

ERINUS ALPINUS Elizabeth Wrigley



ERINUS ALPINUS, the pretty wall flower we see growing in our locality each spring, has its own 'local history'. It is not a native of the area and we are not sure of when it was introduced but it is a rather special 'immigrant'. The plant has been around for a long time but how did it get here?

Erinus Alpinus, also known as the Fairy Foxglove or Alpen Balsam, has been established in local stone walls for some considerable time – probably for more than 140 years but no-one seems to know exactly when it was established here or who introduced it. Flowering in April and May it is suited to our stone walls as the plant does not like to be waterlogged. Erinus Alpinus albus – the white version – can be seen on the walls of Lidgett House; elsewhere the more commonly found purple flowers flourish on walls in Downham, Twiston and Chatburn. A search on the internet puts Erinus Alpinus in the plant family Scrophulariaceae but it is also noted in the family Plantaginaceae on some websites. The plant is a native of central and southern European mountainous areas, especially the Pyrenees. It is an introduction to the British Isles and is believed to be a garden escapee.

In the Downham Gazette, November 1889 edition, Rev Stocks remarks that the plant was not as rare in 1889 as it was when he discovered it in the vicarage garden in 1872 'a very small tuft on a wall in my garden'. He employed the skills of a botanist who declared that it was a 'rare stranger' and could not find it in the botanical books in his possession at the time. A specimen was sent to Kew Gardens where testimony to its rareness was also declared, although it had been seen on the banks of the river Yore in Yorkshire, near Tanfield. By 1889 it had spread 'all over the district' and was 'in almost every garden in our village'. 'Tom' - a correspondent of the old magazine, suggested that it might have been brought by the Romans whose road from Ribchester to Elslack passed close by. The plant was apparently found growing in the ruins of Hadrian's Wall.

Despite romantic tales of Romans bringing the plant to the district, merit for bringing this attractive little plant to Downham goes to Richard Assheton with 'Roman' a reasonably close clue. It seems the plant did not come from the Alps or the Pyrenees but is believed to have come from the Dolomites of Italy. The family story is that Great Uncle Dickie brought the plant back from Italy in the 19th century. In the 1880s Richard Assheton, great uncle of Lord Clitheroe, travelled widely with his brother Ralph but it could have been an earlier Richard Assheton, one generation before Ralph and Richard's travels, who brought the plant home for it to have been established by 1872 in the vicarage garden.

The story of Erinus Alpinus in our parish is rather special - it could be easily lost in time now that we can go to garden centres and pick up plants whose origins could be anywhere in the world.