

“John Gerard, the Herbalist” was the subject of a recent talk to Sandbach History Society by Graham Dodd.

Mr Dodd said that Gerard, the pre-eminent herbalist in Tudor times, was born in Nantwich in 1545 and attended school in Willaston. He said that he learned about plants in the fields and by-ways around Nantwich. Recounting his experiences with the (poisonous) yew tree, Gerard says, “for when I was young and went to schoole, divers of my schoole fellowes and likewise myself did eat our fils of the berries of this tree without any hurt at all.” Mr Dodd commented that he and his friends were very lucky.

In 1562, aged about 17 he moved to London and became an apprentice to Alexander Mason, a barber-surgeon of the Barber-Surgeons’ Company which had been formed in 1540. In 1569 he was admitted to freedom of the Company and in 1595 became a member of the Court of Assistants. In 1598 he was made an Examiner of candidates for admission to the freedom of the company and then Junior Warden. In 1607 he was elected Member of the Barber Surgeon’s Company. His career was therefore as a surgeon rather than a botanist, said Mr Dodd.

Gerard settled in London and had a garden of his own in Holborn. He collected plants and acquaintances supplied him with specimens from abroad. He encouraged the Barber-Surgeon’s Company to establish a garden for the cultivation and study of medicinal plants but apparently nothing came of it. However, in 1586 he was appointed curator of the physic garden of the College of Physicians.

A few years earlier, in 1577, he had been appointed superintendent of the gardens of William Cecil, Lord Burghley, chief advisor to Elizabeth I for most of her reign, which were located at the Strand and at Theobalds Palace in Hertfordshire. Another royal connection came in 1604 when he was granted a lease for one year on a garden adjoining Somerset House and, as herbalist to King James I, with a requirement to supply herbs, flowers and fruits to the royal household.

In 1596 Gerard published *Catalogue arborum*, the first ever catalogue of plants with over 1000 plants he cultivated in his garden at Holborn.

In the following year *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* was published and, said Mr Dodd, the art of gardening was born. The book had originally been commissioned by John Norton, the Queen’s printer. He had arranged for Robert Priest, a physician, to translate *Pemptades*, written by the Flemish herbalist Rembert Dodoens, and published in Latin in 1583 but Priest died whilst carrying out the work. Gerard completed the task.

Gerard’s *Herball* – which is actually three books in one volume (grasses, rushes, etc./herbs for “meat, medicine or sweet smelling use”/ trees, shrubs and bushes) – contained descriptions of more than 2000 plants. The 1800 illustrations were mainly taken from other publications.

A second edition of the book was published in 1633 (after the death of Gerard) and was edited by Thomas Johnson, a London apothecary. He took the opportunity to make

corrections and to add additional plants. He also replaced the illustrations with those supplied by Christophe Plantin of Antwerp. Mr Dodd said that this revised edition became the standard work for students of botany.

The Herball was very much criticised at the time for its errors; allegations of plagiarism (even though it was, in fact, only a translation) and the failure to acknowledge the work of Dr Priest. Nevertheless, it became the most widely circulated botany book in English in the 17th century and proved to be of great value to gardeners, physicians, apothecaries and ordinary people.

Mr Dodd said that it is reasonable to assume that Gerard visited Nantwich in his later life, given the number of references in *The Herball* to the town and to the area. For example, he refers to the “bramble or blacke-berry bushneere unto a village called Wisterson, where I went to schoole, two miles from Nantwich in Cheshire” and describes finding horse radish “wilde in sundrie places as at Namptwich in Cheshire.” Regarding whortleberries (i.e bilberries) he says they grow “upon the Hills in Cheshire called Broxen hills, neere Beeston castle, seven miles from Nantwich.”

Gerard was highly connected in London society. Sir Walter Raleigh was an enthusiastic plant collector and it was to him that Gerard dedicated the second edition of his *Catalogue arborum* in 1599. It is possible that Gerard acquired the Virginian potato from Raleigh, said Mr Dodd.

John Gerard and William Shakespeare were contemporaries in London, living in the same area, and they shared an interest in herb lore. They moved in the same circles, said Mr Dodd, and it is likely that they knew of one another even if they did not know one another. Shakespeare mentions plants and herbs in his work quite frequently, and a copy of the *Herball* was held at the house of Dr John Hall, Shakespeare’s son-in-law.

Little is known of John Gerard’s private life but he was married and died in 1612, aged 67, and is buried in St Andrews’ Church, Holborn.

Mr Dodd said it would be appropriate to end his talk by proposing a toast to John Gerard. He did so by quoting from the section in the *Herball* headed “Of the Manured Vine.”

“It restoreth strength most of all other things, and that speedily: It maketh a man merry and joyfull: It putteth away feare, care, troubles of minde and sorrow.

But Gerard goes on to caution, “...immoderate drinking of wine doth altogether bring the contrarie. They that are drunke are distraughted in minde, become foolish, and oppressed with a drowsie sleepinesse”

And advises, “Wherefore we thinke, that wine is not fit for men that be already of full age, unlesse it be moderately taken, because it carieth them headlong into fury and lust”

A booklet, “John Gerard and his *Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes*” by Helen Cooke and Graham Dodd, is available from Nantwich Museum price £2.95

www.nantwichmuseum.org.uk

The talk was followed by the Society’s annual meeting. The next season of talks begins in September at Sandbach Library. For details about Sandbach History Society see

www.sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk

John Higgins