



Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke

November 2008
Newsletter Number Twenty Seven



Fleam Dyke, south of A11, October 2008

Although this end of the dyke was heavily overgrown by the 1980s, the path along the top of the bank remained sufficiently open for a rich chalk grassland flora to have survived. Perhaps the least obvious and least known flower is the one which can sometimes be found a hundred yards from this gate, just a bit beyond the silver birch on the left of the path. Sharon Hearle, the first Green Belt Project officer, tried to make sure it did not get mowed in summer. Julia Napier

Field Fleawort
Tephrosia integrifolia,
formerly *Senecio integrifolius*
photograph by David Barden

Field Fleawort growing on Pewsey Downs in Wiltshire. (Sorry - I didn't have a photo of a Fleam Dyke plant in flower!) The plants I have seen in Cambridgeshire are usually rather less compact than this, with the flowers perhaps not quite so large. DB



If you want to make a quick visit to Fleam Dyke without walking from Fulbourn, or Balsham, there is a lay-by on the south side of the A11. This cheery cafe serves the usual roadside food and drink from 6.0am until 2.0pm.

Apart from the lovely smell of frying bacon, there are always regulars standing chatting and looking around, so I feel it is safe to leave my car there. (No, not that one.)



The path to the dyke is just left of the bushes next to the cafe. As you go up onto the bank, you will see a triangle of land on either side, planted with juniper bushes. These were grown from cuttings taken from the ageing junipers on the dyke. There are about 15 on either side, now two to three metres tall. Bug lovers, please check in May/June for the juniper shield bug!

Catmint ***Nepeta cataria.***

photograph by David Barden

Catmint in flower on the Roman Road, on the flat bit not far from the North West end, on a beautiful day in late September 2008, when most plants would have gone to seed. Note the rounded head of flowers, somewhat reminiscent of Water Mint. DB

To see abundant catmint on the Fleam Dyke, go over the footbridge and follow the path up to Mutlow Hill, go through the sheep gates, pause to enjoy the view to Fulbourn and beyond, cross the earth 'bridge' over the disused railway, and start looking along the banks where the scrub has been cleared. In summer, any clump of catmint will be alive with insects, especially small bees such as the brown carder bee. JN



Plant notes

by David Barden

The aim of these 'notes', which I hope will become a regular feature of this newsletter, is to highlight some of the plants that may be found on the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke, to describe their appearance, distribution and habitat, and to provide a few details about how they are doing. Some will be well-known and cherished, and others may be less familiar, but I hope that there will be something here for everyone. Although I have a keen interest in plants, especially those in Cambridgeshire, I have no long experience of our two linear sites to draw on, so I hope you will forgive me if I have omitted anything or made any mistakes. Correspondence (particularly reporting sightings of the rarer species!) is of course welcome. Write to me at: 38A Howard Rd, Cambridge, CB5 8QP, telephone 01223 293459, or email dbarden77@yahoo.co.uk.

Field Fleawort

Tephroseris integrifolia, formerly *Senecio integrifolius*

The name of this plant is not calculated to grab the attention - 'fleawort' suggests a rather objectionable weed - but its national rarity gives it claim to be one of the most valuable of all the plants on our two linear sites. Despite this, it is rather easy to pass it over as being a bit of a Ragwort look-alike. Superficially, this is true, with its hairy leaves and stem, and yellow daisy-like flowers, but as a rule it is much shorter than Ragwort - rarely much more than 30 cm, and often a lot less. The key difference, though, is in the leaves, which are leathery, unlobed (hence *integrifolia*), and spatulate (spoon-shaped), whereas Ragwort has deeply divided leaves. These leaves form a tight basal rosette, and are quite densely covered in cottony hairs. This combination of leaf features enables Field Fleawort to be identified with certainty even when it is not in flower. To see it at its best though, try looking for it in the last week of May, when in most years the flowers should be out. Then, when growing in short turf, it has an attractive simplicity, with its rounded leaves held tightly to the ground, and its unfussy bright yellow flowers often growing singly. To my mind it looks very much like the sort of plant that a child would draw!

Field Fleawort has always been rather rare in the UK, and is actually split into two subspecies. The commoner of the two, ssp. *integrifolia*, is currently found from the Devil's Ditch south-westwards along the line of the Chilterns to Wiltshire, and also at the eastern end of the South Downs. The rarer one, ssp. *maritima*, which is endemic to the UK, is found only on Anglesey. The overall distribution of the species reflects its strong preference for shallow soils on the chalk, where it favours warm, dry, south-facing sites. In Cambridgeshire, there are numerous nineteenth century records from the general area of the Gog Magog Hills, but only Charles Babington notes it as actually being found on the Roman Road: in 1860 he said that it could be found on the 'Gogmagog Hills, in and beyond the Park, and on the Wool-street'. There are no other records from the Roman Road, and it was last seen in the 'Gogs area' by N D Simpson in 1913. However, it has been long known from the Fleam Dyke; Babington recorded it from here, W P Hearn noted it as being 'sprinkled about' at the northern end of the dyke in 1879, and David Coombe recorded it as 'plentiful on the Fleam Dyke' in 1949. Apart from a 1991 record by Charles Turner in the section between the old railway and Mutlow Hill, recent records have all been in the area between the A11 and Bedford Gap. Three flowers were seen by Julia Napier in about 2,000 next to the path beside the 2 silver birches at the A11 entrance to the Dyke. I searched for it on 17th May this year, and found three plants in bud, two about 70m NW of the first juniper, and the other a little SE of the last juniper. All three were in the really short turf within 30cm of the centre of the footpath along the top of the dyke, and thus are rather vulnerable to trampling. The reason for the apparent drop in numbers since 2001 is not clear, but it is likely that the sheep grazing that took place on the dyke in 2003 did not favour them, as the sheep tended to sit on the top of the dyke at night, nibbling away at the best bits of turf. Field Fleawort is a long-lived perennial, however, so the species is not in immediate danger of extinction. There may perhaps be more plants in the longer grass on the sides of the dyke - I'm already planning a visit in 2009 to see if any can be found!

The only other place that Field Fleawort is found in Cambridgeshire is on the Devil's Ditch, adjacent to Newmarket Heath. Here, 2008 was an unusually good year for it, with over 50 plants being seen, some, rather uncharacteristically, growing in quite long grassland, especially on the NE-facing bank of the ditch. Why it has done so well this year is a bit of a mystery, but this erratic behaviour matches that noted by Jenyns: in 1823 he found 'a few specimens growing sparingly

on a small part of the beacon course near the gravel-pit'. In 1825, however, he said '...there are hundreds of thousands of specimens. Every part of the Heath is covered with them from the four-mile Stable to the extreme part of the Links'. We can but hope that a similar fortune awaits Field Fleawort on the Fleam Dyke!

Catmint

Nepeta cataria

The genus *Nepeta* is large, with over 250 species worldwide, but with just one representative in the UK, namely Catmint, which despite its name is only distantly related to the true mints. It is a fairly tall plant, growing up to about 1 m, and has its flowers arranged in whorls, which become more closely spaced further up, ending in a 'head' at the top. The flowers are white and speckled with reddish-purple dots - a key distinguishing feature. The whole plant is softly hairy, and has a distinctive mint-like smell, which has a well-known effect on cats, causing them to act as if intoxicated.

Its native status in the UK is rather doubtful, but it is at the very least an ancient introduction, as with many of our cornfield 'weeds'. I always like to know what the Latin names mean because it helps me to remember them! In this case the genus name derives from Nepi, previously Nepete, a town in Italy where Catmint was apparently once cultivated.

The wild Catmint should be distinguished from *Nepeta x faassenii*, the blue-flowered plant frequently grown in gardens, which is a hybrid of two non-native species, *N. racemosa* and *N. nepetella*. The only other plant with which Catmint might be confused is White Horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*), but this has pure white flowers with 10 sepal-teeth rather than 5, lacks the terminal head of flowers, and is in any case now rather rare over the UK, with very few records from Cambridgeshire in the last century.

Catmint has a rather scattered distribution in the UK, and has diminished with the intensification of agriculture and the growth of scrub. Its favoured habitat is open ground on calcareous soils, especially those where there has been disturbance, but it avoids the clay, peat and sands. Cambridgeshire is one of the best counties in which to see it, there being a good number of recent records for it on the chalk. The first localised record from the Roman Road was by David Coombe in 1950, and there have been further records since then, especially near Copley Hill. In July, Julia saw one plant south of the A11, more or less opposite the information board at the base of the big bank there. I found two plants close to the NW end of the road this year (see photo on page 2).

On the Fleam Dyke, the first record was by Miss H Miller in 1952, and in 1982, S Everett noted it beside the path on the half of the dyke NW of the A11. The thickening scrub would probably then have held it back. In 1992 some plants were seen at the base of the south west facing bank about five minutes from the Fulbourn end of the dyke. Sarah Lambert noted the catmint in her 1998 survey and it benefited greatly from the clearance in April 2003. However, following the cutting back of the scrub next to the path between the Fulbourn end and the old railway in 2004-5, it burst forth in vast quantity, presumably from dormant seed. It has continued to be present since then, but will probably diminish in quantity as the vegetation becomes less open.

October 2008

Rest harrow, now a common sight growing along the track of the Roman Road where it begins to rise slightly, a few hundred yards beyond Worsted Lodge.

copyright: Shelley Signs



News in Brief

Autumn Gentians doing well on Fleam Dyke

On 15th August 2008, Rachel Gray saw 60 spikes beside the steps on Fleam Dyke, near the disused railway. She wrote, 'I went to the Fleam Dyke this morning and am happy to say that the autumn gentians are having a very good year. I counted over 60 without searching very hard. They are bigger than in other years.'

Pyramidal Orchids on the Roman Road, south of Worsted Lodge

Some years ago, I was looking at maps of the Roman Road with Bill Clark, former Head Warden of Wandlebury Nature Reserve and Country Park. He said that there had been a good patch of pyramidal orchids on the verge of the Roman Road, going towards Gunner's Hall path. On 27th July 2008, Roger and Stella Wolfe emailed me to say that they had seen '12 spikes of pyramidal orchid at TL54023/51128 (only noticed because the growth of sterile brome had collapsed over the area and they were pushing through.) Nearby were 3 spikes of broomrape'.

Purple Milk Vetch in a new site?

This summer David Barden noticed purple milk vetch growing on the bank of the Fleam Dyke near the junipers. It was not recorded by Sarah Lambert in her 1998 survey, but when it is not in flower you need very sharp eyes to see it in the short turf. Any comments?

Chalk Hill Blues fourth year

The first chalk hill blues of the season were again seen by Roger and Stella Wolfe on 10th August. They saw one male between Mutlow Hill and the disused railway, and four south of the A11: 'one 99% sure female, and 3 males. The wind direction was from the SW, so Fleam dyke was upwind of the Devil's Dyke. Therefore the CHBs could not have been blow-ins from Devil's Dyke'. (Or should that be Devil's Ditch, as in the Ordnance Survey?)

The following Saturday, Nick Ballard saw 8 chalkhill blues: 2 females, 2 males, plus 2 mating pairs. Perhaps 2009 will bring us better August weather and the larger numbers which will enable us to feel that the chalk hill blues are really back. There is certainly enough horseshoe vetch for them.

Dingy Skipper update, with a note for bird lovers

The last official record for dingy skippers on the Fleam Dyke is 1905, so it was a surprise to learn that a pair of dingies turned up on E-bay with a label to say they had been 'captured in 1930 at Fleam Dyke Cambridge'. In the May edition of this newsletter, I asked if anyone had a later record. Norman Moore replied:

I recorded them in 'Cambridgeshire (Fleam Dyke etc.)' in 1941. From other records I know that I visited the Fleam Dyke on June 1st 1941 and the Roman Road on May 22nd 1941. So these are almost certainly the exact dates when I saw them.

Incidentally, I also recorded Grizzled Skipper on Fleam Dyke 1941, presumably on the same occasion.

While walking along the Fleam Dyke on 1.6.41, I saw five Stone Curlews, and when on the Roman Road on 22.5.41, two pairs of Red-backed Shrikes.

Since the last official record for a grizzled skipper on the Fleam Dyke is by Hancock for 25th May 1921, this shows clearly that there are much later records tucked away in field notebooks, card indexes or memories. So I rang Bill Clark, former Head Warden of Wandlebury Nature Reserve, who said he had seen grizzled skippers on the Picnic Field in the 1970s after his work on that area. Unfortunately, he did not notice exactly when it was that they were no longer there.

The following week, a woman who had walked on the Roman Road in the 1940s said that she remembered graylings there, which would be only a few years later than the last official record for the Gog Magog hills: T R Jenkyn, 1938

Wanted! Records of chalkhill blues, silver studded blues, small blues, dingy skippers, grizzled skippers or graylings on the Roman Road and the Fleam Dyke.

Poetic Tribute and an Ancient Greek Joke!

Many thanks to Someone for a very pretty card with flowery compliments in verse, but my plumes are all borrowed from the assortment of experts who belong to this interesting society. For example, with reference to the beautiful portrait of Cecilia Gallerani by Leonardo, Patrick Daunt was pleased to find an honourable reference to:

that noble beast the Ferret or Polecat (alias Fitchew or Foumart), hero of Saki's masterpiece 'Sredni Vashtar'. Your mention of the Greek reminds me of what is, I think, the first known instance of a theatrical gaffe, when an Athenian actor playing the part of Orestes in Euripides' tragedy of that name, meaning to say 'I see a calm coming from over the waves', got the pitch wrong (galên' instead of galén') and astonished his attentive audience by announcing the coming over the waves of a polecat.

Traffic Restriction Order, not ahoy!

You may remember that in Newsletter 25, February 2008, the imaginative cabin boy at the top of the main mizzen mast thought he saw a Seasonal Traffic Restriction Order approaching. Sam Agnew and I had an on-site meeting with the landowner, James Kiddy, a representative of the off-road car drivers and John Cooper of the Cambridgeshire Countryside Services Team. Sam Agnew and I were left with the impression that steps would now be taken to change the legal position of this part of the Roman Road between the Hildersham-Balsham Road, and heavy-duty lockable gates would be installed. Dominic Doble of the Countryside Services confirmed this in an email to me. However, when I inquired about progress in late summer, Dominic Doble had left, and it seemed that the agreement was not definite at all. The damage to the surface and the annoyance to the landowners continues unabated, as Neil Young's photograph shows. The beautiful bank of flowers beside the slope going down to Mark's Grave has been very badly battered with a consequent reduction in floral interest.

Good News, Bad News

At a meeting of the Linear Sites Committee on May, it was agreed that the Fleam Dyke from the disused railway to Fulbourn would get a more careful brush cut by a firm specialising in conservation work. This was done. The dropwort flowered and seeded. Clustered bellflowers were several dozen a penny. Church bells were rung. etc. So it was disappointing to find that apart from specially listed areas, the County Council had cut the full width of the Road from just south of Worsted Lodge to the Hildersham -Balsham Road. In addition, the stretch from Copley Hill to the golf course was mowed from hedge to hedge. This invalidated the butterfly transect, and made it impossible assess the improvements in sections that I like to survey every year.

Alec Norman by Roger Wolfe

Alec was a stalwart member of the Cambridge Rambling Club (for many years he **was** the club!) and did an enormous amount to preserve the rights of way network in the original county of Cambridgeshire at a time when ramblers were very few in number and officialdom even less interested than it is now. He was a link between the utilitarian use of paths in the 1930s and the recreational use of modern times. He worked energetically on the Definitive Maps of public rights of way, a requirement of National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949.

When he died in 1969, the Cambridgeshire Rambling Club decided there should be some kind of memorial, and laid this stone to his memory. They chose a site on the Roman Road, and I was pleased to rediscover the place few months ago. It is not very obvious - set back in a belt of trees adjoining the Road on the north side, near Wandlebury. I think it is true to say that everyone who enjoys walking the countryside of Cambridgeshire and neighbouring counties owes Alec an enormous debt of gratitude. July 2008

Note from Julia.

I strongly recommend www.cambridgeramblingclub.org.uk/crc/history.html
Ailsa MacQueen, until recently their archivist, has written a delightfully lively account of the origins of the club and their varied activities since it was set up in 1927. Several Ramblers, including Ailsa MacQueen, are 'Friends', having been recruited early on by Margaret Rishbeth, who still regularly reconnoitres and leads walks. Meanwhile, Roger and Janet Moreton continue the Ramblers' tradition of ensuring footpaths are kept open for the rest of us to enjoy.



Memorial to Alec Norman of the Cambridgeshire Rambling Club. It is on the north verge, not far from the northern end of the Roman Road. TL49284 54536

The lettering of the inscription on the stone was not deeply cut, and is no longer clear. It reads:

“These trees were planted as a tribute to Alec Norman and his efforts to protect country footpaths” 1971

Below:

Dropwort. This cousin of meadowsweet is now doing well on the Roman Road south of Copley Hill. It is also flourishing on the Fleam Dyke south of the A11. It flowers from July to September, and propagates freely, if not mowed in July!

photographs by Roger Wolfe



Below:

The Roman Road between the Hildersham-Balsham road and Mark's grave, in a dismally familiar state. This section is not a Scheduled Monument or a Site of Special Scientific Interest, so the only hope is for a Traffic Restriction Order in the interests of ordinary walkers, horse riders and cyclists.

Photograph by Neil Young, the unicyclist

In this photograph, Borley Wood is on the right. A section of the Icknield Way joins the Road from the left, a few hundred yards further on. The severely eroded junction has been repaired with 'road scrapings', which look dreadful and cause flooding in the adjoining field, leading to loss of crops.





Friends' Work Party, 12th October 2008.

This section benefited greatly from work by Sharon Hearle and the Midweek Volunteers in the 1990s, but it had not been raked off for some years and the 'thatch' was beginning to smother the rock roses, horseshoe vetch and dropwort.

For some reason this section was exempted from the extensive cutting that took place in July.

Is this a record?

It was remarkably hot for October, but not quite hot enough for mirages. Someone shouted 'Look out!' and along came an entirely real unicyclist. Neil Young wiggled niftily round my booted feet, several rucksacks and a pair of steel-capped brush-cutting boots. Responding to cries of 'Will you do that all again 'cos my friend here did not see?' Neil began his return journey to Horseheath.

Apparently unicycling is very good for a bad back.



From left to right:

Helen Chubb
David Seilly
Mike Albutt
David Cambridge
David Barden
Richard Fowling
and, of course, Iain Webb who was still mowing.

Thanks also to the stalwarts of November 16th, who turned up in a steady drizzle to mow and rake up on the Fleam Dyke: Helen, Richard, David Barden, David Cambridge, Iain Webb andme,

Best wishes,
Julia Napier

November 2008