**On the Wildside**

**The Mountain Pansy in Berwickshire**

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The very first Flora of Scotland, *Flora Scotica,* was written by the Reverend John Lightfoot and published in London in 1777. Lightfoot was an English clergyman who in 1772 made a famous and very intrepid tour of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland on which he recorded many plants in Britain for the first time. His interpretation of a ‘Flora’ was rather broad as it included mammals, birds and fish and he even described the wild white cattle at Chillingham Castle in Northumberland. He may have visited Berwickshire on his tour as he included in his book, a plant he called the ‘Great yellow Violet’ from ‘two miles south of Fast-Castle’ which may be at Earnsheugh where it still grows. Nowadays it is called the Mountain Pansy, *Viola lutea*, and it is one of our most beautiful though diminutive native wild flowers.

Our most celebrated 19th century botanist, George Johnston, the founder of the Berwickshire Naturalists’ Club, knew the plant well, and in his *Botany of the Eastern Borders* in 1853 mentioned its habitat preference ‘it is found especially on the green tops of the hills that are occupied with the remains of the camps of the ancient British people.’ This is still true today, where the plant is found in windswept grassland on the hilltops with Iron Age forts and settlements, for example on Cockburn Law, Duns Law, Raecleughhead near Duns, and very abundantly on Lauder Common.

No other native Berwickshire plant seems to share this pattern, so did the Iron age inhabitants of Berwickshire cultivate this to add a splash of yellow to their surroundings? This seems unlikely and the present distribution is probably because these grassy and often rocky hill-tops have never been ploughed since the Iron Age, allowing the plant to flourish and survive for centuries. The flowers of most of the Berwickshire plants (as in the photograph taken near Lauder), are pure yellow in colour, but in just a few places locally, but very commonly in the Scottish Highlands, the flowers can be bright purple or a mixture of yellow and purple.

In Berwickshire we have several different wild Pansies or Violets, the most frequent and familiar being the Common Violet, *Viola riviniana*, most often found in broadleaf woodlands such as Duns Castle Woods. The rarest is the Hairy Violet, *Viola hirta*, a very rare species of calcareous coastal grasslands. In wet heaths and damp meadows the Marsh Violet *Viola palustris* can be found; it is important as the food plant of the Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary, a local rarity at Gordon Moss.