

Parnassia

The Newsletter of the Liverpool Botanical Society



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April 1995

Editorial.

Welcome to the first issue of *Parnassia*. The dust jacket of 'Travis's Flora of South Lancashire' carries a short promotional write-up of the L.B.S. in which, halfway through, it is stated "A Quarterly Bulletin of our Society containing reports of meetings and items of topical interest is issued to members." This was written in 1963. Unfortunately, somewhere between then and now the Quarterly became Annual and consequently "reports of meetings" have become much abridged and "items of topical interest" lost completely. *Parnassia*, therefore, is an attempt to return to the days of more frequent publishing. The newsletter will, by definition, aim to keep members informed on the botanical 'goings on' in the North-west, including news on projects, surveys and events and also providing updates on the activities of other relevant groups and organisations. The 'main meat', however, will be provided by write-ups of indoor and outdoor Society meetings, thus providing a detailed written account of the Society's activities for future use. The newsletter will also provide the opportunity for local botanists to write articles on topics of personal interest (see "In Search of the Autumn Crocus"). The history of the Society, unknown territory to many members including myself, will be covered in instalments. Finally, it is hoped that publication of a quality Quarterly will provide further incentive for new members to join and actively participate in the Society.

As publication of a more regular newsletter entails a greater workload than the former Bulletin a provisional editorial team has been set up comprising the Honorary Editor, Joan Vincent along with Peter Gateley and myself. I would like to take this opportunity to thank other members for their assistance in producing this issue, namely Angus Gunn, Vera Gordon and Donna Hughes. If there are any other members who would like to play an active role in producing future issue please let me know.

Please note that this is a trial issue and its future relies on your response. You will be able to judge for yourself the contents and format; please let me know what you think. The economics of the newsletter are 10p per sheet. This issue is somewhat larger than is envisaged

for future copies. 4 to 5 sheets is thought to represent the best balance between cost and value for the Society in its present situation.

Please write in with your views and comments on this first issue. If the response is favourable we are planning to produce Issue 2 around July/August. In order to do this we will need your news, reports of meetings and articles on topics of local botanical interest to you. I look forward to a swollen post bag!

Mike Palmer

1995 A.G.M. Report.

SECRETARY'S REPORT.

(figures in brackets relate to 1993).

During 1994 17 (6) new members were elected and 1 (5) deleted. The membership total is now 74 (58) which includes one honorary member.

During the winter months 6 indoor meetings were held at which the average attendance was 14 (11). Each was preceded by a Council meeting at which the average attendance was 10 (9).

10 field meetings were held from Spring until Autumn at which the average attendance was 17 (14). 5 were held in South Lancashire, 3 in the Wirral and 2 in North Wales.

The Society is indebted to those who arranged, conducted and, above all those who attended the meetings, thus ensuring their success.

Vera Gordon.

TREASURERS REPORT

The accounts were circulated and a debt of gratitude expressed to the auditors, Miss J. Davis and Mr D. Lockwood. One of the new, more stringent requirements of the Charity Commission requires registered charities to obtain external auditors. It was decided, therefore, that for a Society of our current size the most straightforward option was to become a de-registered charity.

Subscriptions for the coming year are to remain at £1.50.

Jean Bentley

LIBRARIAN'S REPORT

Goronwy Wynne's '*Flora of Flintshire*' was the only purchase of the year. Unfortunately this book is currently missing from the Library. The annual fruits of our Ramblers Association membership were also added to the Library.

A major acquisition to the library was the time and effort of Harry Mottram who has completed a database of the library contents. A draft catalogue has been produced and members expressed an interest in receiving copies of the final copy which is to be produced this year. A valuation of the Library is also to be undertaken.

It is hoped that future copies of L.B.S. News will carry short articles focusing on books of interest in the Library.

Mike Palmer.

Programme for 1995

FIELD MEETINGS:

29th April. Gwersyllt. Leader: Miss V. Gordon. 09.11 train from Liverpool Central to West Kirby, alight at Bidston for 09.32 to Wrexham. Alight at Gwersyllt.

20th May. Ainsdale and Birkdale. Leader: Mr P. Rooney. Joint meeting with NWNLU. Meet Ainsdale Station at 10.00

10th June. Risley Moss. Leader: Mr P. Gateley. 09.28 train from Liverpool Lime Street to Birchwood.

1st July. Leasowe/Wallasey. Leader: Dr K. Watson. 09.36 train from Liverpool Central to New Brighton. Alight at Grove Road.

22nd July. Hale to Speke/Garston. Leader: Miss J. Davis. H26 bus from Hood Street Gyrary at 09.25. Alight at Hale Village.

12th August. Newton-le-Willows. Leader: Mrs P. Lockwood. No. 43 bus from Liverpool Paradise Street Bus Station at 09.03, alight at Lowton, Bull's Head.

26th August. Blackburn - Cherry Tree - Pleasington. Leader: Miss M. Wilson. 08.50 train from Liverpool Lime Street, arrive Preston 09.48 for 10.12 train to Blackburn.

16th September. Garston Docks area. Leader: Mr P. Gateley. Meet at Garston Station at 10.00.

7th October. Formby and Freshfield. Leader: Dr A. Gunn. Meet at Formby Station (west side) at 10.00.

NB. Members please note that bus and train timetables may be subject to changes from the winter schedules available at time of programme publication. Please check all times before setting off!

(Mersey Travel Line: 0151-236-7676)

Field meetings are all day events, generally to locations remote from shops and pubs, so bring along food, drink and suitable clothing for the day.

INDOOR MEETINGS:

10th October 1995. A Late Holocene Safari at Formby Point: Mr G. Roberts.

14th November 1995. Holiday Exhibits 1995: All members are invited to contribute (slides, specimens).

9th January 1996. Annual General Meeting and review of 1995 Field Meetings. All members are invited to participate - slides of meetings are most welcome.

13th February 1996. Heathlands - Their Future and Conservation: Prof. R. Marrs. All the meetings are held at Liverpool Museum, William Brown Street, at 19.30.

For details contact Mike Palmer at the Natural History Centre, Liverpool Museum (0151-478-4291).

Vice County News...

Although many LBS members are also members of the BSBI (Botanical Society of the British Isles) there are also many non-members and , hopefully, new-comers to botany who will be interested to hear of botanical events and projects nationally and regionally. For this reason the new newsletter will include a regular feature giving a brief report from the vice county (vc) 59 (South Lancashire) recorder. The first news is that, with effect from 1st January this year, there has been a change in the recordership, with Vera Gordon handing over the reins after a record 35 years of unstinting service. Her knowledge of the South Lancashire flora is unrivalled , she is a very hard act to follow!

On the local front the hand-over period is bound to be a bit of a worry and a puzzle but with lots of help and patience light is beginning to dawn and things are starting to happen. In the first two months of the year records of two species new to v.c. 59 have been reported. The two records could not be more different, the first is a straightforward report of an alien grass-species found growing outside the greenhouses of a nursery in Garston. The plant was spotted by LBS member Wendy McCarthy, whilst on a visit to view the exotic orchids and other "jungle" vegetation inside the greenhouses. She recognised the plant as something unusual as indeed it turned out to be! The species has been confirmed by BSBI grass referee, Prof Tony Bradshaw, as *Polypogon viridis*, the Water Bent, an exotic species new to the v.c. This is a species

from southern Europe and was in full flower in Garston in January!

The second "new" plant is a native rarity, an annual species of shallow muddy pond edges. The record was not made by an LBS member but by James Bolton, who died in 1799! The record has been brought to light by Dr John Edmondson who has been studying various hand-written plant lists compiled by James Bolton, of Halifax. Though supposedly a list of Yorkshire records John was surprised to find quite a few from Lancashire, mainly v.c. 59. Bolton listed the "new" plant as *Alisma damasonium*, but we know it as *Damasonium alisma*, the Starfruit. He reported the plant "...on Cuerly (Cuerdley) and Frodsham marsh..." This particular manuscript is undated, but it is known that he recorded *Plantago maritima*, Sea Plantain, in "the marsh near Frodsham in Cheshire and in Cuerly Marsh Lancashire" in 1782. These Starfruit sites constitute new records for both South Lancashire and Cheshire (v.c. 58), though this species is now extinct in both areas.

On the national scene there are various BSBI projects underway which will benefit from as many recorders and records as possible. If you know of a specimen of Mistletoe growing in an out-of-the way location, such as a garden or private orchard not visible to passing botanists, please forward details so that records can be added to the national Mistletoe recording scheme which has been taking place all winter. The BSBI/Plantlife Winter Mistletoe Survey is running through to 1996, records or requests for record cards can be sent to Jonathan Briggs, 2 Ledgemoor, Watledge, Nailsworth, Gloucestershire G16 OAU. This scheme should provide a detailed account of the current status of this parasite nationally.

Also currently underway is a survey of Alder, *Alnus glutinosa*, whose recent decline and death has been observed in several areas of the British Isles. Details of trees suffering from die-back are requested by the Alder Project, based at Canterbury Christ Church College, Canterbury, Kent, CT1 1QU. If you know of a mature tree, or trees, affected by die-back please contact the project for forms to record condition and

location, so that the extent of the problem can be gauged nationally.

Our native Black Poplar *Populus nigra* ssp. *betulifolia* is also the subject of a national survey. Much work has been carried out and co-ordinated on this species by Edgar Milne-Redhead (Watsonia, 18, 1-5). He has recently written requesting information on a tree in Allerton which was reported to him as part of the Daily Telegraph Black Poplar survey. It will be interesting to visit this tree at the end of March to observe the flowers and again in May/June for the leaves. In the interim two slides of a fine-looking tree noted on our July 23rd 1994 field visit to the Dee shore and Ness gardens was forwarded to Mr Milne-Redhead. In his reply he says it looks like our specimen is a native tree and if this proves to be the case it will be a new record for him. Other native Black Poplar are found on the Wirral (v.c. 58) at Thurstaston Hall, Prenton, Gayton, Saughall, Raby and Ledsham. Wirral Countryside Volunteer Rangers, Allan Williams and Paul Loughnane, are actively engaged in finding and identifying trees and have made several new records. For further information see "Black Poplar in Britain" by Franklyn Perring in BSBI News No. 66, April 1994. If you require survey forms write to John White, Forestry Commission, Westonbirt Arboretum, Tetbury, Gloucestershire, GLL8 8QS.

[Editors note - I recently had a letter from the aforementioned John White asking for help on the subject of Manchester Poplars. "As you probably know, the Black Poplar planted widely in Northern towns is called 'Manchester Poplar'. Until this year it has always been described as a single clone. However, responses from the Daily Telegraph Black Poplar hunt indicate that this is not so. I have received a range of forms from various places. The question now is 'what is the Manchester Poplar?'. To work on this problem we need enthusiasts who live in the north. Are you interested?' Are we interested? M.P.]

he largest, most labour-intensive, project is the New Atlas 2000 project. For this existing records are being collated and new records collected for the entire country, on a 10 x 10km square basis. This will be an update of the existing Plant Atlas and will give an accurate and up-to-date overview of our flora for the new millennium. Field cards are now available for the project which is being organised on a regional basis, v.c.59 falls within the North-West and Man region which is being co-ordinated by Phyl Abbot, recorder for v.c. 64 (Mid-West Yorkshire). All proficient botanists with time available for fieldwork over the next four or five years are requested to contact me for further details, YOUR VICE COUNTY NEEDS YOU !

Peter Gateley.



North West Fungus Group Update.

The N.W.F.G. has been up and running now for over a year since it's inception in January 1994 at Liverpool Museum. The group spans six North-west counties, namely Merseyside, Greater Manchester, Lancashire, Cheshire, Clwyd and Cumbria. This is a large area for one group, but it is more their aim to act as an umbrella organisation working with existing groups, such as the Greater Manchester Local Group and the mycological wing of the Merseyside Naturalists' Association, while

encouraging the establishment of new groups in other parts of the region.

They produce two newsletters per year and run a year round programme of forays. The 1995 programme has recently been published (see contacts at end for a copy) and contains details of 18 field meetings, the first being to Coed y Felin, Clwyd on Sunday 9th April. If you are just starting out you'll be pleased to hear that several of the forays are run specifically for beginners. Other activities planned for this year include a visit to a mushroom farm and a slide show on fungi habitats at Liverpool Museum.

Despite being just over one year old the Group currently has 90 members. If you would like to join them individual membership stands at £5 and family membership at £8.



CONTACTS:

Chair: Rita Cook, 1 Summerville Gardens, Stockton Heath, nr. Warrington, Cheshire, WA4 2EG. Tel 0925-263926.

Secretary: Mike Palmer, Natural History Centre, Liverpool Museum, William Brown Street, Liverpool L3 8EN. Tel. 0151-478-4291.

Treasurer: Dr Paul Hamlyn, 24 Tanfield Road, East Didsbury, Manchester M20 0GF. Tel. 0161-434-1401.

Plants, People, Places Update.

PPP is, hopefully, a project that you are all familiar with. Set in motion by the ripples of Richard Mabey's *Flora Britannica*, it has now been running for over two years.

The project has now collected a considerable amount of information on the cultural aspects of our North-west flora, relating to folklore, customs, place names, history, signs, symbols, children's games and local usage. The project relies heavily on plant-minded North-westerners, like yourselves, sending in information - ask your friends too.

I am particularly keen to hear about plants used as emblems, symbols and motifs, whether they be carved into stone or employed on official letterheads. Another under subscribed category is that of plants, particularly trees, entwined in local history. Commemorative trees, trees used as meeting places or as boundary markers are examples of this as is Dave Bishop's article on the Autumn Crocus in this newsletter. Finally, if you have any spare time in the evenings why not carry out some research in your local pub. Visit the Wiggin Tree, Mulberry Tree, Bluebell or whatever local 'botanical pubs' you have and find out what the landlord knows about the name and why the pub is so called.

For further information and copies of the free project newsletter contact myself at the address on the back cover.

Mike Palmer.

Liverpool Museum News

BRAMBLE / LICHEN DOCUMENTATION

One of the main areas of work in the Botany Department is the documentation of the collections. This basically involves the transcribing of information from specimen labels on to a computer data-base. This can then be edited and published in the form of a catalogue of the collections. This has recently been the case with the publication of the 'Catalogue of the Brambles of Britain and Ireland in the herbarium of Liverpool Museum (LIV)'. Catalogues, such as this, provide an effective means of communicating the contents of the collection to, and therefore, facilitate their usage by, the wider botanical audience.

A collection currently 'under documentation' is the Museum's lichen herbarium. This comprises around 3,500 specimens of which, 1,300 have been recorded on computer. Although this is a world-wide collection the vast bulk are of native origin. Of local interest are lichens collected by

W.G. Travis, J.A. Wheldon and A. Wilson in the 1910s and 20s. More contemporary collectors include Vera Gordon, Barbara Greenwood and Hugh McAllister.

It is hoped that completion of this project along with the imminent publications of Mike Gosling's and Brian Fox's Lichen Floras of Lancashire and Cheshire, respectively, will lead to an increased interest in this fascinating group.

ECONOMIC BOTANY COURSE.

Drs Angus Gunn and Martha Newton will be presenting a course on 'Economic Plants and their Wild Relatives' under the auspices of the University of Liverpool's Centre for Continuing Education and the Workers Education Association. The course is to be held at Liverpool Museum, Tuesday evenings, 7.00 till 9.00, commencing 25th April. Content will comprise a discussion of plants which have shaped human history and a look at the features of their biology which make them useful or

dangerous. The history of the major crops will be explored and some wild plants with future potential will be examined.

The course fee is £28 (£19 if you are retired or a full-time student and £10 if you are unemployed)

NATURAL HISTORY CENTRE

Currently on show in the NHC is 'Collectors from Afar', a display looking at the contents of Liverpool Museum's Extra-European Herbarium. This includes historically important specimens collected by pioneering botanists such as J.R. Forster (South Seas), John Bradbury and Thomas Nuttall (North America), Simon Pallas (Siberia) and J.F. Royle (India and the Himalayas). In June this will be replaced by a display focusing on plants a bit closer to home. 'Local Plants, Local Botany' will look at some of the interesting plants recorded from around Liverpool along with notable collectors and published works on the area's flora. Information sheets on both of these displays will be available shortly.

Please note that a series of permanent drawer displays are also present in the Centre covering all aspects of the Botany Department's collections. The NHC is open every afternoon (except Mondays) 1.00 till 4.30.

For further information contact *Mike Palmer* on 0151-478-4291.

Spring in Morocco

a report of an evening meeting presented to the Society by Miss Vera Gordon on 13th December 1994.

This talk was inspired by two 10 day holidays.

In 1992 a Ramblers trip based at Marrakesh spent 3 days in the High Atlas mountains when endemics such as the Spiny Milkwort, *Polygala balansae*, cushions of a Sage, *Salvia taraxifolia*, with large pink flowers, a large leaved Stork's-bill, *Erodium tortylioides*, growing in rocky fissures, and a Daisy, *Bellis caerulea*, were among the treasures seen and photographed.

Slides were shown recording a day on the Atlantic coast at Essaouira where an endemic Sea Lavender, *Limonium mucronatum*, which has frilly wings on its stems, was growing among a creeping succulent, *Mesembryanthemum crystallinum*. There were many confusing Marigold-like flowers such as *Andryala canariensis* with woolly leaves, *Asteriscus imbricatus* with leathery toothed leaves and the pale yellow *Anacyclus clavatus*.

Even the vicinity of Marrakech produced an interesting array of flowers which included a red-flowered Viper's-bugloss, *Echium horridum*, and three Lavender species, *Lavendula stoechas*, *L. multifida* and *L. dentata*.

In 1993 a mini bus tour provided a different holiday. Starting at Marrakech and stopping at many places *en route* to Ourigane for a few nights. Many photographs were taken. Those shown included two Hound's-tongue, blue *Cynoglossum pictum*, and woolly leaved *C. cheirefolium*, both Mediterranean species and another Stork's-bill, *Erodium guttatum*, which also grows in the south of Spain. Wayside shrubs included the pink flowered *Cistus incanus* and white *C. salvaefolius* and a white flowered Broom, *Chamaecytisus albidus*. In places shrubs were covered with the climbing *Clematis cirrhosa* with bell like flowers. Edges of irrigated fields and dry river banks and beds were happy hunting grounds and among many plants were red-horned Poppy, *Glaucium corniculatum*, a Marigold, *Calendula stillata*, the Oleander, *Nerium oleander* and a white flowered member of the Zygophyllaceae, *Peganum harmala*, from which the dye Turkey red is extracted.

From the Ourika Valley a road climbed to a Winter skiing area where there were still some snow patches between which were patches of *Crocus nevadensis*, drifts of *Narcissus bulbocodium* ssp. *nivalis* scattered with *Romula bulbocodium* and some yellow Star of Bethlehem, *Gagea neliculata*.

Further up among the deep scree a pink Crocus-like flower in the Lily family, *Androcymbium gramineum* proved a great excitement.

Over the Tizi-n-Tichka pass at 7,458 ft *en route* to Ouarzazate for a few nights the species changed in the drier more hostile climate. The higher hillsides were dotted with large spiny hedgehog plants of an umbellifer, *Bupleurum spinosum*, other spiny plants were *Zella spinosa*, a pinkish-mauve Crucifer and the widespread *Launea spinosa* with small yellow compositae flowers.

From Ouarzazate the surrounding desert areas were explored, the Anti Atlas hills and the Draa Valley. Yellow rivulets of one of the many forms of *Ononis natrea*, a yellow flowered Restharrow showed where some underground moisture was still retained. Though most places appeared barren, closer examination revealed bushy plants of *Cleome arabica*, a member of the Caper family with spikes of tiny flowers which produce long pendulous pods. Two species of Broomrape were shown, *Cistobanche violacea* growing on *Artemisia herba-alba*, a Wormwood, and *C. phelypaca*, a robust large egg yolk yellow flowered plant parasitic upon salt marsh species in desert salt pans.

Lunch at an oasis produced more plants than could be shown as well as better specimens of desert plants, plants such as *Convolvulus trabatianus*, a pale pink flowered spiny bushy plant and a yellow flowered creeping pea plant *Astragalus schizotropis*.

Then on to Agadis with frequent stops. The lunch halt was in the Argan Forest where the endemic *Argania spinosa* tree was dominant. A substitute for olive oil is extracted from its fruits. The Argan trees provided shade for many herbaceous species. Dominant among them was the 12 inches tall Dock, *Rumex vesicarius* with large reddish fruiting tepals. Another interesting plant was *Dipcadi serotina*, rather like a wild Hyacinth but with ochre brown bells.

From Agadir a seaside reserve was visited where the highlights for the lecturer was *Crypnomorium coccineum*, a dark red club covered with the tiniest flowers rising straight from the soil to nearly a foot tall and parasitic on salt marsh plants. The fixed dunes here were a blaze of colour. They comprised mainly of composites, including a large white daisy with a

yellow and black disk, *Cryptostemma calendula*, and the shiny leaved *Atseriscus graveolins*, in wide cushions. In a creek was the Mediterranean Reedmace, *Typha domingensis*, and further inland a limestone pavement produced interesting plants such as a fleshy Ragwort, *Kleinia pterneura*, a spiny succulent Spurge, *Euphorbia resinifera*, and three Sea Lavenders, *Limonium sinuatum*, *L. thouini* and *L. mucronatum*.

Vera Gordon

L.B.S. : The Early Years

In each issue we will be delving into the archives to scoop up a portion of L.B.S. history. In this issue we decided to go right back to the beginning.

89 years ago the Liverpool Botanical Society came into being. The following is a copy of a letter, dated April 24th 1906, from Arthur A. Dallman proposing the establishment of the Society.

"Dear Sir

Although there are numerous local workers, students, and others who are engaged or interested in Botany, it is a matter of surprise and regret that we have in Liverpool no Botanical Society or Association. This is still more striking when it is remembered that in the sister science of Geology - were workers and followers are generally fewer than in Botany - there are two flourishing Liverpool societies devoted solely to the former science. When we consider the excellent Botanical Societies which exist in Edinburgh, Manchester, and numerous Lancashire and Yorkshire towns, and the valuable work they have performed, it is very difficult to understand why the second city of the kingdom should be so sadly deficient in this respect.

As a result, local Botanical work has been in a more or less stagnant condition for many years past, and what little has been done is mainly due

to individual effort on the part of isolated workers and students. The need and advantages of some such society will be evident to most of us, but it would be as well if I were to mention what, in my opinion, some of the chief aims and objects of such a Society should be:-

To stimulate and promote the study of the various branches of Botany.

To bring local workers and students and those interested in the subject into contact and for mutual assistance.

To encourage original work and research, and especially in connection with local Botany.

I would particularly point out that such a Society as I have indicated should not be devoted solely to any one section of Botany to the exclusion of other branches. Further, being for mutual assistance and advantage, I would lay emphasis on the fact that all, whether specialist, teacher, student, or amateur, should be equally welcome as members, provided they are interested in some branch of the science. Before taking the initiative in this matter, I have consulted many local botanists and interested persons, and the opinions which I have obtained on the question, together with my own personal experience, induce me to take the preliminary steps towards bringing the idea into practical shape. I am convinced that there is a great future before such a Society, and there should be no question of its ultimate success. In order to discuss the matter, and if possible, to elect a committee and officers, the necessary arrangements have been made for holding a meeting at

*THE COMMON HALL,
HACKINS HEY (DALE STREET,
ON THURSDAY, APRIL 26TH, AT 7.30 P.M.
Your presence (and also that of any Botanical friend) is requested.*

*I am,
Yours faithfully,*

ARTHUR A. DALLMAN.

As a result of this proposal the Liverpool Botanical Society was established at the Inaugural Meeting, May 21st of that year, at the Common Hall, where the Society's rules and constitution were "*after exhaustive discussion and amendment, adopted.*" Officers appointed were Rev. S. Gasking (President), J.A. Wheldon and Rev. W. Wright (Vice-Presidents), F.J. Routledge (Hon. Treasurer), Miss H. Roberts (Hon. Librarian) and A.A. Dallman (Hon. Secretary). Seven months later, at the end of the year, membership stood at 123, "*certainly a most gratifying result*".

Seven field meetings were organised. Although our Centenary is still a few years off it has been proposed that in 2006 the Society revisits these sites to 'compare notes'. These were "*Ainsdale & Seaside, Leasowe & Wallasey, Crosby & Hightown, Liverpool Botanic Gardens, Leasowe & West Kirby, Speke Hall and Speke, and a fungus foray to Raby Mere.*" Nine indoor meetings were also held.

With the imminent publication of J.A. Wheldon's and A. Wilson's 'Flora of West Lancashire' published 1907, a South Lancashire Flora Committee was appointed to work towards a corresponding flora for vice county 59.

The need for a Society library was also realised and "*temporary accommodation in the Reading Room of the Common Hall, Hackin's Hey.*"

[Please note the Society Library and Archives are available to all members by appointment. Please Phone Mike Palmer on 0151-478-4291 for details]

In Search of the Autumn Crocus

The following article was sent in to the Plants, People Places and is to be published in a future issue of the project's newsletter. It has been reprinted here with the kind permission of the author, Dave Bishop (Chorlton-cum-Hardy).

My interest began in 1978 when I came across the following line in R.S.R. Fitter's "Finding Wild Flowers" (Collins, 1971), "Autumn Crocus still grows on the grassy banks of the Mersey at Didsbury," The book made it clear that this was not the native plant, often (wrongly) referred to as, "Autumn Crocus" (*Colchicum autumnale*) but a true crocus (*Crocus nudiflorus*) and a non-native introduction to Britain.



One sunny Sunday, in late September 1978, I took a walk along the river bank, from Chorlton to Didsbury, to see if I could find this plant and sure enough I found several flowers between Northenden and Didsbury. These flowers were very striking - tall, slim, leafless (hence, "*nudiflorus*") crocuses of a wonderfully ethereal, pale lilac colour which contrasted beautifully with the brown of fallen Autumn leaves.

A year or so later the Chief Warden in the Mersey valley, David Lloyd told me that I could have found the Crocus in Chorlton, as well as across the river at Sale. In fact the Crocus occurs in many sites in the Mersey Valley, particularly in the section between Gatley and Urmston. Some of the sites where *C. nudiflorus* occurs today correspond to those recorded by Buxton in his Flora of 1849 and Grindon in his Flora of 1859.

The old floras widen the focus beyond the Mersey Valley as does a more up to date volume, "Travis's Flora of South Lancashire" (Liverpool, 1963) which lists 25 records, including Mersey Valley ones, up to the early 1960's. Five of these

records relate to Chadderton near Oldham and Miss Audrey Franks of Didsbury tells me that *C. nudiflorus* still grows in that area.

Alan Newton's, "Flora of Cheshire" (Chester, 1971) gives only two specific locations for *C. nudiflorus*, the Mersey Valley and the Bollin Valley. Interestingly, part of J.M. Thompson's Guardian Country Diary column for 26.10.93 is concerned with *C. nudiflorus* in the Bollin Valley ("in the Mill Wood") so at least they were in that location in 1993.

One book which sheds a great deal of light on the Crocus, its origins and its distribution in England is "A Handbook of Crocus and Colchicum" (Waterstones, 1985 - reprint of 2nd (?) edition) by the great gardener, E.A. Bowles. According to this book, the crocus is native to South Western Europe, on both the French and Spanish sides of the Pyrenees. Bowles tells us that, "Pyrenean peasants call it, "le fleur des dettes" as it flowers at the time when they settle their money affairs."

Bowles also quotes an article from, "The Naturalist" 1950 by W.B. Crump and W.A. Sledge. Crump was a naturalist from Yorkshire and had studied the Crocus for 50 years. He called it the, "Halifax Crocus" because it was, "plentiful on hillside grassland" near that town. In fact it was always found in meadows near hill farmsteads many of which had been the property of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem. He surmised that, "the Crocus was distributed by their agents and because these upland farms seldom had gardens it was most likely planted in the pastures close to the house for the sake of the saffron that could be obtained from the stigma."

Crump had also discovered that, "all the localities in which, *C. nudiflorus*, is naturalised in Britain occur within a circle drawn round Nottingham, Warwick, Shrewsbury, Preston and Halifax.

Before I go any further I thought that it would be useful to include here a couple of details about the biology of the Crocus. First, although the plant is leafless at flowering time, it does have leaves but these don't appear until January and are at their most conspicuous between February and March. The leaves are narrow (2-4mm in

width) with a central white stripe. They tend to appear in dense, stiff clumps and elongate with age. Because the leaves are more numerous than the flowers and a more constant feature, it is easier (with a bit of practise) to spot colonies by means of the leaves than the flowers. Second, *C. nudiflorus* is unusual in that it possesses stolons (underground creeping roots - rather like couch grass); the presence of these stolons may explain why the Crocus colonies are so long-lasting and (relatively) resistant to disturbance.

In the Autumn 1993 edition of the R.S.N.C.'s magazine, "Natural World" an article by Steve Alton, Assistant Conservation Officer for the Nottinghamshire Trust, appeared which radically changed my view of things and added (at least) two new variables to the equation. Apparently, in the Trent Valley, *C. nudiflorus* was usually accompanied by another Crocus species, *C. vernus* the Spring Crocus. Although Mr. Alton doesn't dismiss the link between *C. nudiflorus* and the Knights of St. John (who were also called the Knights Hospitallers - I believe that there is a link with the St. John's Ambulance Brigade) he does state that, "an examination of the distribution of the Spring crocus around the city shows that it seems to have spread out from one central point - Lenton Priory which was not owned by the Knights Hospitallers but by monks of the Cluniac order. "Cluniac" means of the Abbey of Cluny in Burgundy - an area where both crocuses grow wild.

Two other interesting facts emerge from the article:-

(i) Saffron is not just a culinary spice but a herbal sedative and an antispasmodic used in the treatment of malaria (note that the true Saffron Crocus, *C. sativus* is difficult to grow in Northern England). It seems highly likely to me that both the "Hospitallers" and the monks grew the crocuses for medicinal purposes and grew both Autumn and Spring species to ensure a more constant supply.

(ii) The Clunaic monks of Lenton owned a hermitage at Kersall in Lancashire; this is the well known Kersall Cell in Salford (situated in the Croal - Irwell Valley).

After reading Mr. Alton's article it occurred to me that, as far as I knew, no one had looked for an association between *C. nudiflorus* and *C. vernus* in the Mersey Valley. Thinking about the best place to look I remembered that I had seen *C. nudiflorus* in the churchyard at Northenden; it seemed likely that a churchyard was less likely to have suffered disturbance than a river bank, thus increasing my chances of seeing *C. vernus* if present. One Sunday in March 1994 I drove over to Northenden and walked into the churchyard. To my amazement it was full of *C. vernus*! - there must have been well over a hundred flowers, probably many more. In amongst them I found the leaves of *C. nudiflorus*. Within a mile of the church - along Mill lane in the direction of Didsbury and Cheadle, I found another large colony of *C. vernus* again with *C. nudiflorus* leaves mixed in. Ironically, this latter site was almost opposite to the site where I had seen my first Autumn Crocuses back in 1978.

The next Saturday I decided to check all the churchyards, in the Mersey Valley, between Flixton and Cheadle. The only yard which contained crocuses was St. Michael's at Flixton; this was a large colony of *C. vernus* and no sign of *C. nudiflorus* (I checked again in the Autumn - still nothing).

Both Northenden and Flixton are old ecclesiastical sites, although the church buildings are fairly recent. The Northenden site is mentioned in Domesday whilst St. Michael's, Flixton was founded before 1150. It is interesting to note that Lenton Priory was founded between 1108 and 1114.

There are of course lots questions to be answered - here are 3 off the top of my head.

(i) What was the exact relationship (if any) between the Knights of St. John and the Clunaic monks and what land did they own?

(ii) What is the exact status of *C. nudiflorus* and *C. vernus* in the Croal - Irwell Valley? - there are historical records (see Travis's Flora).

(iii) Is *C. nudiflorus* still in any of its other historical sites (Reddish, Eccles, Preston etc.) and are there any more associations with *C. vernus*?

I would like to end with (a rather wild ?) piece of speculation. In Plants, People, Places News No.4 John Percy stated that, "There has been a strong historical tradition of Catholicism, especially in Lancashire. The Crocus evidence suggests that there may have been two Catholic orders of medical herbalists active in the region. Could these orders have been the source of the herbalist tradition in the area?"

Dave Bishop

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