

Middleton and John Ray

Jo Walker from Middleton Hall on the story behind an historic and rare rose

Middleton Hall is a Grade II* listed manor with a museum housed in buildings spanning 750 years of architectural styles. The surrounding estate covers 42 acres and includes a Site of Special Scientific Interest, a walled garden and shops. Now restored the Hall is run by a small independent charitable trust. Middleton Hall has had a wide variety of owners and tenants.

Two of our most famous residents were the great naturalists Francis Willughby (who spelt his name this way) and his tutor, friend and collaborator John Ray.

Francis' work on birds 'Ornithologia' and on fish

'Historia Piscium' were published after his death by John Ray. John Ray tutored Francis' children whilst he stayed at Middleton Hall and remained at the Hall for a number of years after Francis' death. It was at Middleton that he developed his original works on Natural History including his 'History of Plants'.

John Ray (1627-1705) Philosopher and writer, cleric, traveller and taxonomist, deserves a wider reputation. His botanical works - 'Historiae Plantarum' and 'Methodus Plantarum Nova', were published 1682.

Known as the father of English natural history, John Ray's system of plant classification became more popular than that of Morison, and was in general use in England until the latter half of the 18th century, when it



Rose "John Ray" is believed to survive only in Middleton Hall's walled garden

was gradually superseded by the Linnean method which was first applied to English botany in Dr J. Hill's Flora Britannica 1760.

Ray enjoyed the advantage of a very long period of productive activity: in the thirty-four years that separated his Tables of Plants from his Methodus Emendata et Aucta, he had time to revise and remodel his system.

During his residence in Cambridge, Ray devoted much of his time to the study of natural history, a study which



Walled garden and gazebo—the gardens are also open on the day



The moat entrance to Middleton Hall. The hall is open and ready to explore during our plant fair.



We were blessed with a lovely, sunny spring day for our first ever plant fair at Middleton Hall in 2015

afterwards became his chief occupation. The first fruit of his labours in this direction was the *Catalogus Plantarum circa Cantabrigiam nascentium*, published in 1660, followed in due course by many works, for he was a prolific author, botanical and zoological as well as theological and literary, of which only those can be considered at present which contributed materially to the development of systematic botany.

He studied and graduated with such distinction at the University of Cambridge, that he was in due course elected a Fellow of, and appointed a Lecturer in, his College (Trinity). Here he remained until 1662. After leaving Cambridge he spent some years traveling both in Britain and on the continent; and eventually settled at Black

Notley. He was working on a book on insects when he died on January 17, 1705.

The *History of Plants* is the naturalist John Ray's greatest work. In three magnificent folio volumes Ray classified plants in the first place using the differences amongst seeds. He distinguished flowering plants by their flowers, seeds, fruit and leaves and had separate categories for fungi and lichens, mosses and herbs. Ray managed to classify according to many of the natural families that are recognised today even though his taxonomical principles were primitive. The word 'historia' in the title of this work reminds us of Bacon's influence on the Royal Society of which Ray was a member. Natural philosophy was conceived as assembling natural histories and Ray understood his work as a contribution to this

task.

Middleton Hall, is believed, to have the only example left in the country of the John Ray rose in its walled gardens. Volunteer gardeners have taken up the challenge of attempting to propagate this beautiful and fragrant rose. Ruth Springer the Hall's Volunteer Head Gardener said 'We have 6 plants in total in our gardens and want to make sure that we have new plants to replace any that we may lose. The best time to propagate roses is from new growth, however we did not want to wait until the spring so we have decided to try our luck with cuttings created when we cut back the roses this autumn, ready for the winter. We are starting to see signs of new growth at the shoots and are hopeful that we will be successful in our attempts to protect this rare and historically significant rose.'

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