going to pay good money for bulbs, look after them. Personally I don't think that all snowdrops do equally well in every garden. Where they are happy they will seed and multiply. Usually there is little variation in the flowers of thousands in one area or one garden. It is where, in previous times, different species have been planted together that variation is most likely. Where they grow truly wild there is also variation – just look at the pots of *Galanthus elwesii* offered for sale in garden centres. These bulbs are sometimes first generation from being gathered in the wild or maybe they were grown on for a couple of years before being offered for sale. Caveat emptor!

Everyone marvels at the sight of thousands of snowdrops massed in estates. A few clumps at the roadside cheers up a dreich journey on a cold morning. There is no doubt that galanthophiles are looking for variation in snowdrops; in the position, shape, tone and number of the green marks. Even an apparently deformed flower is beautiful to someone, just like ugly bairns to mum and dad.

David Mitchell from the RBGE welcomed everyone to the conference, saying how delighted he was to host the event jointly arranged by the SRGC, Cambo Snowdrops and Christie's Nursery. He said that the RBGE looked forward to building on the Snowdrop and Late Bulb days. He gave an especially warm welcome to our German visitors 21 of whom were on a snowdrop tour of Scotland. He expressed his wonder in the fact that so many people could gather together because of one wee flower and discuss plants and biodiversity. I liked that. I thought we were just obsessing about a collective mania for collecting different snowdrops but when David threw in 'biodiversity' I realised that we galanthophiles are part of the scientific community and were probably at one of the cutting edges of ecological research. I think it would be fair to say that few flowering genera have been studied in such minute detail as *Galanthus* by so many people, for so long so enthusiastically. And.... anyone of us might discover a new variation.....might! David quoted Thomas Hardy's poem, 'A Backward Spring', which I tracked down and here it is !

### **A Backward Spring, by Thomas Hardy**

The trees are afraid to put forth buds,  
And there is timidity in the grass;  
The plots lie gray where gouged by spuds,  
And whether next week will pass  
Free of sly sour winds is the fret of each bush  
Of barberry waiting to bloom.

**Yet the snowdrop's face betrays no gloom,**  
And the primrose pants in its heedless push,  
Though the myrtle asks if it's worth the fight  
This year with frost and rime  
To venture one more time  
On delicate leaves and buttons of white  
From the selfsame bough as at last year's prime,  
And never to ruminare on or remember  
What happened to it in mid-December.

**SRGC President Liz Mills** then welcomed our German visitors in their native tongue and was rewarded with a big round of applause for doing so. As the weekend progressed so did our President's language skill. The hard work she and Ian put in was rewarded by many warm congratulatory comments during and after the conference. After the welcomes we knew we were among friends.



The first lecture was given by **Lady Catherine Erskine** of Cambo near Kingsbarns in Fife. Her title, **Snowdrops and Scottish Tourism**, reflected her hard work over many years to establish the Scottish Snowdrop Festival firmly as part of winter tourism in Scotland. She described her efforts in inspiring and encouraging land owners, gardeners and horticulturalists into cooperating in a month of openings as a journey into lunacy! Having lived at Cambo for 35 years it was 25 years ago that she went into the business of selling snowdrops in order to fund the restoration of Cambo's famed wall garden. Cambo has 75 acres of snowdrops, mainly doubles, which is

unusual in Scotland where most massed snowdrops are apparently singles. She pointed out that she was continuing a century old tradition of lifting, splitting and replanting snowdrops in the estate. As well as Galanthus, Leucojums and aconites thrive at Cambo. She covered everything which happens from from lifting to posting. Her interest eventually spread expanded into collecting different snowdrops and she now has a National collection of snowdrops at Cambo.

The first yellow signs directing people to Cambo gardens were put up in 2003 and since then thousands have made the journey to see snowdrops. The Snowdrop Festival is part of 'Winter White', Visit Scotland's most successful campaign ever. Now Cambo has its own newspaper as well as its own snowdrop giftshop where they sell all sorts of items with snowdrops painted, printed or sewn on them.



When she started to use pigs to clear the ground of invading ivy another attraction was added. Now some come to see the piglets as well as snowdrops.

This spring she brought the estate into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by starting 'Snowdrops by Starlight' – an exciting spectacle with mesmerising light effects, transforming the snowdrop woods into an enchanting family experience. This brought a new tranche of visitors to the gardens.



Catherine is the face of Scottish snowdrops and the vital force behind the renewed awareness and interest in the plantings in estates throughout the country. We wish her continued success in promoting our favourite winter white plants.

David Mitchell commented the gardens are engines which can drive the Scottish economy.



Ian Christie with Richard Hobbs

**Richard Hobbs** lecture was entitled simply 'Snowdrops'. Richard is a conservationist. His professional life in Norfolk took him to many places in the county. He now guides wild flower holidays abroad. He confessed to managing the National Collection of Grape Hyacinths. About 25 years ago he started finding interesting snowdrops in Norfolk. He emphasised that snowdrops and bluebells flowering en-masse were one of the highlights of the natural world. Growing up with such sights we may take them for granted but people travel from all corners of the world to marvel at them.

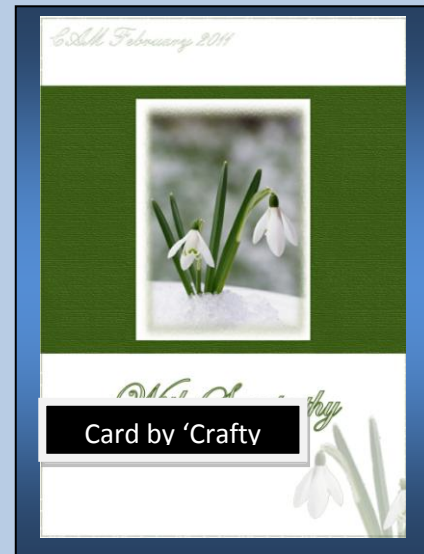
Rather than showing massed plantings of snowdrops, Richard took us back to individual selections; who collected them; who hybridised them and the friends he made through snowdrops. Unlikely as many people might think, snowdrops are

not native to the UK. E.A Bowles in 1924 thought they had been introduced by The Romans but there is no mention of them in literature until around the 1770's. Shakespeare doesn't mention snowdrops! We are told the first to grow them were monks who grew them to flower at Candlemas, the day midway between the shortest day and the spring equinox. Their white flowers are associated with purity.

In Norfolk snowdrops are found mainly in church yards and old gardens. They are associated with death hence they were planted on graves. They also feature on bereavement cards. Many people believe snowdrops should not be brought indoors as they are unlucky. Many are adamant on the subject.

*Galanthus woronowii* was brought in c100 years ago. Richard pointed out that few clones of *woronowii* have been named. The other species widely planted in churchyards was *G. elwesii*, which shows a lot of variation in the wild. They have been imported from their native Turkey for 100s of years. Look for variation in the receptacle [ovary] shape and colour and in flower markings. One of the best clones is Penelope Anne, named by Ray Cobb.

We learned about Heyrick Greatorex [died 1954] whose double snowdrops are legendary. HE was brought up in Rowneybury House, the mansion now known as 'Beckingham palace'. His garden was in Norfolk and his ancestor [I noted father but this man died in 1831, so was dead before Heyrick could be conceived] was organist in and he is buried in Westminster Abbey. Anyway he bred and introduced several doubles notably Dionysus, Desdemona and Hippolyta. Richard then talked about some good plicatus plants – Diggory, Yapples and Clovis. Heyrick's garden is now in the care of a Blofield & District Conservation Group.



Richard ended his interesting lecture with descriptions of some favourites. These included the yellow Lowick and Norfolk Blonde, Bishop's Mitre, Geenfinch, All Saints, Swanton and Smiley. What a treat to learn about the people and gardens. From the Westminster abbey organist and his extraordinary descendant to The Beckham's home, to cemeteries and Shakespeare, Richard took us on an excellent trip. How about a move to Norfolk?

**Brian Duncan**, from Northern Ireland, brought colour to the screen. His was the first part of life after snowdrops. He did though take time to describe and talk about his favourite snowdrop, *Galanthus x valentinii* 'Compton Court', a strong vigorous clone which grows exceptionally well in NI. *G. valentinii* is *plicatus* x *nivalis*.

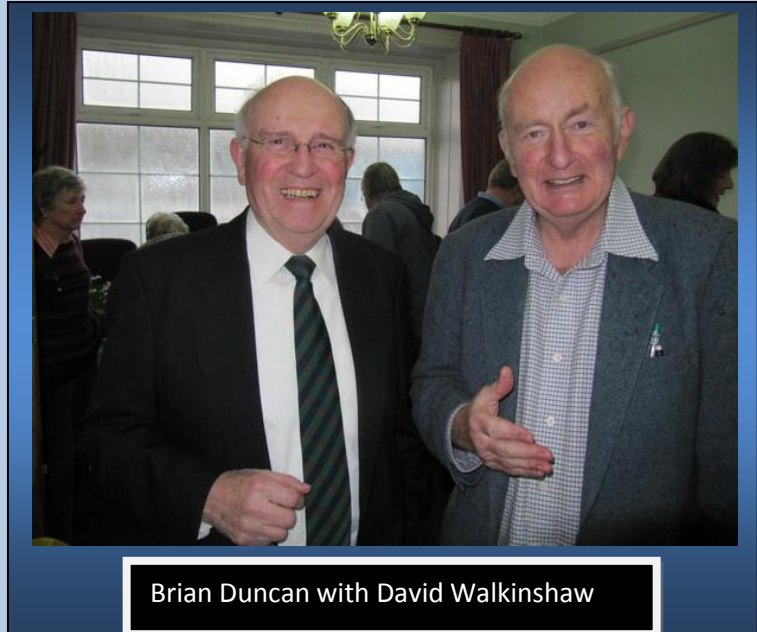
Since the daffodils follow the snowdrops so closely, Brian hardly notices them going over. He has been interested in Narcissus since the 1960's and started showing standard hybrid daffodils. [well before the days of flower power!]. There are 9 daffodil shows in Northern Ireland which points to there being a large number of daffodil enthusiasts in the Province. This uncontrollable fervour is referred to as 'Yellow Fever' and is apparently very contagious. It can impinge on happily married life as Brian illustrated with a wee story. One of his early favourites was 'Camelot' and one year to his disgust and dismay its beauty was spoilt by an insect.

Large daffodils are over 10cm tall, medium under 8cm and miniature under 5cm

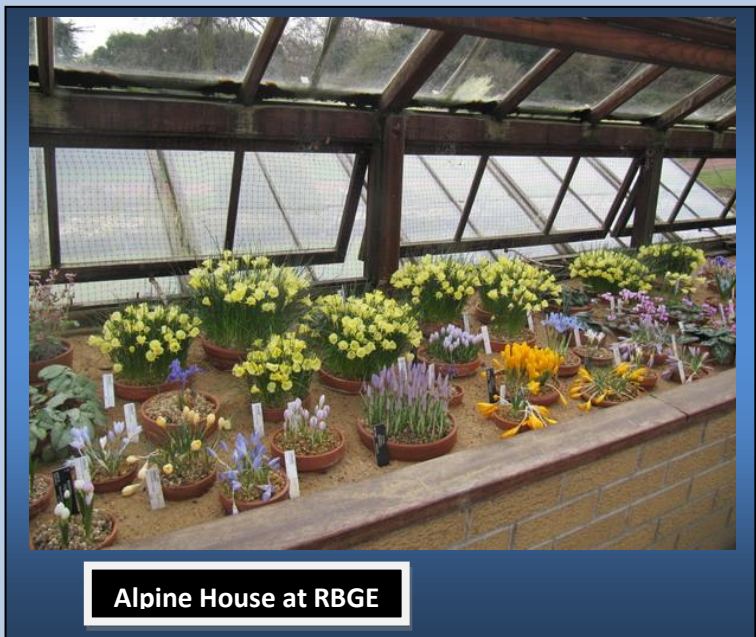
Brian's family background is in agriculture where cattle breeders are always trying to improve their herds by careful crossbreeding and selection. This family trait' malcontent, he called it, is also needed in breeding daffodils. Nowadays he is concentrating more on Breeding Intermediate and miniature daffodils, pointing out that at present breeders of these are at the stage the hybridisers of Large trumpet daffodils were at 100 years ago. The Aims of his breeding are to produce plants with good colours with good constitution and form. Although there are lots of smaller daffs with yellow

petals and orange trumpets Brian wants a good white with an orange trumpet. Some pictures of recent results in large daffodils made us sit up and take notice especially the doubles and those with split coronas but the colour combinations were fabulous. Work is ongoing on a green daffodil using *N. viridiflorus* and *N. poeticus*.

**Why breed daffodils?** -To improve their colour, beauty and form, health and vigour, habit and angle of flower. The search is endless as Brian put it 'Perfection today,



Brian Duncan with David Walkinshaw



Alpine House at RBGE

Mediocrity tomorrow'. There is constant weeding out of plants which do not meet his high standards. Since work on intermediates and miniatures is at such an early stage, there is a lot of work to do. Most modern large hybrids are fertile whereas very many smaller crosses are infertile. This is because first generation hybrids tend to be sterile and it takes care to find the few which are not and these can be used in crossing for further generations.

He showed us how to cross pollinate narcissus. Pollination should be done on a sunny day when the stigma is receptive. Pollen should be selected as soon as the anthers dehisce. 'Grab any opportunity except before rain'. It is easier standing up in a greenhouse or well lit shed than on the ground, so pots are a good idea. Brian stressed that before going too far the hybridiser should have certain aims. First, visualise the objective. Then seek fertile parents with the desired characteristics. You need to enhance the good characteristics and eliminate the bad. You should apply line breeding and avoid inbreeding. It may take 3 or 4 generations to reach the goal. Large flowered hybrids flower in 5 years and smaller ones may flower in 3 years. So it is a slow business.

As to who should involve themselves, these are they - anyone especially young enthusiasts; malcontents who seek change, improvement, novelty and pleasure in the work. Selection and patience are needed as throwbacks often appear and these can be inferior to their parents. The success rate can be as low as 1% of the tens of thousands of seedlings raised each year. A careful record of crosses made and sown is essential, noting the parents and numbering seedlings. When they flower the colour and form is described. This is repeated over several years until eventually one or two might be named.

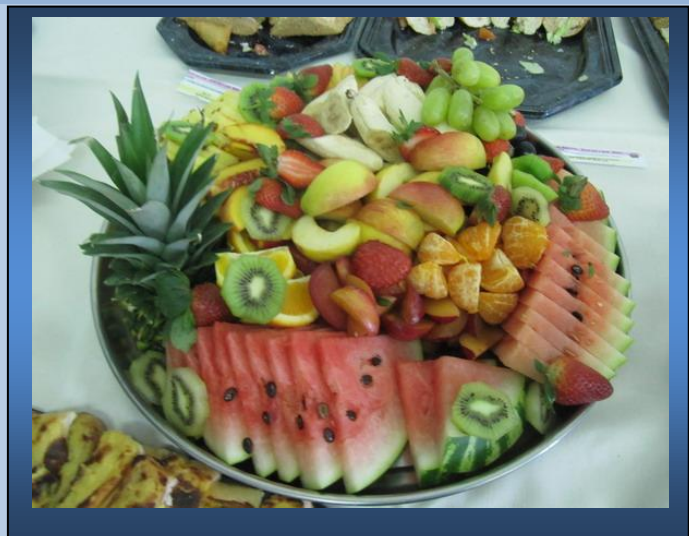
We were then shown pictures of a range of new intermediate and miniature hybrids. I liked them all even the rejects. I don't think I am ruthless enough for daffodil breeding. Perhaps I am just not enough of a malcontent!

To see a selection of pictures of Brian's hybrids go to the club website, [srgc.org.uk](http://www.srgc.org.uk).

**Direct link for Brian Duncan's hybrids in the SRGC Forum:**

<http://www.srgc.org.uk/smf/index.php?topic=329.0>

Lunch was an excellent miscellany of sandwiches, 'Indian' snacks with dips and masses of fresh fruit already sliced and prepared. More than enough for everyone! There was time for chat and buying plants, then a walk in the gardens with guides to take folk to the best bits. I chatted or ate for too long thus missing my group. So, I made my way to the alpine house where I met President Liz and Elspeth MacIntosh who showed some of the fabulous bulbs in bloom. While it is nice to look and admire plants and flowers it is so much better to talk about them with fellow enthusiasts. We all like them for different reasons. We have our favourites and are always open to learning more about them.



In the Afternoon **Ian Christie** talked about the Castle hybrids [G. nivalis x G. plicatus] from the grounds of Brechin Castle. Ian brought them to our attention about a decade ago and each year introduces a few more to show how well they are adapting to cultivation. He used the pots of snowdrops which he had brought with him to illustrate the range of flower shapes and markings on these wonderfully varied hybrids. Unlike Brian's narcissus seedlings, the parents of these Galanthus hybrids had to find each other and chance would decide what characteristics the seedlings inherited. Brechin must be a good home because each hybrid was more desirable than the previous. They certainly have a good pedigree - Galanthus nivalis cultivated in Brechin for many years crossed with Galanthus plicatus from the Crimean war on the Earl of Dalhousie's estate.

The last lecture was given by past president of the AGS Captain **Peter Erskine**. Peter is not related to Catherine Erskine but both are enthusiasts. Peter gardens in the far south of England. He has a large garden in which he has developed a wonderful rock garden. The work involved must have been astronomical. This garden, he then filled with wonderful plants most of which he grows to perfection. The lecture title '25 years on Greensand' made me 'green with envy'! Like hybridising a good garden can't be bought or just hoped for. Lots of work is needed to provide the perfect spot for each occupant at the same time a little trial and experiment can be very rewarding. Peter's talk reminded me of just why I love rock garden and alpine plants.

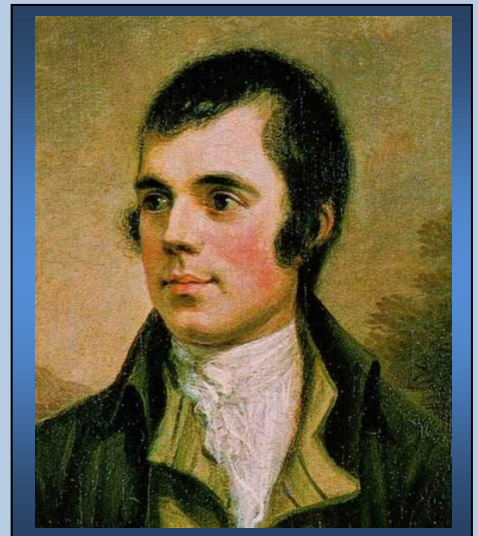
### *The Parting Kiss by Robert Burns*

*written in 1788*

*Humid seal of soft affections,  
Tenderest pledge of future bliss,  
Dearest tie of young connections,  
Love's first snowdrop, virgin kiss!*

*Speaking silence, dumb confession,  
Passion's birth, and infant's play,  
Dove-like fondness, chaste  
concession,  
Glowing dawn of future day!*

*Sorrowing joy, Adieu's last action,  
(Lingering lips must now disjoin),  
What words can ever speak affection  
So thrilling and sincere as thine!*



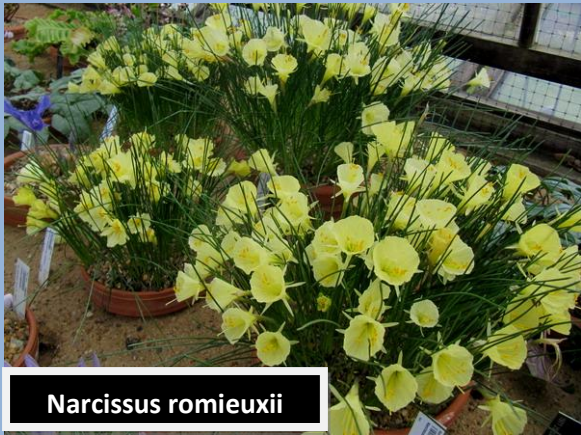
Thank s to everyone who took part in this excellent day. The follow up was the SRGC Early Bulb Display and Lectures in Dunblane.

Sandy Leven





Alpine House at RBGE



Narcissus romieuxii



Galanthus lagodochiana



Galanthus poculiformis 'Springwood'



Galanthus sandersii 'Lowick'



**Hvacinthus transcaspicus**