

THE VASCULAR PLANTS: AN UPDATE

AILS A BURNS

3 Rosliston Road, Stapenhill, Burton-upon-Trent, Staffordshire, DE15 9RĴ.

ABSTRACT

Data recording for the Flora of Slapton Ley Nature Reserve (Brookes & Burns, 1969) was completed in 1968. A supplement, to bring that work up to date, has been proposed but, in the meanwhile, this note focuses on the Shingle Ridge (Slapton Sands) and the shores of the Lower Ley: the two areas in which the floristic changes during the last thirty years are most apparent.

INTRODUCTION

The field work for Brookes & Burns (1969) was finished in 1968. Since then, there have been many changes but, to a very large extent, the Reserve retains its great botanical interest. The area has been increased; the Southgrounds and Start Valley Marshes (G4, G3) and Southgrounds Meadow (O) are now included in the Reserve. No attempt has been made here to detail the flora of these areas, but it is intended to include them in the proposed supplement which will bring Brookes & Burns up to date.

Overall, there has been a general reduction in grazing which has led to the development of scrub in Ireland Field (N1), for example; of carr in Little Marsh (F2), and has favoured the growth of reeds, *Phragmites australis* (*P. communis*) and *Phalaris arundinacea*, at the expense of sedges, in France Valley Marsh, (G1). The woods are being actively managed for the first time since before the Second World War with timber extraction and replanting; additional species such as *Prunus avium*, wild cherry, and *Sorbus aria*, whitebeam, have been introduced.

This note focuses on the Shingle Ridge and the shores of the Lower Ley, the two areas in which changes since 1968 are most apparent. Nomenclature, both scientific and English, is that of Stace (1991); names in parentheses are those used in Brookes & Burns where these differ. The sections and compartments are those of Mercer, 1966.

THE SHINGLE RIDGE

Vehicles have been confined to designated car parks since 1971 and so the vegetation of the shingle crest, 1B, is much less disturbed than previously. Over much of the area, a continuous cover has become established; in the short mown turf between the Monument and the hotel ruins *Trifolium scabrum*, rough clover, previously rare, is now¹ abundant and *T. striatum*, knotted clover, not found in 1968, is occasional.

At the northern and southern ends of the shingle ridge, the vegetation remains open. Just to the north of Torcross, *Medicago sativa* ssp. *sativa*, lucerne, and *Chicorium intybus*, chicory, occur now; but the *Melilotus* sp. which was found here in 1988 has not persisted nor has *Lathyrus japonicus*, sea pea, been seen recently. The large monocotyledonous

¹ "now" refers to the year 1995

plants first noted in 1988, at Strete Gate, a few metres to the north of the reserve boundary, flowered in 1994 and so proved to be *Pancratium maritimum*, sea daffodil; its nearest known wild station is near Quiberon on the south coast of Brittany.

Scrub control and mowing are now considered necessary to maintain botanical species diversity on the shingle backslope, following the decline in the rabbit population. *Senecio jacobaea*, common ragwort, a proscribed weed, is hand-pulled over all the shingle in an attempt to eradicate it. Eradication has been successful in the case of other introductions; *Fallopia japonica*, (*Polygonum cuspidatum*), Japanese knotweed and *Rhus hirta* (*R. typhina*), stag's-horn sumach at Torcross.

THE LOWER LEY

Southgrounds and Hartshorn shores, E2 and E4.

From the late 1970s, lack of grazing by cattle, combined with high summer water levels in the Lower Ley, allowed the fringing reedbeds to encroach on to these inner shores and shrubby species to spread down from the Leyside cliffs. Thus, ten years later, the open trampled nutrient-enriched summer shore habitat, with its distinctive flora, was scarcely in existence. *Corrigiola litoralis*, strapwort, formerly abundant in this, its sole remaining British locality, had become very rare; in 1988 only six plants were recorded.

In 1991, a three year Species Recovery Programme was begun, under the direction of English Nature, during which cattle access to the shores was restored, scrub removed and the Lower Ley outfall across the beach at Torcross kept clear. This management continues and there is now a summer shore again. The population of *C. litoralis*, reinforced by plants grown on at Kew from Slapton seed, is increasing. It is hoped that other species characteristic of this habitat, and formerly abundant, will re-appear; of these, *Littorella uniflora*, shoreweed, is now very scarce and *Ranunculus trichophyllus*, thread-leaved water-crowfoot, has not been seen recently while *Chamaemelum nobile*, chamomile, (on the continent, said to prefer muddy winter/wet, summer/dry places which are grazed by geese—A. P. Conolly, pers. comm.) was last seen in 1990. Neither *Baldellia ranunculoides*, lesser water-plantain (locally frequent in 1968) nor *Mentha pulegium*, pennyroyal (recorded as rare in 1968) has been seen for many years.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am grateful to Chris Riley for all his help in the preparation of this note

REFERENCES

- BROOKES, B. S. and BURNS, A., (1969). Natural History of Slapton Ley Nature Reserve III. The Flowering Plants and Ferns, *Field Studies*, 3, 125–157.
- ENGLISH NATURE, (1991). *Species Recovery Programme, Strapwort*. Unpublished report
- MERCER, I. D., (1966). Natural History of Slapton Ley Nature Reserve I. Introduction and Morphological Description. *Field Studies*, 2, 385–405.
- RILEY, C., (1993). *Slapton Ley National Nature Reserve, Management Plan Revision*. Unpublished report.
- STACE, C. A., (1991). *New Flora of the British Isles*, Cambridge.