



Ashmolean Natural History Society of Oxfordshire

Harvesting Historic Data

By Camilla Lambrick



John Sibthorp
1758 - 1796



George Claridge Druce
1850 - 1932

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Introduction

Past floras have a lot to tell us about our changing flora, here's how volunteers of the Oxfordshire Flora Group are making the information available for analysis.

Sibthorp 1794

Though available in Latin, it seems no translation of Sibthorp's *Flora Oxoniensis* of 1794 has been produced, perhaps because the main text is readily accessible since it uses Linnaean plant names and most of the localities given are extant village names. The Preface of Sibthorp's work has now been translated into English and will be published on the website of the Ashmolean Natural History Society of Oxfordshire under Fritillary Extra (www.fritillary.org.uk) accompanied by an excel spreadsheet of species mentioned and their localities.

Work is currently underway to determine how many current plant records in the county can be linked to Sibthorp's sites.

Background to Sibthorp's Flora

John Sibthorp FRS was the youngest son of Humphrey Sibthorp, Sherardian Professor of Botany at Oxford. He studied at Oxford, and then at Edinburgh and Montpellier. His *Flora Oxoniensis, exhibens plantas in agro Oxoniensi sponte crescentes, secundum systema sexuale distributas* was published when he was 36, shortly before his untimely death.

The Preface begins “Long ago Cambridge claimed its Flora for itself. Indeed more than a century has elapsed since Ray, easily the foremost botanist of his time, led the way and has been successfully followed by celebrated men in our time. However up to now Oxford, though often trodden by the botanist's foot, has as yet found none who would identify its plants and reference them by their currently legitimate names. Yet a great multitude of species have localities here, thanks to the diversity of landscapes and soils. In the shady beech woods we can find *Monotropa* [Birds-nest], *Pyrola* [Wintergreen] and *Serapias* [Helleborines], which appear rarely in other regions. Alpines indeed we don't have, as our area is not adorned with mountains. However close to Oxford Shotover Hill is not without subalpines. *Selago* [Club Moss] and *Oreopteris* adorn the northern slopes, and even *Drosera* grows surrounded by soft mossy carpets. Below in the peaty fen of Bullingdon Green in summer the sedge beds burst with flowers of *Pinguicula* [Butterwort] and *Parnassia* [Grass-of-Parnassus] reaching for the sun; among them even the scarcely known creeping *Sium* [Creeping Marshwort] can be found.”

Method Used for Digitizing Sibthorp's Records

Only the vascular plants and Charophytes were transcribed at this stage. The Mosses and Fungi would require expert knowledge, and are probably less informative as many of the Linnaean taxa have been subdivided.

Help on the preface was obtained from Christopher Preston and others.

Using the Internet Archive of Sibthorp's Flora, volunteers Ruth Ripley, Andrew Saunders and Barbara Spence transcribed the data into a spreadsheet with the following column headings:

Species number in Sibthorp

Linnaean name in Sibthorp

English name in Sibthorp

Latin name in Stace 3rd edition

English name in Stace 3rd edition

**Determined by
page in Sibthorp
Transcriber
Habitats if mentioned
Flowering month as given by Sibthorp
H,4,bO woody, perennial, biennial or annual
Locality as in Sibthorp
Locality modern name
Comments by Sibthorp
Comments by transcriber
Tetrad or monad grid reference
checked by transcriber**

The data was checked by another person against the original, and help sought for difficult determinations, before being entered into the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre database, as well as being published on the Fritillary website.

Results

Sibthorp gives a species account for some 750 species and varieties of vascular plants and Charophytes; this is a little over half the c. 1,400 species cited in the *Flora of Oxfordshire* (Killick *et al.* 1998). For 369 taxa Sibthorp gave a total of 128 localities. The area that he seems to have visited was relatively restricted, mostly making use of the main roads. Several heaths which have now disappeared were often visited. Most of his richest surviving sites are now SSSIs. Several of Sibthorp's localities are still regularly visited for their notable plants – the woods near Ashford Mills are subject to a spring pilgrimage to see Yellow-star-of-Bethlehem; the road verge between Middleton Stoney and Ardley for Meadow Clary; the Burford Downs, now only a roadside fragment, for Purple Milk Vetch; Magdalen College Meadows for Snake's-head Fritillary; Godstow for Birthwort, and most notably the Lye Valley for Grass-of-Parnassus, Marsh Lousewort, Few-flowered Spike-rush, Bog Pimpernel, and the extremely rare Dioecious Sedge which is flourishing after extensive management (J A Webb pers. comm. 2011).

Some species have proved remarkably persistent – Sibthorp reported not only Oxford Ragwort on local walls, but also *Hieracium oblongum* [Weedy Hawkweed] from the walls of Wadham College where Caroline Pannell found it in 1979; and he reported Bistort from near Gosford Bridge where David Morris found it in 2020.

Sometimes Sibthorp unexpectedly gives localities for species which are now abundant e.g. Holly, Dove's-foot Crane's-bill, Rosebay Willowherb, Male-fern and Pendulous Sedge, leaving us to surmise whether they were really less frequent then, or he just had not seen them often.

Forty-five of Sibthorp's species have not been seen recently (since 2000) in the wild, in the vice county:

<i>Agrostemma githago</i>	Corncockle
<i>Antennaria dioica</i>	Mountain Everlasting
<i>Botrychium lunaria</i>	Moonwort
<i>Bupleurum rotundifolium</i>	Thorow-wax
<i>Chenopodium murale</i>	Nettle-leaved Goosefoot
<i>Chenopodium urbicum</i>	Upright Goosefoot
<i>Chenopodium vulvaria</i>	Stinking Goosefoot
<i>Clinopodium calamintha</i>	Lesser Calamint
<i>Convallaria majalis</i>	Lily-of-the-valley
<i>Dianthus armeria</i>	Deptford Pink
<i>Drosera rotundifolia</i>	Round-leaved Sundew
<i>Eleocharis acicularis</i>	Needle Spike-rush
<i>Eleogiton fluitans</i>	Floating Club-rush
<i>Equisetum sylvaticum</i>	Wood Horsetail
<i>Fallopia dumetorum</i>	Copse-bindweed
<i>Genista anglica</i>	Petty Whin
<i>Gentianella campestris</i>	Field Gentian
<i>Huperzia selago</i>	Common Clubmoss
<i>Jasione montana</i>	Sheep's-bit
<i>Lycopodium clavatum</i>	Stag's-horn Clubmoss
<i>Lythrum hyssopifolia</i>	Grass-poly
<i>Marrubium vulgare</i>	White Horehound
<i>Moenchia erecta</i>	Upright Chickweed
<i>Nardus stricta</i>	Mat-grass
<i>Neotinea ustulata</i>	Burnt Orchid
<i>Ophrys sphegodes</i>	Early Spider-orchid
<i>Persicaria minor</i>	Small Water-pepper
<i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>	Common Butterwort
<i>Potentilla argentea</i>	Hoary Cinquefoil
<i>Pulicaria vulgaris</i>	Small Fleabane
<i>Pulsatilla vulgaris</i>	Pasqueflower
<i>Pyrola minor</i>	Common Wintergreen
<i>Ranunculus hederaceus</i>	Ivy-leaved Crowfoot
<i>Ranunculus sardous</i>	Hairy Buttercup
<i>Sagina nodosa</i>	Knotted Pearlwort
<i>Salix repens</i>	Creeping Willow
<i>Schoenus nigricans</i>	Black Bog-rush
<i>Tephrosieris integrifolia</i>	Field Fleawort
<i>Teucrium scordium</i>	Water Germander
<i>Trifolium scabrum</i>	Rough Clover
<i>Trifolium subterraneum</i>	Subterranean Clover
<i>Turritis glabra</i>	Tower Mustard
<i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i>	Bilberry
<i>Vicia sylvatica</i>	Wood Vetch

An analysis of the causes of extinction from the county over time is underway. Combining Sibthorp's data with later information will give a picture of the ways in which the flora of the county has changed since the 18th century - an early picture of our changing flora.

Druce 1927

Now Druce's 1927 Flora of Oxfordshire is to be scanned by the University of Oxford and made accessible online; the first edition of 1886 (which is already online) contains many fewer records. The second edition however contains some 20,000 species records which we plan to digitize as described above. If you would like to help, do contact us at the email below. This information will also be made available through the usual channels.

camilla.r.lambrick@gmail.com