

NEWSLETTER

Issue 21

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WILTSHIRE BOTANICAL SOCIETY

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Saturday October 19th 2003

The Orchids of Britain and Europe

Marlborough College Science Laboratories

Monica Blake

I have to confess at the outset of this review that it takes something special to get me back inside a school on one of my days off! Fortunately, Monica's talk and slides were special and like the rest of the audience I was held spellbound by the beauty and quality of her slides and the sheer fascination of the subject.

Monica started with a whistle-stop tour of species and places, illustrating orchid habitats, full views of the plants and, just occasionally, some extreme close-ups of a single floret to illustrate differences between species.

Once again we were reminded of the sheer variety of orchids we are able to enjoy given just a little effort and patience. The *Ophrys* orchids; Bee (*O. apifera*) and Fly (*O. insectifera*) from Wiltshire sites, Early Spider (*O. sphegodes*), the labellum surrounded by green sepals and petals, from the Dorset coast, Late Spider (*O. fuciflora*) the lip surrounded this time by pink, from Kent.

The range and variety of our orchid flora was beautifully presented, the diminutive (and elusive) Fen, (*Liparis loeselii*), Musk (*Herminium monorchis*) and Bog orchids (*Hammarbya paludosa*) from Kenfig, Morgans Hill (and elsewhere in Wiltshire) and the New Forest were contrasted to the dramatic (and equally elusive) Lizard Orchid (*Himantoglossum hircinum*) and of course the simply dramatic (and fiendishly difficult) Marsh Orchids (*Dactylorhiza* spp). We were shown slides of the common species of orchids (the Pyramidal, (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*) is apparently the most common, which surprised me) and as a really special treat, some of the most rare; the Military (*Orchis militaris*) and Monkey (*O. simia*) from Oxfordshire, the Red Helleborine (*Cephalanthera rubra*) from a Cornish site on Bodmin Moor and using two borrowed slides that were an incredible thirty-two years old (and in amazing condition) the legendary Ghost Orchid (*Epipogium aphyllum*). Apparently, this fully saprophytic orchid which hasn't been recorded in this country for the past twenty years... raises the meaning of the word elusive to new levels, not only does it live its life out in the deepest, darkest forest, it does so under the leaf-mould and it will, if the mood takes it, even flower underground!

Without so much as a backward glance, and without pausing for breath, we were then whisked onto the Mediterranean island of Crete! Here the orchids

become more numerous and more exotic and (wouldn't you know it) more complex! For the botanist on Crete the challenge comes from the *Ophrys* orchids, finding them, identifying them in all their multiplicity of forms (plus of course the possibility of hybrids), photographing them and finally working out how to pronounce their names! For myself the Sawfly Ophrys, (*O. tenthredinifera*) was at once the most attractive, the most variable and the most unpronounceable plant in the whole slide show!

The *Serapias* or Tongue Orchids are almost as bad! But the slides were beautiful!

Wavy Monkey (or Naked Man) inexplicably named *Orchis italica* was as perfect as the sublime Pink Butterfly Orchid (*O. papilionacea*). The rugged and fairly common Giant Orchid (*Barlia robertiana*) contrasted nicely with the only other species in the genus (*B. metlesicsiana*), which is a rare endemic from Tenerife where it was rediscovered some thirty years ago.

I have missed so much else worthy of mention, but I cannot finish without remembering some truly stunning shots of the Lady Slipper Orchid (*Cypripedium calceolus*) from a site near Potes in the Spanish Pyrenees, its flowers were well over at the foot of the valley however they were in glorious full bloom at the top, a hard climb but well worth it! For all present it was well worth it too. Thank you Monica for a splendid afternoon.

Steve Whitworth

Saturday 16 November 2003

Blue Bonnets and Prickly Pears: a Journey to the Rio Grande

Marlborough College Science Laboratories

Speaker: Barbara Last

Barbara had seen a photograph of a gorge in Texas that looked to be interesting to visit, so different from the picture of Texas gleaned from cowboy films. So, four years ago, she and Dick had visited. It was a thousand mile trip from the airport to Big Bend National Park on the western edge of the state where the Rio Grande is the frontier with Mexico. So they took a week each way visiting what looked might be interesting on the map. Being cattle country there is pasture woodland; no herbicides are used so there is a rich flora. Blue bonnets, *Lupinus texensis*, are a low growing annual lupin with silky foliage and blue flowers that since 1901 has been the state flower of Texas. So

famous that there is a blue bonnet festival at Easter which had so filled the motels that the Lasts had to go on to the next town.

A name on the map took them to a town only to be told that the Falls were now under concrete because the river had been dammed. But the compensation was that the dam had created a flower rich meadowland downstream.

Arrived at Big Bend National Park they found it one of the least visited in the USA with accommodation and petrol available only outside it. The Park combines sweeping views of its canyons, interesting animals like the Kit Fox, *Vulpes macrotis*, and Peccary, *Pecari angulatus*, with Century Plants, *Agave americana*, prickly pear, *Opuntia spp.* and other interesting species. Reaching the Rio Grande there was a boatman to take them into Mexico at an unguarded crossing point.

All this was illustrated by a selection of Barbara's superb slides, her usual beautifully phrased talk, and augmented by Dick's occasional commentary from the projector.

No catalogue of the species illustrated, and anyhow difficult to record in the dark, could do justice to the pleasure of this vicarious Texan trip. If you were not there you missed a treat and should ensure you are free to go next time.

Christopher J Perraton

Saturday 7th December 2002

Juniper in Wiltshire

Marlborough College Science Laboratories

Talk by Jane Banks

Just as it is stimulating to travel and meet old friends (of a botanical nature) in new and varied habitats, so it was equally interesting to explore the evolution of juniper and its present status in Wiltshire – albeit at Marlborough College on a bleak December afternoon.

Jane Banks provided a fascinating insight into Juniper, telling us about continuous pollen and fossil records in this country, dating from the last period of glaciation, and a period some 10 000 years ago when it was possibly the dominant woody species in lowland Britain. The climate was warming at this time, although nothing like as warm as it is today, and Jane feels that its subsequent decline is quite likely linked to increased temperatures. She suggested that more southerly populations, such as those found in Portugal, have survived by becoming increasingly montane.

The plant may be regarded as transient; a successional stage which is progressing towards beech woodland. Its intolerance of shade certainly fits this picture. Members were astonished to learn that the plants of the southern chalk are genetically identical to those that thrive in the peaty bogs of Scotland and moorlands of Teesdale, both being *Juniper communis ssp. communis*. All British populations are in decline but the northern plants are doing so more slowly; one thought is that a mite that damages seed around here may not be active further north. The oldest known plant is believed to be 2000 years and occurs in Latvia where they grow more slowly and have a longer life span.

Jane went on to discuss the results of several surveys carried out in 1972 and currently. The results make dismal reading – not only are old trees failing to be replaced by young ones but sites also are being destroyed for a variety of reasons. It is feared that Juniper could become extinct if more is not understood about its habitat requirements and that information used in active site management. For this reason the plant is on the Species Recovery Programme and is part of the 'Back from the Brink' project being sponsored by English Nature and Plantlife.

To conclude, Jane told us of two sites, both local to Salisbury, where she had discovered several hundred seedlings and where she intends to carry on researching the habitat requirements of the species. Her feeling is that they have a requirement for bare ground and that, at present, such conditions can be met on slopes such as those found at roadsides, where predation might also be less of a problem. Those who missed this fascinating talk will be able to read about the research work in the next publication of Wiltshire Botany.

Pat Woodruffe

Saturday January 18th 2003

Wild Plants on Upland Holidays

John Presland

Marlborough College Science Laboratories

About 18 of us turned out on a miserable January day to hear John's latest talk on our native flora.

The talk and slide show was this time devoted to England and Wales, and discussed just about every region of elevation from the Surrey Hills to the mountains of Snowdonia.

Cheddar Gorge and the Avon Gorge in Bristol represented our local areas of carboniferous limestone and their respective floras were well illustrated with some excellent slides of such interesting plants as Cheddar Pink, Bristol Rock Cress, and Round-Headed Leek.

A visit to the Chilterns revealed a fine show of Candytuft *Iberis amara*, as well as Chiltern Gentian, *Gentianella germanica*.

My attention was caught particularly by the slides of Snowdonia where John was lucky enough to photograph the Snowdon Lily, *Lloydia serotina*, a plant which has eluded me over countless visits to the area, - although in my case, botanising was not always the priority.

Numerous references were made to the medicinal properties of many plants, quotations being taken from both Gerard and Culpepper.

Digitalis lutea is apparently now naturalised beside the Fosse Way near Stow on the Wold and mention was made of digitalis being used for heart problems, although the drug was more likely nowadays to be obtained from foreign relations!!

John pointed out that he had deliberately omitted to show plants north of the border as this year he is planning to do a Highland visit and will no doubt be giving another talk and slide show specifically about Scotland in due course.

Most of his excellent pictures were taken in bright sunshine in beautiful parts of the country, and made us all look forward to getting out again in the coming year.

Ron Hurst

Saturday, February 15th 2003.

Climate Change Monitoring and the Porton Ranges "Life" Project.

Stuart Corbett

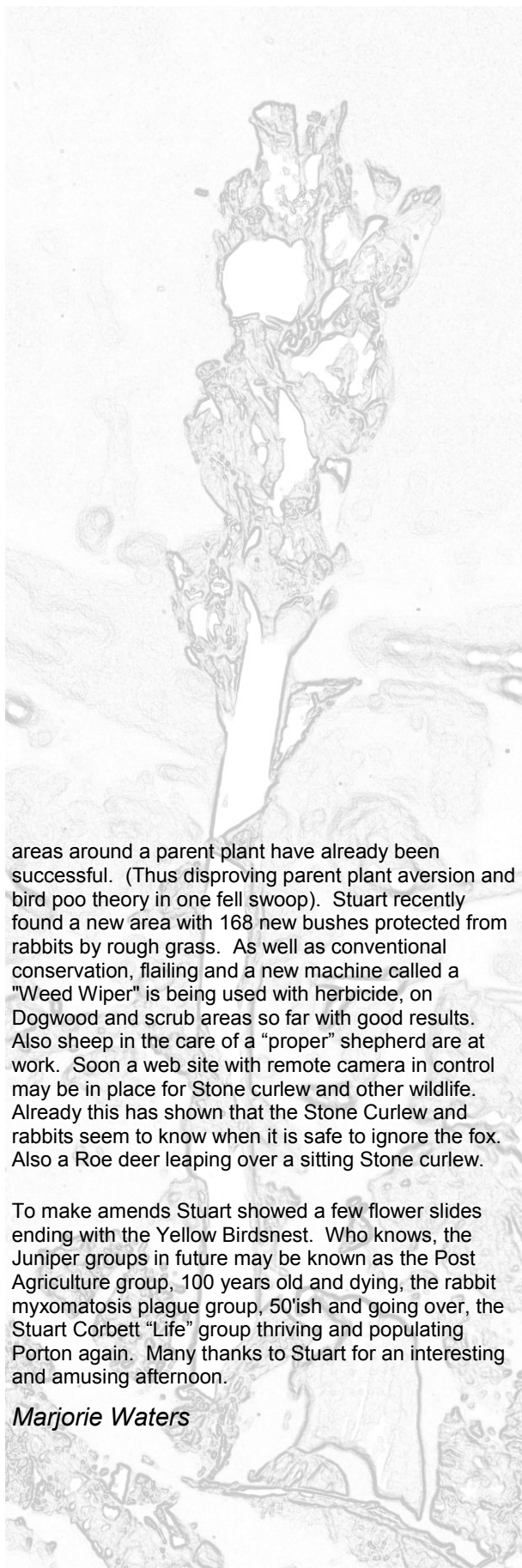
Marlborough College Science Laboratories

Stuart is Conservation Officer at Porton Down Ranges for the four years of funding of the "Life" project. This aims to dramatically improve Salisbury Plain Sites of Special Scientific Interest and other areas, including Porton, and is fielded for four years, half from the European Commission and half from other interested bodies – Ministry of Defence (MOD), English Nature, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Butterfly Conservation, etc.

He pointed out that there is evidence of man at Porton from pre-historic times, farming and flint mining. Cultivation carried on until the Black Death when depopulation resulted in the land reverting to grassland. In the 18th century a cycle of low-key cultivation began, a rotation of sheep and crops. The Corn Laws meant that grassland returned again and in 1914 the MOD and the rabbit took over - thus Porton Down is a piece of Wessex landscape frozen in time. What is now a time capsule and so precious would have been typical for all the farmland round about. Stuart showed us a satellite image of Porton, a green island in the landscape of today. Surrounding fields belong to the MOD, let to farmers, and Stuart thinks that Wildlife Corridors leading from Porton to surrounding countryside would be more beneficial than isolated Stewardship Schemes. This is what the bee in Stuart's Bonnet tells him. (Oh, wise bee, may you buzz loudly and to good effect!)

Surprisingly the area of The Breck was in use as a Warren until the end of the 19th Century. The amazing Flora and Fauna at Porton survived because of the much-maligned rabbit and perhaps, in places, because the soil was so poor.

Habitat management is crucial for Juniper, Stone curlew, Silver spotted skipper, Marsh fritillary, Brown Hairstreak, etc. These being the most studied what other creatures must be benefiting. Stone Curlews are now up to 22 pairs from a low point in 1992. Butterflies are phenomenal at least 45 species have been recorded. Robin Page, on a quest for the Beningfield Trust was lucky enough to see Brown Hairstreak and Silver spotted skipper, and was very grateful to Stuart. Several experiments on regeneration of Juniper are being carried out. 10,000 berries in 16 plots planted in 2002 may show shoots this April. Whereas wired off



areas around a parent plant have already been successful. (Thus disproving parent plant aversion and bird poo theory in one fell swoop). Stuart recently found a new area with 168 new bushes protected from rabbits by rough grass. As well as conventional conservation, flailing and a new machine called a "Weed Wiper" is being used with herbicide, on Dogwood and scrub areas so far with good results. Also sheep in the care of a "proper" shepherd are at work. Soon a web site with remote camera in control may be in place for Stone curlew and other wildlife. Already this has shown that the Stone Curlew and rabbits seem to know when it is safe to ignore the fox. Also a Roe deer leaping over a sitting Stone curlew.

To make amends Stuart showed a few flower slides ending with the Yellow Birdsnest. Who knows, the Juniper groups in future may be known as the Post Agriculture group, 100 years old and dying, the rabbit myxomatosis plague group, 50'ish and going over, the Stuart Corbett "Life" group thriving and populating Porton again. Many thanks to Stuart for an interesting and amusing afternoon.

Marjorie Waters

Saturday 29th March 2003

The Work of the Wiltshire and Swindon Biological Records Centre

Talk by Tom Cairns

**Marlborough College Science
Laboratories**

Tom Cairns' talk was preceded by a selection of his excellent slides of special Wiltshire plants featuring the principal habitats to be found in the county.

On chalk downland plants of particular interest are the rare Tuberous Thistle (*Cirsium tuberosum*) on Salisbury Plain, Burnt-tip Orchid (*Orchis ustulata*), (scarce in Wiltshire), Early Gentian (*Gentianella anglica*), and the Meadow Clary (*Salvia pratensis*) in abundance on Salisbury Plain. Plants of neutral grassland were represented by the Snake's Head Fritillary (*Fritillaria meleagris*), Downy-fruited Sedge (*Carex filiformis*) and Greater Burnet Saxifrage (*Pimpinella saxifraga*). Examples of special interest plants in woodlands were the Violet Helleborine (*Epipactis purpurata*) and Bath Asparagus (*Ornithogalum pyrenaicum*) or Spiked Star of Bethlehem, a plant of ancient woodlands (Clouts Wood is one habitat) - its principal localities are on the oolitic limestone around Bradford, Box and Broughton Gifford.

These slides confirm the great value to the WSBRC of volunteer recorders. The Record Centre's small staff supplies information to a wide range of different users including all the local authorities, English Nature and the Environment Agency. This is used to determine planning applications and prioritise their environmental work. Income from this service funds the operation of the Local Records Centre. Although the WSBRC does not currently have the staff needed to provide more than a minimal free support to volunteer recorders, additional income by Records Centre over the last nine months has made it possible to appoint new part-time staff whose first priorities will be botanical and bat data. A grant has also been secured from the Heritage Lottery Fund for a project aimed at recruiting and training a new generation of recorders.

Rosemary Smith



BBSI Local Change, BENTLEY WOOD

Saturday 5th April 2003

The sun was glistening through the bare branches of Bentley Wood but first we had work to do, all 14 of us. After tea and coffee in The Barn, Dave Green explained the intricacies of the BBSI Local Change Recording Scheme, a follow-up to that of 1987-88 in which many of us participated; a two-year project which should be fun.

Dave is now the ex – B.B.S.I. Recorder for VC7 (Vice-County 7, the half of Wiltshire north of the Kennet and Avon Canal) and we thanked him for his fantastic

help over 22 years.

Now we could meander through the woodland with Pat, David the Warden and Dave Green helping us with violet and fern identification. Pat showed us leaves of the rare *Luzula forsteri*.

Back to lunch by The Barn in the sun then some of us took a very pleasant stroll; butterflies, bees and woodland flowers made it a memorable day.

Joy Newton

The BSBI* Local Change Survey 2003-2004: a progress report

BSBI recorders started the Local Change survey in 1987 and 1988. They divided Great Britain into a grid of ten-kilometre squares and picked out one in every nine of these. Vascular plants were recorded in three tetrads (2 x 2 kilometre squares) within each ten-kilometre square. Fourteen of these tetrads fall within Wiltshire.

The survey laid a baseline for following long-term losses and gains in our flora. Follow up surveys should give hard evidence for judging the effects of changes in our environment. The BSBI plans to repeat the survey every fifteen years: the first fifteen years is now up.

In her article above, Joy Newton described how Dave Green launched us into the second phase of the survey, distributing recording sheets to willing volunteers. I agreed to act as the 'Wiltshire Hub', collating the records for the county.

BSBI provides a little blue booklet of instructions which explains how to do the survey, including how to stay safe and not get lost! The recorder gets a set of recording sheets which have a list of all the species found in 1987/88. One of the recorder's tasks is to

cross off any species which they find again, showing that they have not disappeared. The other part of the survey is to record any new finds. These need a 6-figure grid reference, a place name and any interesting notes.

When a recorder has made a visit, he or she posts off the recording forms for entry into a computer program called 'Mapmate'. They then go off via the Internet to Pete Selby of the BSBI, who runs the 'National Hub' for the project. Mapmate has the advantage of recording in a standard format that can be fed into other computer systems (including the Wiltshire and Swindon Biological Records Centre in Devizes) without any retyping. The recorder gets a new printout of the list of species for the tetrad, ready for the next visit. All the species which have been found are clearly shown and need not be recorded again.

Eleven of the fourteen sites have recorders, who have been making tremendous progress. There is at least one set of records from eight of the sites. At the time of writing, Barbara Last, Audrey Summers and Jean Wall have re-found around 70% and Jeremy Wood has re-found 80% of the species which were recorded in

Map of the Cotswolds region showing the locations of various authors and their associated grid coordinates. The map includes a grid with letters (ST, SU, SY, SX, SZ) and numbers (1-10). A green line traces a path through the region. Callout boxes point to specific locations:

- Newton: ST99A (Joy Newton)
- Lacock: ST96J (Lesley Wallington)
- Easton Royal: SU26A (Audrey Summers)
- Rowde: ST96W (Phil Cleverley)
- Newton Tony: (Daphne Grainger)
- Pitton: SU2 (Jeremy Wood)
- Teffont: ST93W (Barbara Last)
- Bedwyn: (Martin R. Maureen)

You will see from the map that there are still several sites without 'owners', so you still have a chance to take part if you have not volunteered already. You will need a fairly good botanical knowledge, but there are experts in the Wiltshire Botanical Society who can help with surveying and identification. The field work is

*Botanical Society of the British Isles

Sad News

From the BSBI website (www.bsbi.org.uk/html/news.html): "... We are very sad to announce that Pete Selby, our Volunteers Officer, died suddenly of a stroke last night. He had been working for the BSBI for just over a year but had already become a popular, effective and central figure in the organisation, and he will be very much missed. ..."

As indicated earlier in this newsletter, Pete was the organiser the BSBI Local Change project.

Message from the Treasurer

Until now our monies have been banked with the Portman Building Society quite satisfactorily. However, they are no longer accepting accounts from small clubs and societies and from 1st August are making a charge of £5 per month on those who choose to remain. There is also a strong inference that this sum could increase in the future.

At £60 p.a. for a previously free service, we have decided to make a change to Lloyds TSB. This is convenient for me and there are sufficient branches for it to be so for future treasurers! No charges will be incurred.

I have written to everyone paying by standing order with details of what I hope will be a smooth change-over. If you pay your subscription in this way and have not heard from me by the time you read this, please contact me at once.

Gwyneth Yerrington

Dave Green

We are all very sorry that Dave Green has relinquished the job of BSBI Recorder for VC 7. He has done this for many years, accepting and verifying countless records in the production of the Great Millennium Atlas.

He was a key figure in the production of 'The Flora' when we all did a marathon task of surveying the flora of the county. When this was achieved he was instrumental in founding this Society and was its first Chairman until recently. He has led many of the Society field trips. We are all most grateful for his erudite and amusing contributions to our meetings. We hope we will continue to enjoy his input as a committee member for many years yet.

In the meantime, there is a vacancy for a VC 7 Recorder !

Barbara Last

The Next Newsletter

will cover this year's outdoor meetings and will be published soon. Please send notes, articles, reports, news items and pictures to:

Richard Aisbitt, 84 Goddard Avenue, Swindon,
Wilts SN1 4HT — *or*
richard@aisbittr.freemove.co.uk

Future meetings

Please suggest ideas for meetings or talks. Contact me by writing to:

Anchorsholme, Hop Gardens, Whiteparish
Salisbury, Wilts SP5 2ST
or by phone or e-mail (01794 884436,
pmw@bentleywood.fsnet.co.uk)

Pat Woodruffe

Membership

We welcome new members, beginners and experts alike. If you would like to join, please complete the slip and send it to:

Gwyneth Yerrington, 28 Meadowfield
Bradford on Avon, Wilts BA15 1PL

Subscriptions:

Ordinary Member	£5.00 per year
Joint Membership	£7.50 per year
Life Membership	£50 (£75 Joint)

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