

An unexpected rose

Charmian Astbury

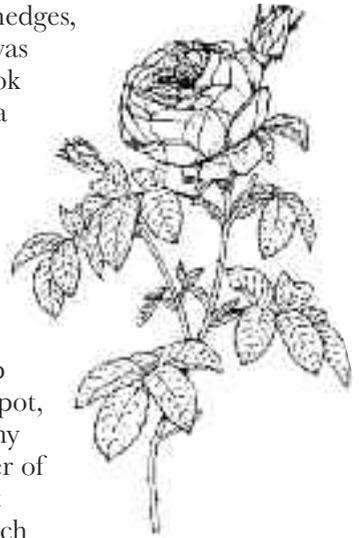
During the month of June my cottage garden, high above the North Devon coast, is filled with the colour and the perfume of its roses. Each and every one has its own particular history. Some have been with me since the beginning, such as the three old Harry Wheatcroft hybrid tea roses, Iceberg, Duke of Windsor, and Mary Cousins, the survivors of bargain pack purchases of years ago. I should have retired all three long since, but am quite unable to do so while they continue to produce their beautifully shaped and scented blooms year after year. Others, planned purchases, impulse buys, birthday presents, bring with them a variety of happy recollections. But the one rose that may well turn out to have the most interesting history of all is the one I call my Peppercombe rose, the unexpected rose.

Peppercombe is the name given to a small, steep wooded ravine that runs down from the coast road to the wild and boulder strewn rocky shore of Bideford Bay. There was once a large house tucked into the steep hillside there above the shore, a family house with a garden, orchard, fish holding pond and, a little lower down, boathouse. Hardly anything remains of the house or the boathouse now for their foundations were damaged during the great storm at the end of the 1890s. However, here and there, the area that supported the lawn, gardens and orchard does yield a few reminders of the earlier times. One such was the climbing rose that covered the stone outhouses by the bridge at the lower end of the ravine, once the approach to the house but now the way down to the shore.

This was a lovely rose, strong and healthy. It produced clusters of deep pink quite large globe-shaped blooms during its single flowering period. These were massed on the great arching stems that covered what remained of the old outbuilding walls. Probably planted at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, possibly as late as the First World War, I had known this rose for at least forty years. Its beauty and its longevity ensured that it was a very well-known rose in the area, much admired and commented upon. But even the most well-established plant is vulnerable to what unthinking man gets up to.

Over time, while walking my dogs down to the shore and back at Peppercombe, I had noticed that there appeared to be a certain lack of

awareness in those undertaking the upkeep of hedges, verges and old walls and buildings, as to what was growing there. (I had never been able to overlook that a vehicle of theirs had been reversed over a lovely clump of milkwort I had been hoping to photograph). And so, once I had realised that work was taking place on the old wall by the rose, I carefully pulled away a small healthy heel from near its base, wrapped the same in a tissue and placed it in my pocket - not perhaps the most accepted manner in which to propagate a rose. This I duly planted in a damp mix of soil and compost and placed the flower pot, slightly into the ground, among the shrubs of my wind break to the north-east. It joined a number of other plants I had tucked away there to prevent them being blown over or knocked over. At which point I more or less forgot about it.



My fears about the survival of the old climbing rose at Peppercombe had been well-founded. The repair work to the outbuilding walls proved to be its death knell. Rubble and builder's waste had been dumped right on top of where it grew. Although, even now, I continue hopefully to explore deep into the grasses and wild plants growing there, no new shoots have ever reappeared. However, the small off-shoot I had safely tucked away continued to thrive slowly and steadily, producing a few leaves in due season and then, about year three, a flower. At this point I thought that I should move it to a more suitable position. The rose was having none of it. A strong root and gone down into the earth through the hole in the base of the pot and it was firmly anchored. Not wishing to jeopardise its survival, I carefully cut away the pot and dug a wide hollow around the rose root. Then well-rotted compost was dug into the earth before easing the rose down into the loamy mix and firming it in with a small support. This year, five strong arching stems carried aloft their clusters of globe-shaped pink blooms from a most overshadowed position in the midst of a mainly evergreen shrubbery. I am still trying to track down an identity for the rose, but in the meantime I refer to it as my Peppercombe rose, the unexpected rose.

Charmian gardens in Bideford, North Devon.