

Cambridgeshire Flora Group

NEWSLETTER Spring 2006

A New Flora of Cambridgeshire

It is now more than 40 years since the publication of the last full Flora of the county by Frank Perring, Peter Sell, Max Walters and Harold Whitehouse (*A Flora of Cambridgeshire*, CUP, 1964) and already over 20 years since Gigi Crompton and Harold Whitehouse provided their invaluable updating in *A Checklist of the Flora of Cambridgeshire* (1983). The 1964 Flora followed hot on the heels of the first BSBI *Atlas of the British Flora* (BSBI, 1962) which was based on maps showing the occurrence of species in 10km squares of the national grid. The BSBI has now brought to a successful conclusion a second massive national survey in its *New Atlas of the British & Irish Flora* (OUP, 2002). It thus seems an appropriate time to consider the idea of preparing a new Flora for the county.

Recent decades have witnessed far-reaching changes in agricultural practices, increasing road and urban development and the escalating demands in the use of the countryside for recreational purposes. All of this has had and will continue to have an effect on the flora of the county. Added to this we already seeing tangible botanical consequences of the sustained increase in average temperature – in the occurrence and spread of some alien plants in particular.

A number of schemes have been set up over the last twenty years or so to attempt, systematically, to record the county's flora in greater detail than done for either Atlas, but have been faltering through lack of support and seem unlikely to have an immediate successful conclusion. A previous plan to produce an historical Flora also failed to come to fruition. However, Gigi Crompton has succeeded in preparing and publishing her unique web-based *Catalogue of Cambridgeshire Flora Records since 1538* (www.cambridgeshireflora.com). Her work in extracting and organising Cambridgeshire's botanical records in this way would give a kick start to the preparation of any new Flora. It is our intention now to take up this challenge. Our aim will be to provide an account of current distribution set in the context of over 460 years of botanical records. We intend the new Flora to be as inclusive as the records at our disposal allow: in other words it will include all species and hybrids ever recorded for the county, including both native and alien taxa. As far as we are able to so do it will take account of all critical taxa, both variants at any infraspecific rank but also all the familiar apomictic groups such as brambles, hawkweeds, dandelions, as well as a few that may be less familiar in this context such as *Ranunculus auricomus* and *Hypericum perforatum*. Where gaps exist in our records or problems occur in their interpretation these will be highlighted. The new Flora is thus intended to provide a detailed summary of our accumulated records of plants in Cambridgeshire rather than just a snapshot of occurrence over a recent limited period.

Much of the data for such a project is, as stated, in the *Catalogue* but there are already many additional and updated records in the Recorder database maintained by NPM and in the card index maintained by ACL. The start of recording for the 2002 *Atlas* means we have a ready made and sensible starting point to define 'recent records' for the Flora (i.e. 1987 onwards) and we feel that listing presence or absence in 10km squares will give an adequate indication of overall distribution within the county for our purpose, based on three date categories similar to those used in the 1964 Flora (i.e. pre 1950, 1950-1986 and 1987 onwards). We do not propose to initiate any systematic new recording at a finer (tetrad) level: in other words this will not be a 'dot map Flora'. It is our deliberate intention to try and shift the

focus of recording slightly, moving away from the relentless crossing off of names on a card (a process that has and will continue to produce benefits of its own) to a greater consideration of the plants themselves, their populations, ecology and variation. At the same time we would like to encourage more recorder to make more detailed individual records with information on habitat, status and abundance together with the usual information on locality, date and recorder.

We expect the process of bringing together the accounts will take some time (probably no less than five years) and we would welcome an input of new or updated records whilst this is going on. Inevitably there will also be a range of queries thrown up in the process of writing these accounts and help in following up some of these before publication would be appreciated. In anticipation of others being interested in contributing not only to the material for a new Flora but in contributing to the ongoing collection of botanical records we suggest the following range of potential activities, all of which would contribute towards our aim of a new Flora of Cambridgeshire:

- (a) Choose an individual species and follow up all the listed records to see if the plant still occurs there. This can be very addictive and rewarding! An ongoing survey of *Berberis vulgaris* sites listed in the *Catalogue* has already resulted in refinding plants in four sites where it has not been reported in over 50 years. There will be many species where localities known to Ray, the Martyns, Relhan or Babington can still be tracked down and this does not always involve the rarer plants. (ACL)
- (b) Get to know some of the infraspecific variants of often common plants and track down localities for them. Many of these sort of variants were well-known to an earlier generation and perhaps at last some interest is beginning to be shown in them again. Where for instance do the various colour forms of scarlet pimpernel (*Anagallis arvensis*) occur? (ACL)
- (c) Get to know some of the alien taxa that look like our native plants and which are increasing being planted in the county, as discussed by Peter Sell in *Nature in Cambridgeshire* recently. Where are they being planted and is there evidence for them beginning to reproduce from seed, perhaps crossing with their native counterparts? (ACL)
- (d) Tackle one of the apomictic groups – this would be a more demanding option! Brambles and hawkweeds are comparatively well studied but we need someone to take an interest in dandelions with so far have resolutely failed to capture any great interest. (ACL)
- (e) Adopt a parish and study the flora of such an area more intensively. This is another activity that can become addictive as you begin to search for the local history that may explain a lot of what you see. Perhaps too this could result in a few independent Parish Floras being published. We are keen for more people to take up this option as we would like to see the parish-based recording started by Derek Wells continue and NPM, who has been keeping it going in recent years, is keen to find a way to make this ongoing database more accessible to all recorders. (NPM)
- (f) Select a 10km square and concentrate on that. We can provide you with list of what has recently been recorded from the square so that you do not have to repeat everything (which only makes more work for the Recorders!) (NPM)
- (g) Select a particular habitat and concentrate on seeing as much of it as you can in Cambs. The main road verges throughout the county are currently supporting the greatest quantity of maritime plants that there have been in the county but they do not get recorded by many; boulder clay woods, the Breckland fringe, fenland field weeds, hedges (a habitat much neglected by recorders), even mown road verges in towns and villages all have surprises awaiting those prepared to look! (NPM)

We shall do our best to use future Cambridgeshire Flora Group excursions to further some of these aims and to try and introduce recorders to some currently unfamiliar species and variants. If you feel that any of the approaches to recording appeals to you then please get in touch with one or other of us. In the list above the initials of which us to contact in the first instance in each case is indicated. We shall look forward to hearing from you.

Excursion programme for 2006

In contrast to recent years the excursions during 2006 will be made in a single group; in other words, participants will not be paired up and sent off in all directions to the corners of the parish. In addition to the usual aim of increasing our knowledge of under-recorded parishes we hope to interest participants in some of the questions and approaches outlined above.

The first excursion of the year is to Kennett, northeast of Newmarket. This is part of Cambridgeshire's small piece of Breckland; *Hypochaeris glabra*, *Herniaria glabra*, *Trifolium scabrum*, *Medicago minima* are amongst the specialities here. Some of these species may not be limited to Breckland, they could turn up elsewhere if suitable soils are present, as the recent finds at Cambridge Science Park demonstrate.

Waterbeach is a large fen edge parish. This parish was well-recorded and profitable in the past and features quite frequently in the older floras and in Gigi Crompton's Catalogue. Records continue into the first half of the 20th century but thereafter become fewer. Species worth looking for include *Aristolochia clematitis*, *Dracunculus vulgaris* and *Atropa belladonna*. Species with older records that might be re-found include *Chenopodium bonus-henricus* and *Stellaria palustris*. And perhaps we will be able to trace *Potamogeton praelongus* at its 1952 locality on Waterbeach Fen, or find some of the other species that were known here, such as *Sium latifolium*.

At Cheveley we will concentrate on the northern chalk areas on the outskirts of Newmarket. Acid grassland species should be evident on the upper parts of Long Hill and we hope to confirm that *Calluna vulgaris*, *Viola canina* ssp. *canina*, *Danthonia decumbens* etc. are still present (last recorded 1986-7). *Rubus britannicus* was recorded here from the margins of a plantation in 1979 and it would be good to confirm its continued presence. Overall, Cheveley is a much under-recorded parish and there is plenty of scope for someone to adopt it and explore more thoroughly.

Christchurch is a very poorly-recorded, large fen parish in the far northeastern reaches of the vice-county. It was formerly called Upwell until county boundary realignment united the village of that name with its Norfolk counterpart. Recent records suggest that *Epilobium obscurum* is more widespread in the fens than we had thought and we should see this species in the village.

At Swavesey we would like to see if we can find *Eleocharis palustris* ssp. *palustris* at its known site (recorded 1988) and encourage people to distinguish subspecies *palustris* and *vulgaris* elsewhere in the vice-county. The recently recognised *Bromus hordaceus* ssp. *longipedicellatus* can be found on the disused railway here and is likely more widespread in the vice-county than records so far suggest.

Wentworth is a rather small, obscure, poorly-recorded fen edge parish where we hope to encounter some of the typical peat fen arable weeds in the field margins in the northern part of the parish. The grassland species *Trifolium medium* was recorded in this parish 110 years ago, perhaps we shall re-find it.

| Date | Parish | Meeting point – 1.30pm |
|----------------|--------------|---|
| April 22nd | Kennett | TL689690, verge of B1085 by entrance to sandpit |
| May 13th | Waterbeach | TL496653, southern end of village green |
| June 10th | Cheveley | TL651633, track off Old Station Road at bend, southeastern outskirts of Newmarket. You should be able to find somewhere to park in Heathbell Road etc on the southern side of Old Station Road. |
| July 8th | Christchurch | TL493965, village centre, by the church |
| August 12th | Swavesey | TL362689, market place by the White Lion PH |
| September 16th | Wentworth | TL494790, northern end of Marroway Lane, Witchford (western end of village, south of bypass). You should be able to find somewhere to park in nearby residential streets. |

NO DOGS PLEASE

Please note that there is no guarantee that you will be able to park directly at the meeting points listed and should leave time to find a parking place and walk to the meeting point.

ALL ENQUIRIES REGARDING CFG EXCURSIONS TO NPM, PLEASE:

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