

Whitby's William Willison

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When I first joined the Wakefield & North of England Tulip Society, I remember James Akers telling me that the tulip 'Joseph Paxton' was bred by Willison of Whitby but nothing much was known about Willison. This summer I tried to find out about him. The Society still shows 'Sir Joseph Paxton' as a flame and feather, and did show the breeder until the Second World War. 'Juliet', also bred by Willison, is shown as a breeder. It now breaks only as a very poor flame.



Richard Willison December 2011

All photos Linda Chapman

William Willison was born in 1806, in Whitby. He was the fifth child of Alexander Willison, a Scot, who was a gardener/nurseryman and who had established a greengrocer's business in Whitby in 1800. The greengrocer's shop is still in existence and is now managed by Richard Willison, a descendent.

Alexander moved the family to New Gardens in 1812. New Gardens is something of a misnomer as the garden on the site was established

in 1652 by the Cholmley family. The Cholmley's family home was at Abbey House, located, as its name implies, adjacent to Whitby Abbey on a

very exposed site. Abbey House did not have any land suitable for growing vegetables and flowers, so, Sir Hugh Cholmley established New Gardens a mile to the east of the house. The new gardens were 'walled' for protection against the elements. The wall is now a listed building and bears a plaque with the inscription "I Sir Hugh Cholmley Kt and Baronet and Elisabeth my dear wife (daughter to Sir Will Twisden of Gt Peckham in the county of Kent Kt and Baronet) built this wall and planted this orchard Anno domini 1652".



The plaque of 1652

When the Cholmley* family ceased to consider Abbey House as their primary residence, New Gardens was leased out. Alexander Willison became superintendent of the garden (possibly extending to 9 acres) and, along with others, established a Botanical Garden in part of the walled garden. He became curator.



(*Cholmley is used throughout this article, Cholmeley is an alternative spelling)



Above - New Gardens house where William lived and died

Left - The original wall at New Gardens

In 1814 Alexander Willison and Rev. Young published *A catalogue of the plants in the Botanic Garden*. The catalogue was arranged according to the Linnaean system of plant identification. This publication can be viewed in Whitby's Pannett Park museum. The collection of plants catalogued was not huge, however, it did contain many very rare plant specimens.

William Willison was only a boy at the time of his father's work in the Botanic Garden, however, it would appear that he was influenced by the work going on there, and so began his life-long love of, and fascination with, plants. In later life he talks about working in a nursery in Middlesbrough when he was young. It is possible he did an apprenticeship there.

In his early twenties, William began to cultivate roses and appears to have paid considerable attention to growing seedlings. He worked alongside his father at New Gardens nursery and became solely responsible for the roses. *The Florist & Gardening Miscellany* of 1849/50 states that, at this time, it was the only rose nursery in the North of England, and that it was the only nursery in England where roses were cultivated for sale on a significant scale.



Left - Original back/
front walls and inter-
nal path of vinery

Below - Original
vinery wall



Left - New Gardens
ground where the
tulips and dahlias
were grown

In the 1830's, instructive and interesting horticultural periodicals had started to become popular and cheaply available to the general public. As early as 1836, William was writing and contributing articles to such periodicals. This was an activity that he continued for the rest of his life. He wrote mainly about roses, dahlias and alpine auriculas, but would send baskets of interesting plant specimens for the editors to examine and write about and for readers to discuss. He was a keen observer of all plants and their development and, as such, was a successful breeder of a variety of plants. He appeared to be passionate about sharing his acquired knowledge with other people who had similar interests. As early as 1838 he wrote an article about moss roses, he knew the crosses were not stable and some plants could exhibit characteristics of previous generations. If only he had known about genetics!

At this time many Floral and Horticultural Societies were rapidly being set up. In 1832, the Whitby Floral and Horticulture Society was established, records show that, initially, the society held five shows a year, with the Willison family winning prizes from the outset. In 1834, William Willison offered five shillings for the best *Erica* in bloom. Tulips were shown in late May of this year, with prizes for seven classes. The tulips of 1834 appeared to exceed all expectations, with the finest being grown by Mr Francis Hogarth. No tulips at this time were shown by the Willisons.

At this time William endured a personal tragedy. He had married Jane Dunning in 1831, they subsequently had two children. Records show that Jane died in 1836, leaving William to raise the two children as a single parent. William remarried in 1838, to a widow, Mary Sandor-Turner, who already had a son. William remained with Mary for the rest of his life and they had four more children together. Tragedy struck a second time, when between 1853 and 1855 four of his six children died.

The first definitive record of William showing tulips relates to the Whitby show of 1840, where William won six prizes. A feathered rose tulip, named 'Mr J Sanderson' (a Whitby florist), and bred by William, was shown here. Later, this tulip was to do very well at national shows and in 1856 gained a premium award at Crystal Palace. In the 1840 show, William was also awarded prizes for double anemones (3 prizes), pelargoniums (5 prizes) and greenhouse plants in pots (1 prize).

The year 1841 was the last time William showed at this Society. The article in the *York Herald* for this year did not give any results it just said "suffice it to say the Willison family walked off with a great many of the prizes". There were obviously tensions between the amateur and the professional growers, the amateurs had to pay ten shillings annual subscription, the gardeners only five shillings, but they won the prizes. The society later reformed as the Whitby Amateur

Horticultural Society with only three shows a year and not one at all in the Spring. William did still judge for the Society.

William soon became established as a judge at floral shows throughout the North and East of Yorkshire. The opening of the horse-drawn train service from Whitby to Pickering, in 1836, enabled easier travel from Whitby to these other areas of Yorkshire.

The Willison family, including William and his father and brothers, were enthusiastic supporters of the showing and judging of dahlias. This was one of the flowers that the Willison nursery specialised in cultivating. There was something of a 'dahlia mania' in the 1830's and 1840's. Good prices were paid for the new types of dahlia being bred by Willisons. William was particularly successful with the breeding of new, previously unknown, dwarf varieties of the flower.

In *The Garden* April 1840, an article mentions "excellent seedlings of polyanthus at New Gardens" and in 1848 reference is made to "a splendid collection of alpine auriculas".

It must have been during this decade (1840s) that William developed his tulip collection and started to breed from it.

The steam railway from Whitby to York opened in 1845, and William started to travel more. In 1849 he was judge at the Ancient Society of York Florists. Also in 1849, the newly formed National (later, Royal National) Tulip Society held its first exhibition in York. This Society subsequently held its annual exhibition in a different town, the arrangements being conducted by a local committee appointed for the purpose. William travelled to these and other national shows throughout the rest of his life.

In 1850, Alexander Willison died, aged 75, and William took responsibility for management of the entire nursery. During the next decade records and articles indicate the extent and diversity of William's interests in flowers and horticulture. He shared his expertise with readers on subjects ranging from growing roses from seed, growing alpine auriculas, raising seedling potatoes of a hardier character and the cross-breeding of carnations. Articles show how methodical he was, making meticulous records for himself and also detailed instruction for the reader.

In 1850, the tulip 'King' (described as a seedling of Mr Willison's) was shown at the Ancient Society of York Florists. By 1860 this tulip, along with 'Queen', 'Juliet' and 'Sir Joseph Paxton' would sweep the board with prizes at regional shows (including Wakefield) throughout the Midlands and North of England

He wrote an article for the *Midland Florist* entitled *Best tulips in each Class*. In order to write this article he asked the principal growers of tulips in Great Britain to each submit to him a list of their six best tulips for each class i.e. eighteen in total from 3 classes; bizarres, bybloemens, and roses. The results of ten

such growers (he included himself) were published in the magazine in 1852. The only tulips bred by William listed were the ones he chose himself, 'King' a bizarre and 'The Gem' a rose. The *Midland Florist* repeated this in 1858, although William himself did not take part. Many more growers chose his tulips as their best, and their lists included 'Sir Joseph Paxton', 'Juliet', 'Gem of Gems', 'J. Sanderson' and 'King'.

In another article of 1852, he does mention people coming to his nursery to buy 'Juliet' but as yet it does not seem to appear on the show bench. I have found no reference to the tulip, 'Sir Joseph Paxton', in my investigations through to this date, but it could have been named in 1851 as this was the year Paxton was knighted.

His tulips were often described in the *Midland Florist*. After the National Exhibition of 1853 : *We must allude to three bizarres raised by our friend William Willison and named: 'Sir Joseph Paxton', 'King' and 'J.F.Wood'. We liked the last best, a short cup with distinct feather. It is a notable flower. The breeder had a very slight tinge but in the rectified flower it had disappeared. With us 'Sir Joseph Paxton' was purity itself with a stout, well formed, cup that is heavily barred and feathered. 'King' was not a good specimen but had a good flower in it.*

Although he had been a judge at Ancient Society of York Florists, William did not show here until 1854, when he showed 'Juliet' for the first time and took the President's prize. 'Sir Joseph Paxton' was not shown here until 1856, and then not as a broken flower.

In 1855 William wrote an article in the *Midland Florist* entitled *The Breeder Tulip*. This article is slightly confusing, as he goes on to say*Again fine as the rectified flower of 'Sir Joseph Paxton' was, as shown by Mr Wood, at Regent's Park in May last (which is the only break of it yet known, and for which Mr. Wood asks ten pounds, full sized roots), who can tell what shall break from the breeders of that superb flower, which are now in distribution?* It is widely reported that William broke Sir Joseph Paxton, and it was described as a feather in the 1853 article. Here William casts some doubt.

The *York Herald* of 1856 announces *Mr. Willison of New Gardens, Whitby has just opened for inspection for the season. He has an extensive selection of tulips, 1,200 varieties of the highest class of tulips.* Also in *The Garden* of 1856 *Mr. Willison should not be overlooked as a polyanthus grower.*

A report of the tulips after the National Exhibition of 1859, describes William's tulips:

'Gem of Gems', - fine feathered bybloemen- too long in the cup but Mr. Turner gave 20 guineas for five roots. It is inappropriately named as its form will always mitigate it being even a gem.

'J. Sanderson' - a feathered bizarre of excellent qualities. Ground colour rather pale but feather is good round all the petal, it has purity and may be classed as a first rate bizarre and one of the most desirable in cultivation.

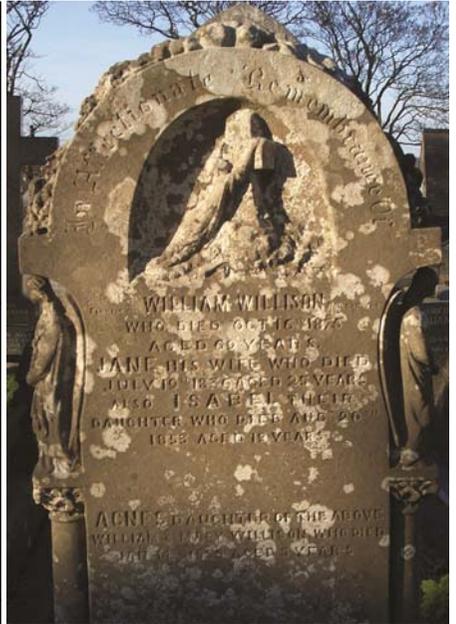
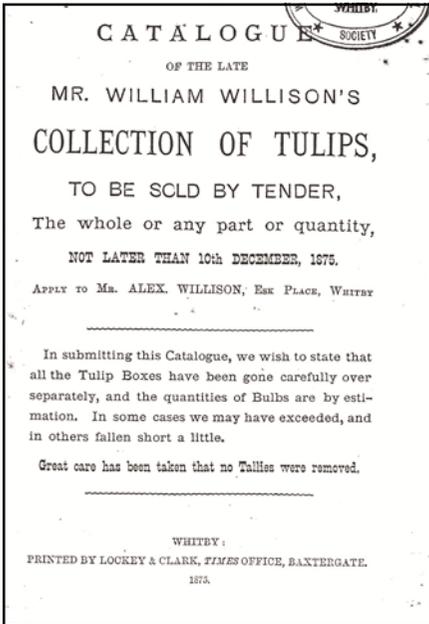
'Juliet' the finest rose breeder, feathers well, first rate cup and quite pure, ought to be in everyone's collection.

'Sir Joseph Paxton' – first rate flame and broke from a breeder as fine a feathered bizarre as we have seen.

In 1869 the National Exhibition was held in the grounds of King's College, Cambridge. The *Gardeners Magazine* thus describes the appearance of the tent during the process of staging the flowers. *"Meanwhile the tent in which the tulip growers were arranging their flowers had been, for some time, a scene of great activity. There were veteran growers, with grey hairs, failing sight, and stooping gait, and yet as full of fire and enthusiasm as ever they were in the whole history of their cultivation of these gorgeous flowers. To stand at the entrance to this tent and watch what was going on within was a study of human nature, and well worthy the attention of a philosopher. For several hours the one absorbing passion was the best arrangement of a stand of flowers so as to win a prize: the value of the prize was of small moment – it was the winning the prize for which all strove. At length, and not till the sun had reached its meridian, was the tent cleared, and then only by the exhibition of some authority, as each exhibitor seemed extremely loathed to leave the flowers he had tended with so much care and regard."*

William, aged 63, did very well here, gaining prizes in all but two of the classes, some of his prizes being for numbered but nameless seedlings. He did particularly well in the breeder classes, winning three out of the six prizes.

William was still busy and writing articles in 1875, the year of his death. He died very suddenly, of a heart attack, on 16 October. He was 69 years old. There were obituaries in *The Gardener's Chronicle*, *The Florist and Pomologist* and the *York Press*, the latter saying he was one of the best botanists and most successful gardeners of Yorkshire. Probate was granted in November. His effects amounted to under £450. His collection of tulips was put up for sale. The catalogue, of the late Mr William Willison's collection of tulips, asks for tenders to be received not later than 10 December 1875 and describes *"250 distinct varieties of unnamed seedlings which have never been distributed to anyone, running from 2 to 30 bulbs of one kind, between 3,500 and 4,000 in all. These would be highly prized by tulip lovers. The collection has been formed with the greatest care and knowledge during a period of 40 years and is one of the most valuable ever offered"*. The collection included 41 varieties which were Willison named seedlings.



After William's death the family left New Gardens. Detailed diaries and records of the plants and garden catalogues were kept by the family, tragically they were all lost in a fire in recent times.

Other plants bred by William, not mentioned in this article are *Clematis willisonii*, hybrid *Spiraeas*, *Euonymous*, *Ruscus*, *Calceolarias*, *Potentillas* and *Fushcia willisoniana*. In later life, William became very interested in ferns, some of which he collected in the wild, others he bred. The 1865 edition of *Our Native Ferns* includes a colour plate of *Lastrea felix mas* var 'Willisonii'

The horticultural accomplishments of William seem to have been forgotten now, but his contribution to breeding and developing not only tulips but many other plants cannot be overstated.

One final legacy of William. This was planted by William in 1864. After visiting New Gardens I discovered that cuttings were taken from this rose and it still exists locally and is called the New Garden rose.

photos at top of page
 left - sales catalogue
 right - Willison's grave in Whitby cemetery

AN ENORMOUS ROSE BUSH.—There is now growing at the **New Gardens, Whitby**, a rose tree which is attracting a great deal of attention from florists and horticulturists as well as from the general public. It is of the description known as the Marshal Niel. It was planted about eighteen years ago, and the extreme growth horizontally is no less than 102ft., 48ft. to the left and 5ft. to the right of the parent stem respectively. The average depth of the tree is 5ft. or 6ft. Last year no less than 2500 roses were plucked from it, and this extraordinary quantity will be greatly exceeded this season, no less than 3500 distinct flowers having been counted already.

above cutting from *The Dundee Courier & Argus*, Wednesday, May 10, 1882