

OBSERVE, COLLECT, PRESERVE

Caroline Zoob shares her appreciation of herbarium sheets and, in the first of a series of articles, introduces the idea of re-creating them in different forms.



Who hasn't pressed a flower, either in a flower press or, for sentimental reasons, slipped between the pages of a book? Is there anything more touching than opening a book and finding a papery, faded flower, recalling memories forgotten until that moment?

Pressed flowers, grasses and other plant material are inspiring for the embroiderer. Freshly picked, their three-dimensional forms can be dauntingly hard to capture. Pressed, their forms are cleaner, yet there is enough texture to inspire, and there is also a serendipitous quality to the pressed form. The muted palette is pleasing to work with: the original colours rarely survive. The roots are an important part of both herbals and herbaria because they were crucial to identifying a plant's medicinal properties.

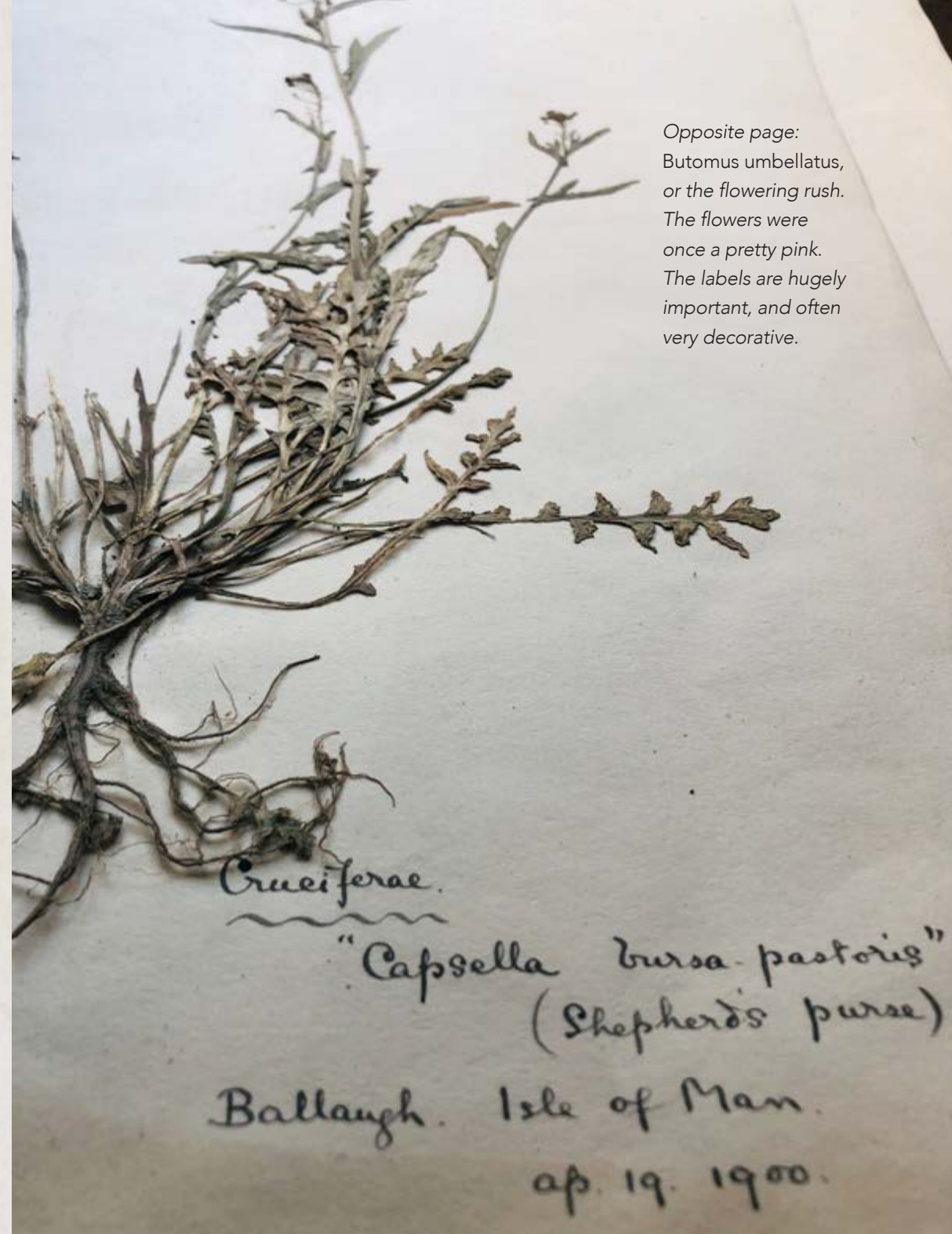
It seems appropriate, in the bicentenary year of Joseph Banks, the first director ➤

*Left: Epilobium parviflorum, commonly known as the hoary willowherb or smallflower hairy willowherb.
This page: Note the impression made by the hoary willowherb.
Right from top: Angelica sylvestris or, charmingly, Angélique des forêts, cow parsley and ox-eye daisy.*





of Kew and a keen botanist whose herbarium now resides in the Natural History Museum, to celebrate the herbarium, *herbier, hortus siccus* or dried garden: the art of preserving plant matter in dried form taped on to large sheets of 'Whited brown paper' rather than a brown paper that 'spoils the plants'. It is a practice which has changed little since it began in the mid-sixteenth century. Sometimes, the labels are miniature works of art in themselves, written in exquisite, spidery copperplate. Not only are herbarium sheets beautiful, they are a valuable scientific resource, and botanists exchange herbaria details in their work on contemporary taxonomic, evolutionary and ecological research. The specimens in the Joseph Banks' herbarium were collected ➡



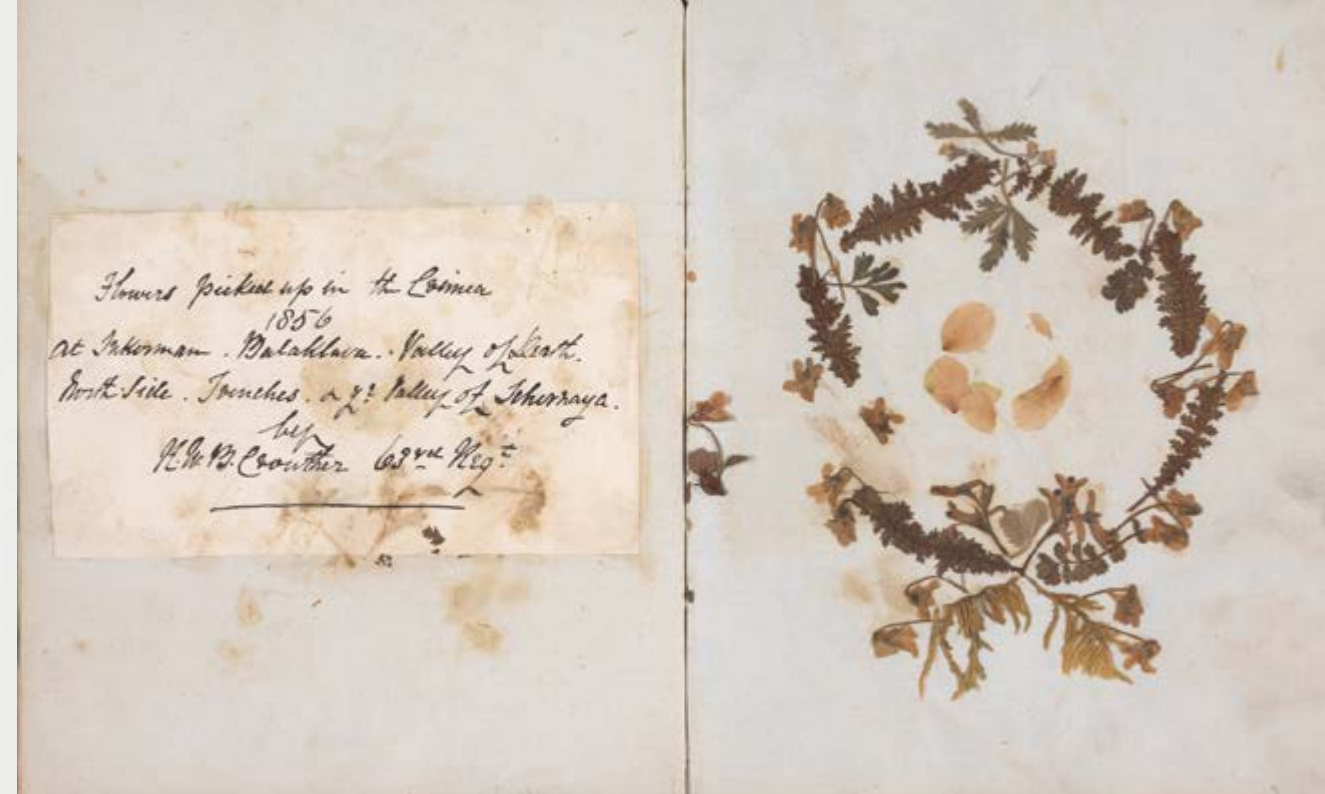
Opposite page:
Butomus umbellatus,
 or the flowering rush.
 The flowers were
 once a pretty pink.
 The labels are hugely
 important, and often
 very decorative.



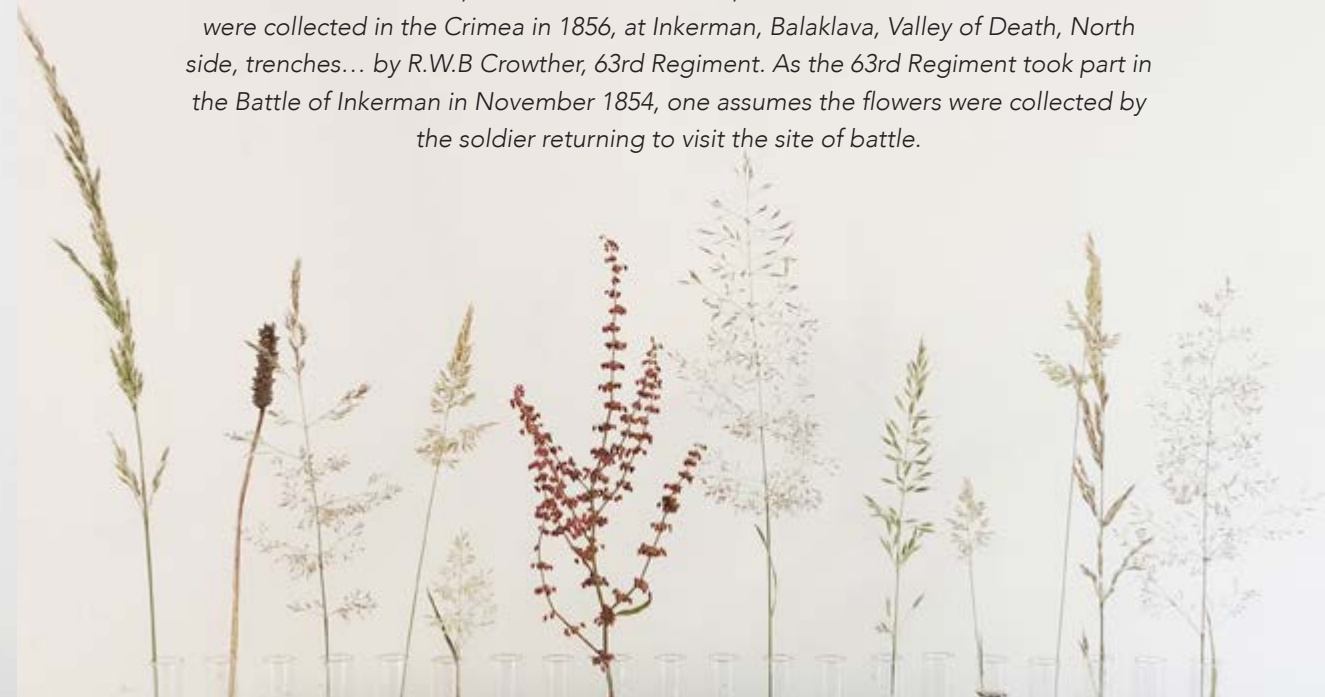
by Banks and Daniel Solander — at that time 'the most knowledgeable botanist in Britain' — during James Cook's 1768-1771 expedition on HMS *Endeavour* to observe 'the passage of the Planet Venus over the Disc of the Sun'. After considerable persuasion and investment by the wealthy Banks, he was given permission by the Admiralty to assemble a team and join the expedition, for which, among an impossibly long list of unwieldy equipment, were reams of drying, pressing and mounting paper and a series of presses.

In the 'enlightened' eighteenth century, herbaria were created to record the hitherto unknown. New plants and seeds were arriving on our shores from afar and self-taught naturalists, wealthy and poor, made great efforts to interpret and understand nature, particularly with drawing and painting. They were encouraged to 'observe, collect and preserve'. Now we do this with our smart phones, but, lockdown having brought us all closer to the natural world, it seems to me that a new trend for journaling has arisen, akin to that of Victorian and Edwardian times, when many women delighted in combining drawing, painting, scrapbooking and collage with the study of science and botany to create beautiful 'commonplace' books containing original ➤

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Above: Leaf 1 from an album of pressed plant, flower and seaweed specimens collected in Great Britain, Ireland and the Crimea, between 1856 and 1863. The flowers were collected in the Crimea in 1856, at Inkerman, Balaklava, Valley of Death, North side, trenches... by R.W.B Crowther, 63rd Regiment. As the 63rd Regiment took part in the Battle of Inkerman in November 1854, one assumes the flowers were collected by the soldier returning to visit the site of battle.



Specimens of Sea Weeds.



*Call us not weeds we are flowers of the Sea.
For lovely & bright & gay indeed we are.
And with independent of sunbeams or showers.
Thou wilt our not weeds we are, we are gay flowers.*

SEAWEED BASKET

Amateur natural history and artistry combined in the Victorian era. Seaweed, 'by Lady's gentle fingering displayed,' was described by a contemporary critic as 'exquisite paintings'. Seaweeds were compared to 'fine tracery and fragments of velvet' and certainly the basket of seaweeds opposite, forming the title page of an 1840 volume of *Specimens of Seaweed*, begs to be embroidered. I have pulled some threads from my collection as a starting point. In laying them out, I have realised this is a useful way of gathering threads for any piece because it allows you to see the solid colour as well as the fine threads.

Seaweed offers an opportunity to step right away from formal stitches and experiment with weaving, leaving threads lying on the surface, creating long loops that you then cut, manipulating the loose threads, layering them on top of each other, adding a few French knots but also covering areas with tiny stab stitches, very close together, interspersed with knots and loops. You could even use some hand-painted scraps of linen for some of the more solid pieces of weed and the basket.



All Weeks Dye Works unless stated. GA=Gentle Art

1 GA Green Tea Leaf 2 GA Grape Leaf 3 Cornsilk 4 GA Raspberry Frost 5 Angel Hair
6 Faun 7 DMC 372 8 Arrowhead 9 GA Dried Thyme 10 Chablis 11 Baked Apple
12 Cattail 13 GA Clover/Tea Rose mix