A plant that is fascinating - just don't smell

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It seems that despite our best efforts we shall once again have to remove a number of young seedlings of hound's-tongue (Cynoglossum officinale). This is an interesting large plant and in small numbers can be attractive in the summer as it has flowers of a most unusual colour of dark brick red tinted with purple. Unfortunately the attractiveness of the plant ends there. The leaves are large and to the words of the herbalist Gerard 'stink very filthy', a smell which he likened to that of the urine of a dog. It is now generally more usually described as 'vaginal'!

Following the flowers is the appearance of spongy roots which look rather like tiny hedgehogs and these will cling with great persistence to clothing and animals, eventually falling and resulting in the appearance of so many new plants in unexpected places. It would therefore seem that the smell of the leaves which is supposed to deter animals is not particularly successful. However it has been reported that humans have felt quite ill and faint after handling the plants.

The strange name 'hound's-tongue' supposedly was originally suggested because the stem leaves of the plant were shaped like those of a dog's tongue but the plant has also been connected to dogs in other ways. Allegedly hound's-tongue placed beneath a person's feet will prevent them from being barked at by any dog, and later the belief spread up that the leaves of this plant placed over the wound would cure anyone from the bite of a dog.

Despite its doubtful reputation hound's-tongue has been used medically, particularly for skin complaints. It was said to stimulate swollen joints, but there also reports of it being used as a narcotic. The medical profession never seemed entirely comfortable with its use and it slowly fell entirely out of favour.

Hound's-tongue is a biennial plant and a member of the borage family; its very near relatives viper's bugloss and both plants are happy on light, sandy soil, but unlike viper's bugloss the hound's-tongue can cope with almost any soil which is not waterlogged. Usually it has to be dug rather pulled out, as it has strong, blackish roots which unfortunately have been known to poison some farm animals.

Michael Nutt, administrator of Familiar Fields, the regional celebrations for the Benjamin Britten Centenary, explains why the composer is so special.

A composer worthy of the fanfare

Happy 100th Birthday Ben!

Next month sees the 100th anniversary of the birth of Lowestoft-born composer Benjamin Britten, and the climax to more than a year of musical celebrations around the world. I have been privileged to coordinate the local celebrations, Familiar Fields (the name is taken from a line in Peter Grimes), which has seen almost 300 performances of Britten's music across Suffolk and Norfolk since September 2012.

Britten was born on November 22 1913 — the patron saint of music, St Cecilia's Day. He was still alive when I was a young boy playing in the Norfolk Youth Orchestra and he was still a music student when he died aged only 63 in 1976. But he loomed large in the musical world. I was eagerly discovering as a young musician, all the more so because of his deep-seated roots in nearby Aldeburgh.

And he seems such a strangely familiar figure to me still, the abundant photos from his extensive archive somehow shining with my own black and white memories of the 60s and early 70s. A major figure of British music celebrated around the world, both as composer and performer, a beacon of the East Anglian cultural community, creator of Snape Maltings Concert Hall and the Aldeburgh Festival.

Yet he has always been regarded as a rather controversial character. He lived with his life-long partner, the tenor Peter Pears (for whom he wrote so much of his music) at a time when homosexuality was positively suppressed, and, at first sight, he seemed a conscientious objector during the Second World War. His precious talent and artistic success also provided jealousy and resentment among contemporaries and many erstwhile acquaintances found themselves excluded from his select circle of intimates and friends.

Remnants of this resentment and intimacy pervaded somehow persist in some quarters today and yet his legacy — so wonderfully showcased by the centenary celebrations over the past year or so — stands any scrutiny. If anyone chooses to question his convictions for example, then look no further than the War Requiem, his remarkable protest against the futility and tragedy of human conflict. Written for the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral (built in 1963 alongside the shell of the original cathedral destroyed in the Blitz), its setting of the war poetry of Wilfred Owen struck such a chord at its premiere that a staggering 200,000 copies of the first recording were sold in a year. Its emotional impact remains as powerful today.

The role of great art, it seems to me, is to awe and to move us, but it must also challenge and disrupt us, make us think and ask questions. Britten's music does all this. Yes, some of his music may seem challenging to the casual listener, perhaps a little strident or difficult on the ear even. But if there is a reason for that at times, there is also so much more that is really approachable. Britten's music can be lyrical and sensuous, uplifting and life-affirming — try my Top 10 below and see for yourself!

Britten didn't enjoy the ecstatic circles of cultural life in London; he preferred the tranquility and home-comforts of his beloved Aldeburgh. And as a composer he didn't live in an ivory tower. He wanted his music to be 'useful' — 'I would rather my music used than write masterpieces that are not
Other performance highlights in Norfolk:

■ Friday November 8 - The Rape of Lucretia - Glyndebourne Touring Opera bring to the Theatre Royal Norwich their first production of Britten's chamber opera since they premiered it in 1946.

■ Friday November 15 - a lecture by the composer's nephew John Britten and a concert of Britten's school compositions. A Joy to Us All, at Big School, Gresham's School, Holt.

■ Monday November 18-Friday December 14 - Britten at the Forum - a major new audio visual presentation of people's memories and experiences of Britten with a programme of supporting events. The Forum, Norwich.

■ Tuesday November 19 - Into your Satisfaction! A presentation of Britten's diaries and letters at the Usher Theatre, Gresham's School, Holt.

■ Wednesday November 20 - BBC Radio 3 Choral Evening from Norwich Cathedral featuring Britten's choral music.

■ November 23 - Hymn to St Peter exhibition showing at the Forum in Norwich from November 18 to December 7.

■ As much as in his great works for the opera stage or the concert hall, his true legacy lies in the children's songs. Friday Afternoon of his children's opera Noye's Fludde, both of which are delighting schoolchildren and their audiences.

■ www.familiarfields.org

A Top 10 of Britten's Music

1. Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra - Perhaps the most popular of Britten's works. His introduction to the instruments of the orchestra is a set of variations on a theme by Henry Purcell, a composer he much admired. It features in a special Family Concert by the BBC Symphony Orchestra at Snape Maltings on November 23.

2. Serenade for Tenors, Horn and Strings - try the Nocturne, a setting of words by Tennyson, including the line 'Blow, hue, blow, set the wild echoes flying' which features on the Royal Albert Hall's new commemorative CD entitled 'Serenade'.

3. In the City of Notre-Dame - Britten's Sinfonia with tenor Mark Padmore (pianist) at the Royal Albert Hall on November 17.

4. Four Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes - Depicting the changing moods of the sea around Aldeburgh, these orchestral interludes reflect the ever-present force in the story of Peter Grimes and his fishing community. 'Sunday Morning' is a good place to start. Hear all four played live by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in a special centenary tribute concert at the Music Theatre, Lowestoft on November 26.

5. War Requiem - Britten's intensely moving and war masterpiece. The Dies Irae or 'Day of Wrath' will knock your head off! You can hear it live at St Andrew's Hall, Norwich on November 9 when Norwich Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus are joined by three soloists, two conductors plus the Academy of St Thomas, USA Choir and Norwich Cathedral choirmen.

6. A Hymn to the Virgin - One of his best loved pieces for unaccompanied choir, written when Britten was still at Gresham's and supposed to be resting while ill. It is performed in a St Cecilia's Day Concert at Gresham's School Chapel, Holt, on Britten's 100th birthday, November 22.

7. Friday Afternoons - Written for his schooldays brother's school, this delightful set of 12 songs has been the focus of a major national educational project this year and they will be performed by school children on the anniversary date Friday November 22 all over the UK and nationally at St Andrew's Hall, Norwich, and Jubilee Hall, Aldershot.

8. Noye's Fludde - Although there are parts for professional musicians and adult voices, this Chester Miracle Play is performed almost entirely by children to enchanting effect. Judge for yourself with performances by local school children conducted by Britten scholar Paul Kidley in St Margaret's Church, Lowestoft on November 21, 22 and 23.

9. Violin Concerto - Given a superb performance by Loraine MacDonald with Academy of St Thomas in Norwich earlier this year, this work combines sparkling virtuosity with an elegant sorrow that reflects Britten dispar on the onset of war in Europe.

10. Funeral Blues - This is one of four Cabaret Songs which Britten wrote for the soprano Kirstin Anderson, a setting of W H Auden's poem 'Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone', famously used in the film 'Four Weddings and a Funeral'.