

Nicholas Culpeper - The Complete Herbal Hero

by Michael Blencowe of the Sussex Wildlife Trust

Just over 400 years ago, in 1616, a legend was born; a rebel who partnered up with Mother Nature to revolutionise British medicine. The herbal hero, the botanical bad boy, the father of alternative medicine - ladies and gentlemen, I give you Nicholas Culpeper.

Culpeper did his growing up upstream in Isfield, just north of Lewes. The country lanes and starry Sussex skies were his classroom and the hedges and the heavens taught him botany, astronomy and astrology. He learnt about love too. In 1634, Culpeper and his Sussex sweetheart planned a secret Lewes wedding and a speedy elopement to the Netherlands. But tragedy struck when his love-struck lady's carriage was struck by a lightning bolt en-route to the ceremony. She died instantly.

There's no cure for a broken heart and Culpeper left Sussex to start a new life in London. He threw himself into his work as a lowly apothecary's assistant, cataloguing medicinal herbs on Threadneedle Street. At this time, medicine was only practiced by elite physicians. They would charge exorbitant prices for their secret remedies and would not even demean themselves to talk to patients, instead requesting a sample of urine to make their diagnosis. Culpeper believed medical treatment should be available to all - not just the privileged. Setting up his own practice in a poorer part of London, Culpeper started treating forty patients a day with herbal cures derived from English plants. Then he dropped his botanical bombshell. Culpeper published an incredible tome that instructed people how to pick their own remedies, free of charge, from the hedges and meadows. The book was 'The English Physitian' (1652, later enlarged as 'The Complete Herbal'). His book promoted and preserved folk remedies at a time when physicians and priests were discrediting village healers and preventing them from passing along their traditional knowledge. Enraged, the medical establishment accused Culpeper of witchcraft. But his Complete Herbal endured. It's been in continuous print longer than any other non-religious English language book, running rings around Tolkien and Rowling and their tales of hocus-pocus.

No doubt Culpeper's herbal remedies could have come in useful for some of you over the festive period; wild privet (for headaches), blackthorn (for indigestion), rosemary (for flatulence) and the juice of ivy berries 'snuffed up into the nose' (for hangovers). So, start 2021 by raising your Nutribullets and ginseng teas to the healing properties of Mother Nature, and to four centuries of Nicholas Culpeper.

Sussex Wildlife Trust is an independent charity caring for wildlife and habitats throughout Sussex. Founded in 1961, we have worked with local people for over half a century to make Sussex richer in wildlife. We rely on the support of our members to help protect our rich natural heritage. Please consider supporting our work. As a member you will be invited to join Michael Blencowe on our regular wildlife walks and also enjoy free events, discounts on wildlife courses, Wildlife magazine and our Sussex guide book, Discovering Wildlife. It's easy to join online at sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/join