

## NOTES & QUERIES

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### VICTORIAN ROYAL WEDDING FLOWERS: ORANGE, MYRTLE, AND THE APOTHEOSIS OF WHITE HEATHER

*The plants used at the weddings of Queen Victoria and her family between 1840 and 1913 are noticed in the contemporary Court Circulars published in The Times. These reports are extracted and the named plants tabulated. The contemporary records do not indicate that Queen Victoria carried a bouquet containing myrtle at her wedding, despite the persistence of the story into the present century, and despite innumerable claims that myrtle shrubs were propagated from the Queen's bouquet. Instead, myrtle was carried by the Princess Royal, Princess Victoria, at her wedding in 1858, after which the Queen commanded that the shrub should be propagated for future use. The other most frequently used flowers were orange blossom, the only flower worn by Queen Victoria, and white-flowered heather, which became a royal wedding flower also with the marriage of the Princess Royal.*

There is a persistent and seemingly ineradicable error that when Queen Victoria was married to Prince Albert on 10 February 1840, she carried a bouquet containing myrtle (*Myrtus communis*). From that myrtle there 'sprang' a bush, and from that bush and its descendants myrtle sprigs have been taken ever since for inclusion in the wedding bouquets carried both by royal brides and by commoners and in other decorations. There are countless myrtle shrubs reputed to have come from Queen Victoria's wedding bouquet.<sup>1</sup> Occasionally, the correct history is recounted: Elizabeth Grice's 'The mystery of the Queen's missing bouquet', in the *Daily Telegraph* (28 August 2007),<sup>2</sup> is a noteworthy example of accuracy, contrasting starkly with 'A list of 60 facts about The Queen and The Duke of Edinburgh to mark their Diamond Wedding Anniversary, published on 18 November 2007' issued on the 'official web site of the British Monarchy'<sup>3</sup> in which 'fact' number sixteen reads: 'The bride's [Princess Elizabeth's] wedding bouquet was supplied by the Worshipful Company of Gardeners and made by the Florist Mr MH Longman. It was of white orchids with a sprig of myrtle from the bush grown from the original myrtle in Queen Victoria's wedding bouquet.'

Although the World Wide Web may propagate untruths which cannot easily be corrected, it is also an efficient means of carrying out research that can elucidate events in the Victorian era. The entire run of *The Times* (from 1785 to 1985), for example, is available in facsimile and provides the Court Circulars which, in turn, allow verification of accounts of the use of flowers by royal brides, including Queen Victoria herself, her daughters and her daughters-in-law-elect.

Sometimes information was released in advance, and *The Times* included this 'for the gratification of our fair readers'.<sup>4</sup> The following extracts from *The Times* are arranged chronologically, beginning with Queen Victoria's own wedding on Monday, 10 February 1840, and concluding with that of her grandson Prince Arthur of Connaught in 1913. The descriptions of the elaborate dresses and the jewellery, and of decorations worn, are sometimes exceedingly detailed, so only the accounts of the floral adornments with whatever other particulars are essential to understand their employment have been extracted.

#### QUEEN VICTORIA TO PRINCE ALBERT

*Her Majesty's costume:* For the gratification of our fair readers we may state that Her Majesty's dress will be of rich white satin, trimmed with orange-flower-blossoms. Head-dress – A wreath of orange flower blossoms, and over this a beautiful veil of Honiton lace.

Her Majesty wore no diamonds on her head, nothing but a simple wreath of orange blossom. (11 February 1840, p. 4)

#### PRINCESS AUGUSTA OF CAMBRIDGE TO PRINCE FREDERICK, GRAND DUKE OF MECKLENBURGH- STRELITZ

The dress of the Princess Augusta was of Brussels lace ... The front of the *tunique* was raised on one side with a *guirlande* of orange flowers and myrtle (the myrtle being introduced with the orange flowers as the emblematic flower of Germany), and on the other side a *bouquet* of the

same. The train ... was ... edged with a silver *rouleau*, above which ran broad Brussels lace, looped up at distances with *bouquets* of orange blossoms and myrtle ... The head-dress ... consisted of a wreath of orange flowers and myrtle ... The bride-cake ... [was] encircled by a wreath of candied white roses, while immediately above were garlands of orange-flowers, and rose-buds with silver leaves. Around the top of the cake a movable cornice was formed of ... little tiny hands, in sugar-work, filled with love bows, encircled with silver bracelets, and holding a bouquet of orange flowers, Portuguese laurel, and myrtle buds. (29 June 1843, p. 5)

THE PRINCESS ROYAL TO CROWN PRINCE  
FREDERICK WILLIAM OF PRUSSIA

In these ceremonies we believe the dress of the Bride ranks only next in importance to the celebration of the service ... At the top of each flounce in front of the dress are wreaths of orange and myrtle blossoms, – the latter being the bridal flower of Germany – every wreath terminating in bouquets of the same flowers, and the length of each being so graduated as to give the appearance of a robe defined by flowers. The apex of this floral pyramid is formed by a large bouquet worn on the girdle ... The dresses worn by the [bridesmaids] ... are from a design furnished by the illustrious bride herself. They consist of a white glacé petticoat, entirely covered by six deep tulle flounces, over which falls a tunic of tulle trimmed with ruches of tulle, looped up on one side with a bouquet of pink roses and white heather. The body is trimmed with draperies of tulle, with hanging sleeves of the same material trimmed with ruches. A bouquet of the same flowers is worn in the girdle and upon each shoulder. (26 January 1858, p. 7)

PRINCESS ALEXANDRA OF DENMARK TO PRINCE  
EDWARD, PRINCE OF WALES

*The Princess Alexandra's Bridal Bouquet* – It will doubtless interest our readers to learn that Mr. James Veitch, jun., of the Royal Exotic Nursery, King's-road, Chelsea, had, by special permission of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, the honour of presenting the wedding bouquet. It was of the most beautiful description, being composed of orange blossoms, white rose buds, rare orchideous flowers, and sprigs of myrtle, with a trimming of Honiton lace. The myrtle was, by express command

of Her Majesty, sent from Osborne, and was taken from plants reared from the sprigs used in the bridal bouquet which Mr. Veitch had the honour to present to her Royal Highness the Princess Royal. It is, we understand, Her Majesty's desire to have myrtle plants raised and kept in the gardens at Osborne from each of the bridal bouquets of the Royal family in remembrance of these auspicious events. (11 March 1863, p. 12)<sup>5</sup>

PRINCESS HELENA TO PRINCE CHRISTIAN OF  
SCHLESWIG-HOLSTEIN

Her Royal Highness Princess Helena wore a bridal dress of rich white satin, with deep flounces of Honiton guipure, the train of extra length, trimmed with bouquets of orange blossom and myrtle, lined with white glacé and trimmed with Honiton guipure, with cordons and bouquets of orange blossom and myrtle ... The wreath was composed of orange blossoms and myrtle, and the bridal veil (a square) was of the choicest Honiton lace, to match the dress ... Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales wore a dress of blue tulle over blue silk, richly trimmed with Irish lace, ribands and lilies of the valley ... Her Royal Highness Princess Louise wore a petticoat of white tulle over white glacé trimmed with a deep flounce of Irish point lace ... head dress, blush roses, feathers, and veil ...

Her Royal Highness the Princess Beatrice wore a dress similar to that of Princess Louise.

The bridesmaids wore white tulle skirts, trimmed with buillons of tulle over white glacé slips, with tunics of silver tulle and chatelaines of flowers; forget-me-nots, blush roses, and heather, with wreaths and veils to match. (6 July 1866, p. 9)

PRINCESS LOUISE TO THE MARQUIS OF LORNE

The wedding dress of her Royal Highness Princess Louise was of rich white satin, covered with a deep flounce of Honiton point lace trimmed with cordons of orange blossoms, white heathers, and myrtle, and a train of white satin trimmed to correspond with the dress. Her Royal Highness wore a wreath of orange blossoms and myrtle, with a veil of Honiton lace ... the flowers supplied by Mr. Nestor Sirard ... On leaving the Castle after the marriage ceremony her Royal Highness wore ... a white chip bonnet, with a wreath of lilies of the valley and orange blossoms ... Her Royal Highness Princess Beatrice wore a dress

of pink satin, trimmed with Brussels lace; a wreath of white heather; and emerald, diamond, and pearl ornaments ... The bridesmaids' dresses were of white glacé silk trimmed with satin, and a tunic of gossamers and fringe, cerise roses, white heather and ivy, with wreaths to correspond ... the flowers supplied by Mr Nestor Sirard. (22 March 1871, p. 10)

GRAND DUCHESS MARIE ALEXANDROVNA TO  
PRINCE ALFRED, DUKE OF EDINBURGH (IN ST  
PETERSBURG)

The Grand Duchess ... carries a Prayer-book bound in white and a bouquet of white and purple flowers ... The bouquet held by the bride ... was from the Queen [Victoria] ... It contained sprigs of myrtle from the tree at Osborne, from which were plucked sprigs for the Princess Royal's bouquet ten [*sic*] years ago. (24 January 1874, p. 9)

PRINCESS LUISE MARGARETE OF PRUSSIA TO  
PRINCE ALBERT, DUKE OF CONNAUGHT AND  
STRATHEARN

The bride ... wore a heavy white satin dress ... The skirt was ... decorated with bunches of myrtle-leaves, the emblem in Germany of the bridal state ... The Princess wore a beautiful bridal wreath, and had a bouquet of white flowers in her hand. Her bridesmaids wore dresses of the richest white satin duchesse faille and mousseline de soie, embroidered with wild rose-buds and foliage, flowers representing England, Scotland, Ireland and Germany being employed as trimmings for the skirt and body ... When the Princess reached the daïs her bridegroom took her bouquet, which he handed to one of the bridesmaids. (14 March 1879, p. 10)

PRINCESS HELENA OF WALDECK-PYRMONT TO  
PRINCE LEOPOLD, DUKE OF ALBANY

The trousseau of Princess Helen is being supplied from Paris ... The [bridesmaids'] dresses are of white moire antique, trimmed with white satin, the headdresses being composed of cluster of violets, primroses, and white heather bloom. (20 April 1882, p. 9)

PRINCESS BEATRICE TO PRINCE HENRY OF  
BATTENBURG

Her Royal Highness the Princess Beatrice wore a dress of white satin draped with Honiton lace and trimmed with bouquets of orange-blossom, myrtles, and white heather.

The beautiful bouquet of choice white flowers which the Princess carried was presented to her by Mr. Veitch. In the centre was a sprig of myrtle from a tree at the Swiss Cottage at Osborne, which was struck from a similar sprig in a bouquet presented to the Crown Princess of Germany on her marriage, 25th June, 1858, also by Mr. Veitch.

Her Royal Highness ... wore when she left Osborne ... a white bonnet entirely covered with white heather, in which was placed a branch of orange-blossoms ... The bridesmaids wore white satin dresses ... trimmed with lace and pink and white carnations. (27 July 1885, p. 6)

PRINCESS VICTORIA MARY ('MAY') OF TECK TO  
PRINCE GEORGE, DUKE OF YORK

Princess May's wedding-gown is exceedingly beautiful. The material used is a rich silver and white brocade ... It is quite untrimmed except by a narrow berthe of finest Honiton point-lace, headed by a trail of orange-blossom gathered into a cluster at the bust, and with a sprig of white heather introduced ... The front of the bridal gown is of beautiful white satin, arranged, with three festooned flounces of Honiton point matching that on the corsage, but much wider. The upper flounce is outlined by a trail of orange-blossoms, caught in the centre with heather ... The side seams, marking the division between the silver brocade and the white satin petticoat, are overlaid with trails of orange-blossoms, terminating in a cluster, in which the white heather again appears ... The Princess will carry a shower bouquet, composed of rare white flowers, the old white Provence rose 'House of York' predominating. Choice white orchids, the new white carnation – appropriately christened 'The Bride' – lilies of the valley, myrtle, orange-blossoms, delicate fern and other foliage complete the exquisite bouquet, which is tied with white corded ribands. (6 July 1893, p. 6)

PRINCESS ALEXANDRA, DUCHESS OF FIFE, TO  
PRINCE ARTHUR OF CONNAUGHT

The Duchess of Fife's wedding gown is a very simple one ... The bride will wear a long embroidered tulle veil ... which will be arranged somewhat in a mob-cap form on the head and encircled with a wreath of orange blossom and white heather. She will wear pearl ornaments and carry a bouquet of orange blossoms and white heather ... Princess Maud, as chief bridesmaid ... will wear a wreath of small pink roses and buds, and she will carry a bouquet of white heather. (10 October 1913, p. 5)

#### ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

By far the favourite flower for the Victorian royal brides was orange blossom (Table 1). It was the only floral adornment at the Queen's own wedding in 1840,<sup>6</sup> and was to be used on seven other occasions in various ways. The brides who did not wear or carry orange blossom were all daughters-in-law from other European royal houses. Princess Beatrice was an exception among Victoria's daughters in not wearing it during the marriage ceremony, only in her going-away bonnet.

Nine brides wore or carried myrtle, but not Queen Victoria. The first 'Victorian' bride to do so was Princess Augusta of Cambridge, the Queen's first cousin, in 1843 when it was explicitly indicated that the myrtle was emblematic of Germany. The same reason is associated with it at the marriage of the Princess Royal in 1858.<sup>7</sup> However, after those nuptials, the myrtle became transformed into a family marriage flower, its justification being that the myrtle had been in the Princess Royal's bouquet. This may help explain the error in attributing it to Queen Victoria's wedding bouquet – the Princess Royal's name was also Victoria. That this myrtle was important to the family is clearly shown by its appearance during January 1874 in St Petersburg at the wedding of the Duke of Edinburgh and Grand Duchess Marie Alexandrovna, and by its continuing use in the twenty-first century.

After myrtle, white heather was the third favourite being worn or carried at seven of the weddings. What is most remarkable is that its first appearance was at the Princess Royal's wedding in January 1858 forming centrepieces in clusters of roses worn by the bridesmaids.<sup>8</sup> The story about the white heather sprig plucked by Crown Prince Frederick William on the day in September 1856 when he asked Princess Victoria, the Princess Royal, to be his bride was certainly not in the public domain in January 1858.<sup>9</sup> White heather was more often among the bridesmaids' flowers, and Princess Louise was, it seems, the first bride to wear it. Undoubtedly this happened in recognition that (as an obituary of Baron Hatherley revealed) 'the Princess and the

Marquis of Lorne [had] plighted their troth' at a bush of white heather like her elder sister.<sup>10</sup> However, the most extravagant use of this flower was by Princess Beatrice, whose going-away costume included a white bonnet covered with white heather.

While we can be confident of the identity of myrtle, *Myrtus communis*, and can assume that the 'orange blossom' was from a cultivar of *Citrus* (probably *Citrus × aurantium*), the identification of the white heather remains enigmatic. Heather was used at weddings in January, March, April, July (three times) and October. The earlier ones must have used tree heath, *Erica arborea*, or Portuguese heath, *Erica lusitanica* (usually known during the Victorian era as *Erica codonodes*). In March and April those heathers would still have been in bloom in Britain, as well as white-flowered clones of winter heath, *Erica carnea*, and Irish (or Mediterranean) heath, *Erica erigena* (called *Erica mediterranea* in Victorian times). In July, a larger choice was possible, including early blooming, white-flowered cultivars of ling, *Calluna vulgaris*, or bell heather, *Erica cinerea*. Even St Dabeoc's heath, *Daboecia cantabrica*, could have been used, although it is not ideally suited for use as a cut flower because it tends to shed the corollas soon after picking. For an October wedding, ling would have been the most likely choice.

In the 'language of flowers', orange blossom stood for chastity, so it is not surprising that Victorian brides selected it first and foremost.<sup>11</sup> Myrtle was emblematic of love. Until Victorian lore changed its meaning, or rather added to it, heather meant solitude; after about 1870, white heather meant 'good luck'.<sup>12</sup> Yet, perhaps that meaning was not always implicit. There is another early reference among the Court Circulars to the use of white heather by a member of the Royal family, in this case Princess Helena (Queen Victoria's third daughter). At the Queen's Court on 21 June 1864 'Her Royal Highness the Princess Helena wore a dress of blue grenadine ... headdress of tinted roses and white heather, diamond ornaments.'<sup>13</sup>

By the early twentieth century, white heather was a very popular bridal flower, not just at royal weddings, and the erroneous tale about the myrtle in Queen Victoria's bouquet was widely perpetuated. When the Duke of York married Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon on 26 April 1923, the bride wore a 'simple wreath of orange blossom with a white rose at either side' and her bouquet was reported to contain white heather and white roses with lily-of-the-valley (which is also white-flowered).<sup>14</sup> The bridesmaids' dresses each also had 'a silver rose and white heather at the side'. The people 'thronging the footpaths' to watch the royal procession from Westminster Abbey to Buckingham Palace waved 'handkerchiefs and sprigs of white heather'.<sup>15</sup>

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Table 1. Summary of the plants used at royal weddings, 1840–1913

Bride, date	Costume	Orange	Myrtle	White heather	Rose	Other plants
Queen Victoria, February 1840	Dress	*				
	Headdress	*				
Augusta, June 1843	Dress	*	*			
	Headdress	*	*			
	Cake	*	*		*	Portugal laurel ( <i>Prunus lusitanica</i> )
Princess Royal, January 1858	Dress	*	*			
	Bridesmaid's dress			*	*	
Alexandra, March 1863	Bouquet	*	*		*	Orchids
Helena, July 1866	Dress	*	*			
	Wreath	*	*			
	Bridesmaid's dress			*	*	Forget-me-not ( <i>Myosotis</i> sp.)
Louise, March 1871	Dress	*	*	*		
	Headdress	*	*			
	Bridesmaid's dress			*	*	Ivy ( <i>Hedera helix</i> )
Marie Alexandrovna, January 1874	Bouquet		*			Not specified
Luise Margarete, March 1879	Dress		Leaves			
	Bouquet					'White flowers'
Helena, April 1882	Bridesmaid's headdress			*		Violets ( <i>Viola</i> sp.); primroses ( <i>Primula vulgaris</i> )
	Dress					
Beatrice, July 1885	Bouquet		*			
	Bonnet	*		*		
	Bridesmaid's dress					Carnations ( <i>Dianthus caryophyllus</i> )
	Dress	*		*		
Victoria Mary, July 1893	Shower bouquet	*	*		*	'Rare white flowers': orchids; carnation 'The Bride'; lily- of-the-valley ( <i>Convallaria majalis</i> )
	Dress					
Alexandra, October 1913	Wreath	*		*		
	Bouquet	*		*		

Note: \*Flowers; see the text for a discussion of the identification of 'orange' and 'white heather'.

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> For example, Nora McMillan, 'Queen Victoria's myrtle', *Moorea*, 10/27 (XXXX); George P. Monger, *Marriage Customs of the World: From Henna to Honeymoons* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004); and Roy Vickery, *A Dictionary of Plant-lore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- <sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Grice, 'The mystery of the Queen's missing bouquet', *Daily Telegraph* (28 August 2007) (available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/portal/main.jhtml?xml=/portal/2007/08/28/nosplit/ftflowers128.xml>) (accessed 26 October 2008).
- <sup>3</sup> See <http://www.royal.gov.uk/output/Page6131.asp> (accessed 26 October 2008). Contemporary reports, in *The Times*, for example, on 14 November 1947, refer only to white orchids in the bouquet. However, *The Times* reported (21 November 1947, p. 4) that the bouquet that was left after the wedding on the tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Westminster Abbey by the Dean of Westminster, at the princess's request, was of 'white orchids, carnations and other white flowers', presumably because the actual bouquet carried at the ceremony had been mislaid. On the other hand, for the wedding breakfast the table decorations for the centre table had 'white flowers with sprigs of heather and of myrtle struck from a bush grown from a sprig from the wedding bouquet of Queen Victoria' (*ibid.*, p. 6).
- <sup>4</sup> *The Times* (10 February 1840), p. 5.
- <sup>5</sup> The princess's wedding flowers were not all real, because a 'Sprig of artificial orange blossom from Princess Alexandra's bridal wreath' is in the Royal Collections (RCIN 54331.a; image available on Royal Collections' e-gallery at: <http://www.royalcollection.org.uk/eGallery/>; accessed 27 October 2008).
- This is accompanied by a card on which is written 'From Alix's ... Bridal Wreath March 10<sup>th</sup>/63'. The principal flower, shown wide open and composed of five white petals and numerous stamens, has been modelled on *Myrtus communis* (myrtle); it cannot have been modelled using the flower of a member of the genus *Citrus* (including *Citrus × aurantium*, orange). The foliage is proportionately too small for *Citrus* and also morphologically inaccurate if it is meant to represent orange. However, it does resemble the foliage of *Myrtus*. Complicating this identification, however, are the three other flowers – two buds and one partly open flower seen in side-view – because these most closely resemble the buds and flowers of a *Citrus*.
- <sup>6</sup> In 1839, before their marriage, Prince Albert gave a brooch, in the form of a sprig of orange with flowers, to his future bride; the Prince also designed the brooch (RCIN 65306.1a–b; image available at: <http://www.royalcollection.org.uk/eGallery/>; accessed 27 October 2008). The leaves and stems are gold, the two flower buds and the two flowers are in white enamel. The details are botanically correct (cf. the sprig of artificial 'orange blossom' from Princess Alexandra's bridal wreath cited in note 5 above).
- <sup>7</sup> McMillan, 'Queen Victoria's myrtle', p. 27.
- <sup>8</sup> E. Charles Nelson, 'Lucky white heather: a sesquicentennial review of a Scottish Victorian deceit', *Heathers* 3 (XXXX), p. 40.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41–3.
- <sup>10</sup> *The Times* (11 July 1881), p. 4.
- <sup>11</sup> There were numerous issues and editions: I have used *The Language of Flowers* (London: Milner & Sowerby, c.1871).
- <sup>12</sup> Nelson, 'Lucky white heather', pp. 40–1.
- <sup>13</sup> *The Times* (22 June 1864), p. 11.
- <sup>14</sup> *The Times* (26 April 1923), suppl., p. vii.
- <sup>15</sup> *The Times* (27 April 1923), p. 14.

In 1845, Albert gave Victoria orange blossom brooch and matching earrings, and the following year his gift of an orange blossom wreath celebrated their wedding anniversary. Queen Victoria's choice of floral emblem and white silk wedding dress became the standard wedding attire for generations of Victorian brides. Princess Victoria, Princess Alice, Princess Helena, Princess Louise, Princess Louise Margaret of Prussia, Princess Helena of Waldeck and Pymont, Princess Beatrice and Princess Alexandra, all had orange blossom as part of the design of their wedding dresses. This tradition contin Victorian ideals of weddings, romantic love, and purity were projected backwards to rewrite the white dress as a symbol of innocence and virginity rather than wealth. The trend caught on, and Queen Victoria's own 1840s-style wedding dress—the slim waist, the lace, the full nineteenth-century skirt over petticoats and crinolines—is still considered the most recognizable “wedding” silhouette. Victorian royal wedding flowers: orange, myrtle, and the apotheosis of white heather. By: E. CHARLES NELSON. *Garden History*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Winter 2009), pp. 231-236.