

60 Downland Orchids in the Dover Area

BY PAT PENNINGTON

In the last edition of the Newsletter I dealt with woodland orchids to be found locally; in this copy I will mention some of the downland types which may be numerically more numerous but are rarely noticed by most walkers.

Frog Orchids (*Coeloglossum*) for example, grow on Gorse Hill behind the Dover Athletic Football ground. Lest you think I am encouraging plant hunters in revealing the exact spot I defy any but the most persistent to discover these squat three-inch high green curiosities buried among the matted grass. Despite being directed to the site, it took two of us forty minutes careful searching before we found them and when I returned next day with a camera I was convinced someone has picked them all. Actually they were still there in their dozens but it took nearly an hour before we rediscovered them. I wonder if their virtual invisibility means they are far more widespread than is commonly believed?

Even smaller and more significant are the minute yellow-green Musk Orchids (*Herminium monorchis*) which I only tracked down at Park Gate Down in the Elham Valley because someone had considerably erected a protective covering of twigs over them. If you lie flat on the ground and sniff very hard you might be able to discern their characteristic honey scent.

The more famous resident of Park Gate Down is the Monkey Orchid (*Orchis simia*), a beautiful silvery pink with red extremities at the end of each monkey-like flower. Yet although now naturalized, it was deliberately planted here some time ago by the Kent Trust for Nature Conservation so in a sense is not really native. Yet it is common in the Pas de Calais, a striking example of how our flora was impoverished when Britain was separated from the rest of Europe by rising seas at the end of the Ice Age.

Another common continental orchid is the Late Spider (*Ophrys fuciflora*) but the only sites known to me locally are on Wye Downs, two plants at Holywell, Folkestone, and a few more on the chalk escarpment nearby. How the nearby Channel Tunnel workings will affect this flower's fragile hold on East Kent I do not know but expect the worst.

The Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*) is happily more common. It looks very similar to the Late Spider but its tiny greenish "beard" points backwards to the stem whereas the yellow jutting point on the Late Spider Orchid points forward. They can be found on Temple Down, Temple Ewell, the Sandwich Golf courses, Coombe Valley and in fields on either side of Warren Lane, Lydden, if grazing animals permit. Yet their flowering,

like so many orchids is highly erratic; one year there may be hardly any and the next year there might be hundreds,

Whereas Bee Orchids have pink sepals, the well-known Early Spider Orchids (*Ophrys sphegodes*) have green sepals. They are probably the rarest orchids to be found within the town boundary since they are quite common on the terraces above the Eastern Docks and on the cliffs near Aycliffe where they bravely survive the salt-laden blasts, dwarfed but sturdy. They used to be common on Old Park Hill if one climbed up from London Road, River, but I have not been in recent years and it looks as though the undergrowth is now too high since they must have short turf like most downland orchids. There is a large garden on Kingsdown Leas where literally hundreds flower despite regular mowing and they are also found on the neighbouring golf courses and on Lydden Nature Reserve.

The same is true for an amazingly abundant orchid which hardly anyone notices, the Autumn Ladies Tresses (*Spiranthes spiralis*). This blooms in September and at first glance resembles short spikes of flowering grass. Its beauty is best appreciated by lying on the ground with a magnifying glass so be prepared for suspicious glances from passers by. It is common on Temple Down and the Nature Reserve at Lydden. In fact it can appear almost overnight on uncut lawns when conditions are right.

The last orchid is the most well-known downland orchid—the Common Spotted Orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*) found on the Western Heights, the area surrounding the Castle, Langdon Cliffs and numerous woodland margins along Alkham Valley (one of the best orchid sites around Dover). Often, it will grow quite happily in gardens where concern for wild life takes precedence over weedkillers and hoeing. In the past I have seen children picking great bunches of the pink/mauve flowers in June but perhaps education as to the general rarity of these beautiful plants has reduced these depredations. There certainly seems to be a greater awareness of the astonishing variety of the wild life in our local area.

Several of the orchids mentioned are illustrated on the front cover

Deadline

for CONTRIBUTIONS

The Editor welcomes contributions suitable for the *Newsletter*. Illustrations to articles and other appropriate visual materials, are particularly appreciated.

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