

Lockdown flower walks



Lockdown walks in our two parishes have really brought home to me what a wonderful variety of wild plants we have here. From the soils of the Downs a walk to the north takes one through five other geological strata - various clays and sandstones, all giving rise to different soil types, ending up in the extreme north on the Tunbridge Wells Sand.

Some plants are quite picky about the kind of soil they prefer - or tolerate - so many of the wild plants on the chalky soils of the Downs do not grow elsewhere, at least in quantity, because they are adapted either to the chemical or physical conditions. Perhaps most notable of these are the Chalk Fragrant-orchid, with its carnation scent, and the Round-headed Rampion, the 'Pride of Sussex'. Both grace the downland to the south of the parishes and their distribution maps in *The Flora of Sussex* show how confined these plants are to the chalk.

Many other plants are not particularly concerned about the geology beneath their roots - as their distribution maps show - but in the north, where the Tunbridge Wells Sand makes its influence felt, there are plants indicative of acid soils. For example, from May through to autumn, the Common Cow-wheat (alas not very common any more), a partial parasite on the roots of other plants, displays its beautiful lemon-coloured flowers on a bank on the Green Lane that runs south-west from St Helena Lane. It is joined later in the year by our native Goldenrod (a relative of several species of introduced species of Goldenrods that are grown in gardens), which likes shady places on acid soils.

There are also little treasures to discover, such as the diminutive fern, Adder's-tongue, which is in a separate family to most of our more familiar ferns such as Bracken and Male-fern. It doesn't look like a fern at all with its single fleshy leaf almost encircling its spore-producing spike. All Saints churchyard has a little colony and it occurs in some other old meadows locally. It is not fussy about soil type but has disappeared from places that have been treated with artificial fertilisers.

A recent Facebook post of a photograph of the lovely Meadow Cranesbill on Novington Lane near the junction with Chapel Lane was intriguing. This plant, which is familiar as a garden plant, is a true native of grassy verges and damp meadows, especially on chalky soils. According to *The Flora of Sussex*, it is thought to be a garden escape in most places with the exception of around East Chiltington, Plumpton and Lewes, where it has been known for over 200 years. The first record was from

meadows in Plumpton. At the southern end of Novington Lane there is a verge designated for the protection of this species and it is good to know of another site. The neighbour of the person responsible for the Facebook post, who grew up in the area, says that she remembers verges full of these lovely flowers. There is also a colony in All Saints churchyard, which is a beautiful remnant of old meadow, but whether this had once been planted on a grave or is a remnant of the plant community that existed before the church was built is not known.

The Flora of Sussex is beautifully illustrated and has distribution maps of all species (except those that are so widespread they occur everywhere in the two counties) as well as chapters on: Sussex botany and botanists; The geology and soils of Sussex; The habitats and vegetation of Sussex; Changes in land management since 1940 and effects on the Sussex flora; Conservation of the Sussex flora, and much else besides. It is a bargain at £45. I have a few to sell on behalf of Sussex Botanical Recording Society so please contact me if you are interested in obtaining one.

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