

# Wild flowers of the Chilterns

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Famous for its chalk grasslands and beechwoods, the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty has its scarp slope to the north-west, a plateau on the top and a gentle dip slope to the south-east. The chalk has alkaline soils, which are very well drained and having been grazed for a very long time have chalk grasslands on the plateau. However, as illustrated in a small car park freshly dug earth in many places reveals the presence of clay with flints with acid soil. Many of the beech trees were planted for the furniture industry.

The Chilterns has some lovely bluebell woods with native bluebells, the flowers of which hang down on one side of the stem. A great deal of concern has been expressed about hybridisation with Spanish bluebells in gardens, with flowers sticking up on all sides of the stem and the petals more open than the native bell-shaped flowers. The speaker considered that the extent of hybridisation had perhaps been exaggerated because the seed capsules of native bluebells turn up as they ripen and may be misidentified as hybrids.

## Woodlands

The speaker is one of the botanical surveyors for wildlife sites and is concerned with the great interest in ancient woodlands (at least 400 years old). The judgement as to whether woodland is ancient woodland is based not on the trees but on the wild flowers on the ground. There are about 100 ancient woodland indicators and at least 10 must be present for a woodland to be classed as ancient woodland. In practice ancient woodlands usually have a greater number than this but the non-ancient woodlands seldom have more than 4-5. Most of the flowers illustrated by the speaker are ancient woodland indicators, though Lesser Celandine, Red Campion, Herb Robert and Ground Ivy were not, since they grow just about anywhere. Most woodland flowers grow along the paths since that is where the light is available. Lack of maintenance of paths can result in a decrease in their presence.

Among the flowers illustrated were:

- Primroses – Whippendell Woods on the outskirts of Watford has very few Primrose except for the area of the Scout camp, probably because being surrounded by housing the others have been dug up;
- Foxgloves, which prefer clay with flints and are very attractive to bees, which work from the bottom to the top of the spike;
- Coral Root Bittercress, which is concentrated in the Chilterns between High Wycombe and Watford (and also occurs in the South Downs in Sussex). It hardly ever produces fertile seed and propagates by bulbils, which drop off and form new plants, all of which are cloned;
- Dwarf Laurel, which flowers in February and later has black poisonous berries;
- Native laurel, a deciduous bush, unlike the evergreen garden laurel. It flowers very early in the year; and
- Stinking Hellebore flowers in January/February.

Others included Wood Sorrel, Woodspur, Yellow Archangel, Bugle, Woodruff, Sennicle, Nettle-leaved Bell Flower, Green Hellebore and Herb Paris.

Woodland orchids included:

- Early Purple Orchid, which has declined in the last decade or so, possibly due to a combination of deer, dry summers and lack of management;

- Bird's Nest Orchid, so-called because it describes the roots;
- Greater Butterfly Orchid, which has a white flower, lots of nectar and a vanilla scent and is more common in northern England;
- White Helleborine, which is not found in northern England, usually occurs under very old beech trees, suggesting it also needs the soil fungi associated with the beech;
- Red Helleborine, of which there are only 2 populations in England, one of which is in the Chilterns;
- Violet Helleborine, the stem of which is faintly violet and which is not confined to chalk soil;
- Narrow-lipped Helleborine;
- Fly Orchid, which is pollinated not by flies but by 2 species of solitary wasps that try to mate with it because its scent mimics the pheromones of the female wasp; and
- Military Orchid, which was relatively common in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but was not seen at all between 1914 and 1947, probably because of botanical collectors. It was found again in 1947 in Home Field Woods and there are 2 other sites in the Chilterns and one in Suffolk.

## Grasslands

Views of a gorse bush on clay with flints on Watlington Hill and of cowslips with shrubby hawthorn illustrated a major problem with chalk grasslands, that of shrubbing over. This requires management and one of the means of stopping it is the use of Hebridean sheep, which browse the bushes as well as the grass. The best variety of flowers occurs on chalk grasslands, acid grasslands are much less diverse.

Among the flowers illustrated were:

- Horseshoe Vetch, the food plant for the Chalkhill Blue caterpillar;
- Bird's Foot Trefoil, which occurs on both chalk and neutral grassland and is the food plant for the Common Blue caterpillar;
- Small Scabious, which is a calcareous indicator, whereas Field Scabious is not;
- Greater Knapweed, another calcareous indicator, while Common Knapweed is not;
- Yellow Wort *Blackstonia perfoliata*, named after the London apothecary John Blackstone, 1713-1753, whose grandparents lived at Harefield;
- Candytuft, which is rare as a wild plant being an annual and there being no bare ground on which its seeds can germinate on grassland; and
- Harebell, which also grows on acid soil.

Others included Hairy Violet, Wild Thyme, Rock Rose, Wild Parsley, Marjoram, Fairy Flax, Clustered Bell Flower, Purple Gentian and the Chiltern Gentian.

Grassland orchids include:

- Common Spotted Orchid, which is very widely distributed across Britain;
- Southern Marsh Orchid, which hybridises with the Common Spotted Orchid. At Rushdown Common, there are masses of them;
- Twayblade, which has similar leaves to the Butterfly Orchid;
- Little Frog Orchid, which is declining and very hard to find;
- Monkey Orchid, which occurs at 2 sites in the Chilterns and 2 in Kent; and
- Bee Orchid, which is never found in the same place twice. It is self-pollinating and not pollinated by bees trying to mate as might perhaps be thought.

Others included the Fragrant Orchid, Pyramidal Orchid, Musk Orchid and Lady Orchid