

The Flora of Sussex



As a member of the Sussex Botanical Recording Society and as a contributor of plant records from Plumpton and the surrounding area over the years, I was especially pleased to acquire *The Flora of Sussex* (Pisces Publications) when it was launched a few weeks ago.

It is a very large and impressive book and its 428 pages contain a huge amount of information. It is the first Sussex plant publication of this kind since 1980 when *The Sussex Plant Atlas* was published, giving accounts of all the plants recorded in the two counties with distribution maps, notes on how abundant or rare they were, whether they were native or alien, and the habitats they grew in. It was incredibly useful when I started recording because I could tell if a plant I had identified tentatively was probably correct or completely impossible in that particular square on the map. The Atlas was in black and white and had no photographs but had some useful chapters on habitats, geology etc.

In due course the Sussex Botanical Recording Society decided to involve its members in recording plants with a view to producing a new flora. So between 2000 and 2015, members, either individually or in organised field meetings, sallied forth and recorded the plants they found in 2 km x 2 km squares, based on the National Grid system. Modern technology allowed records to be sent in on line (or on the paper recording cards preferred by some people) and results were uploaded to the web site where a map, updated from time to time, showed how many species were recorded in each tetrad, with lists of species expected but were still waiting to be found.

By the end of 2015 nearly 200,000 records of 1988 plant species had been submitted. These include non-native species that have established in the wild. The average number of species per square was 350 (excluding squares that were incomplete because of parts being in the sea or in an adjoining county). It is good to know that most of the squares that cover Plumpton and East Chiltington had plant species in excess of this number. The Flora itself deals with 2749 species and subspecies, including some that haven't been seen for decades.

There are chapters on Sussex Botany and Botanists, Geology and Soils, Habitats and Vegetation, Conservation, and Changes since 1940. The bulk of the book gives accounts of each species or subspecies with notes on their status, whether Native to Sussex, Archaeophyte (established in the wild before AD1500) or Introduced (after AD1500). There are also details of any conservation designation, how common or

rare they are and what habitats they occur in. There are distribution maps (based on the 2-km squares) of all but the most common and rarest species. Some species have photographs – including one of Tall Sea-lavender *Limonium procerum* ssp. *procerum* taken by Plumpton's Kate Gold at Rottingdean. This is an introduced plant in Sussex (but native in south-west England). In East Sussex it was first discovered in 1979 on cliffs at Rottingdean where it had been grown in the garden of the White Horse Hotel since at least the early 1950s. It has since spread along the coast and reached Shoreham Beach in 2006.

The changes that have had negative effects are well known: human population increase (from 937,339 in 1951 to over 1,600,000 in 2011); intensification of agriculture, building and transport development. Acres of vineyards, golf courses, areas devoted to equestrian pursuits and development have all contributed to the loss of habitat as well as loss of fields and hedgerows to development. Much the most dramatic decline has been in species-rich grasslands. Flower-rich hay meadows have been ploughed up for crops, or reseeded and fertilised to establish species-poor grassland, and summer mowing for hay has been largely replaced by spring mowing for silage. Many species of old pastures and hay meadows have become much rarer: Saw-wort, Green-winged Orchid, Pepper-saxifrage, Cowslip and Adder's-tongue fern. In Plumpton these species still survive in one or two places, as our surveys have found, and we hope that they continue to thrive, but that does depend on appropriate management and lack of development.

The Sussex Botanical Recording Society welcomes new members whatever their level of expertise. The Field Meetings provide opportunities to learn in a friendly and informal group, often visiting places not normally open to the public. There are also indoor meeting, newsletters, a website sussex.flora.org and Facebook Group.