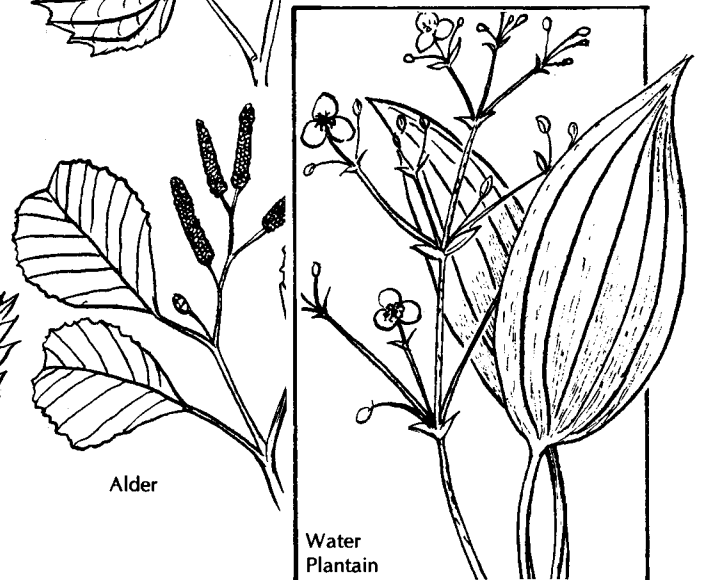
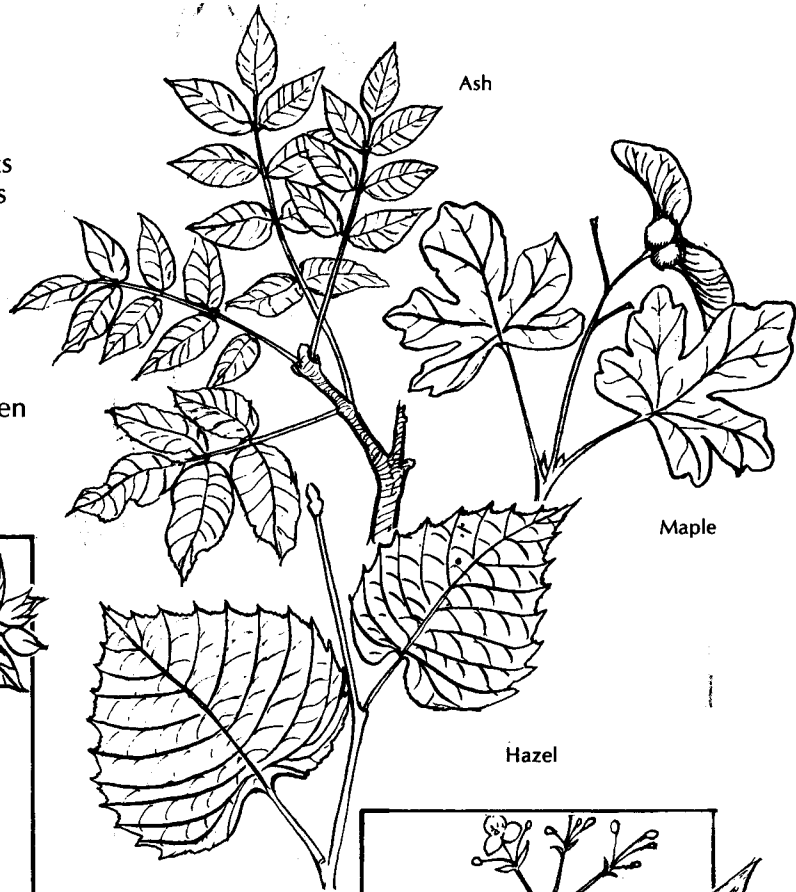




A. R. Hall

Almost every spadeful of soil from the excavations at Coppergate contained the remains of a wide range of plants from the Viking Age. These remains, especially the fruits and seeds, tell us a good deal about the plants that grew wild there in those days, but also about the crops that were grown and the wild plants that were specially collected.

We know many of these plants today as common weeds, and no doubt they grew as weeds in Jorvik also. They include stinging nettles, docks, burdocks, chickweed and fat hen — all of which can be seen in neglected gardens, allotments and waste places in York today.



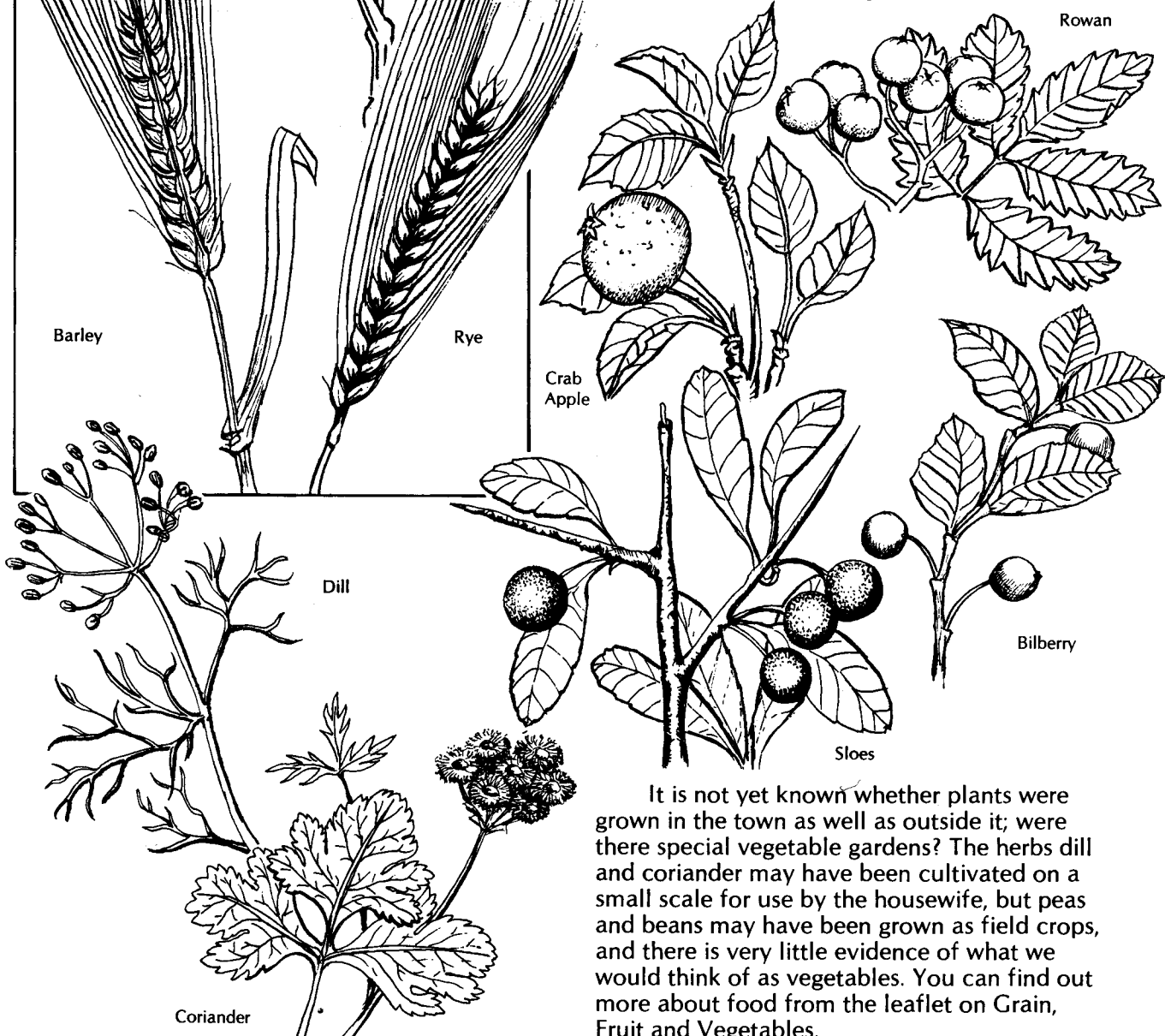
Another group of plants whose fruits and seeds were regularly found at Coppergate are celery-leaved crowfoot, sedges, water pepper and water plantain, which live in or near water. They probably grew along the rivers Foss and Ouse, on stretches of muddy bank near the wharves. The constant traffic on the river and the bustle of loading and unloading would have provided the sort of disturbance which actually helped some of them to grow.

Further away from the town, there was dense, often marshy forest, from which the people of Jorvik obtained their building timber — mainly hazel for the wattle houses and oak for the plank buildings — as well as firewood. Such trees as ash, field maple and alder supplied wood for the turner to make into bowls and cups. The forests also provided the handfuls of moss used as toilet paper in their latrines!



Where the forest had been cut down, land was available for growing crops. The four most important cereals — wheat, oats, barley and rye — were used by the people of Jorvik, and all might have been grown near the town. The weeds that grew with them have also been found: plants such as corncockle, corn marigold, cornflower and wild radish were commonly found at Coppergate. The cornfields of Viking times would have been colourful, but the crop yield would have been poorer because of all the weeds.

The edges of the forest were probably where the Jorvik folk collected their winter supplies of wild fruits, especially crab apples and sloes, but also hips and haws and rowan berries. Bilberries were also eaten, and these may have come from the higher ground of the North York Moors and the Pennines where bilberries are still common today. It would be from these moors, or from heaths nearer the town, that heather was cut, perhaps for bedding, roofing or dyeing.



It is not yet known whether plants were grown in the town as well as outside it; were there special vegetable gardens? The herbs dill and coriander may have been cultivated on a small scale for use by the housewife, but peas and beans may have been grown as field crops, and there is very little evidence of what we would think of as vegetables. You can find out more about food from the leaflet on Grain, Fruit and Vegetables.