

THE “RUSKIN PLOT,”
PRESENTED BY MR. HENRY WILLETT
TO THE
ASHMOLEAN NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY OF OXFORDSHIRE.

ABOUT four years ago, when I was visiting my old friend Mr. Henry Willett, at his residence, Arnold House, Brighton, I accidentally picked up a paper which announced the gift to Cambridge of a portion of Wicken Fen, the haunt of the Swallow-tail Butterfly and the home of many interesting species of insects and fen plants, and read the account of it to my kind host, who at once, with characteristic kindly generosity, said, ‘I should like to do something of the kind for Oxford,’ and asked me if I knew of anything of the kind in our neighbourhood. I told him I did, and described to him a piece of marsh land which I have especially alluded to in my ‘Berkshire Flora.’ It is situated between Cothill and Besselsleigh, and is of a specially interesting character, being representative of a kind of soil which drainage and cultivation is yearly diminishing in our midland area.

Subsequently Mr. Willett came to Oxford, and we drove over to see it on a beautiful day in late summer, when the place was bright with flowers and insects, and the whole aspect of the place appealed to my friend in the strongest manner, as it appeared to so well answer his requirements, namely, to have a piece of virgin soil which should be preserved in its pristine undisturbed condition for all time. He also expressed a wish to connect the place with the name of his friend, the distinguished Oxonian, John Ruskin, and suggested that when acquired it should be known as the ‘Ruskin Plot.’ He was also kind enough to wish that the Plot might be acquired during my Mayoralty of the City of Oxford, and that it might signalise the union of the Ashmolean and the Oxfordshire Natural History Societies. The negotiations, however, were rather protracted, but eventually the most interesting portion, from its containing the plants of special rarity, has been acquired by Mr. Willett, and by him transferred to Professor Poulton and myself.

It will be well to describe our landed estate, which, although included in the parish of St. Helen’s, Abingdon, is situated, as I have said, near Cothill village, which is about five miles S.W. by W. of Oxford. Near the Watermill a small lane, guarded by a gate, on the north side of the road, follows the mill-stream in a nearly parallel direction. The approach, like the entrance to many picturesque eastern buildings, is prosaic, but the plentiful growth on either side of the lane of the two Crane’s-bills (*Geranium pyrenaicum* and *G. rotundifolium*), and the occurrence of the local stonecrop (*Sedum dasyphyllum*) on the rugged walls have their own interest. Near the mill the stream has widened out into a somewhat fair-sized shallow pool, but on the way to our ‘Plot’ it narrows at times into a deepish brook bordered with great tussocks of the sedge *Carex paniculata*, and with it I have found the very rare hybrid *Carex Boeninghausiana*. In one place at least the stream is so nearly level with its banks that in wet seasons it forms a swamp, where I have seen the beautiful blossoms of the bog-bean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*), and where there is a rich growth of ragged-robin (*Lychnis Flos-cuculi*), marsh marigold (*Caltha palustris*), and lady’s smock (*Cardamine pratensis*) in the spring. Its eastern side is sheltered and shaded by coppices, while tall hedgerows on the Western side shut out the view of the village and the school-grounds of Cothill. About a quarter of a mile from the mill a large grassy field of about 15 acres, known as the ‘Parson’s Moor,’ which belongs to the vicarage of Besselsleigh, is reached, and this in itself is a very happy hunting-ground for the naturalist, since in some parts the coralline oolite comes to the surface, and then we have such typical gypsophilous plants (*calcipetes*) as the grasses *Brachypodium pinnatum* and *Bromus erectus* and the pyramidal orchid (*Orchis pyramidalis*) occurring in close proximity to typical marsh plants which occur where the limestone has been denuded, or where the clay itself comes to the surface. And on this impervious soil we have a flora in which such typically uliginous and pelophilous species as the marsh lousewort (*Pedicularis palustris*), the marsh helleborine (*Epipactis palustris*), the broad-leaved cotton-grass (*Eriophorum latifolium*) occur, and the sedges luxuriate. But although very close to and despite its being of a larger size this Parson’s Moor is not so rich as our smaller portion, which is only a short distance from its south-western corner, and is reached by following the grass-grown lane for a few yards further. Our spot consists of a piece of ground about 1¾ acres in extent, and includes a portion of the grass-covered lane and the sloping ground to two shallow natural ponds, separated by a grassy causeway or balk. The margins of the pools are spongy and afford two

insectivorous plants, the sun-dew (*Drosera rotundifolia*) and the butter-wort (*Pinguicula vulgaris*), as well as the marsh orchids (*Orchis incarnata* and *O. latifolia*), and the fragrant orchid (*Habenaria conopsea*). The wetter part contains the marsh helleborine (*Epipactis palustris*), and the marsh lousewort (*Pedicularis palustris*), and the sedges *Carex dioica*, *C. pulicaris*, *C. stellulata*, or as it is sometimes called, *C. echinata*, *C. flava*, *C. panicea*, *C. Goodenowii*, *C. Hornschuchiana*, and *C. disticha*. There are also tussocks of the sedge *Carex paniculata*, of the purple Melic-grass (*Molinia varia*), and the black bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*). Crawling among the wet moss, but where there is some amount of exposure, may be seen the beautiful and delicate rosy flowers of the bog-pimpernel (*Anagallis tenella*). In the pools there is a considerable growth of a pond weed, which is not known from any other locality in the diocese, namely, *Potamogeton coloratus*, sometimes called by the equally expressive name *P. plantagineus*, the leaves of which are often coloured of a dark crimson, and when held against the light are seen to be most beautifully veined. Here, too, a bladder-wort (*Utricularia major*, or as it is more frequently called, *U. neglecta*) is frequent and sometimes flowers freely. The smaller species, *U. minor*, also occurs. The large charad (*Chara hispida*) is abundant, and, unlike so many of its allies, persists from year to year; two other species, *C. contraria* and *C. fragillis*, have also been found, all three being copiously encrusted with calcareous matter from the hard water which rises in a natural spring from the junction of the coralline oolite with the clay to form these pools. Growing in the water, especially in the shallower parts, will be found the pale rush (*Juncus obtusiflorus*), the sedge *Carex rostrata*, and the reed-grass (*Phragmites*), and very rarely the water-dropwort (*Oenanthe Lachenalii*), the water-plantain (*Echinodorus ranunculoides*), in its only locality near Oxford, and the very local *Samolus Valerandi*. The small valerian (*Valeriana dioica*), the marsh bedstraw (*Galium uliginosum*), the broad-leaved cotton-grass (*Eriophorum latifolium*), the smooth meadow thistle (*Cnicus pratensis*), the grass *Siglingia decumbens* also occur in and about the marsh. The drier portions have yielded the dyer's weed (*Genista tinctoria*), the petty whin (*G. anglica*), the gromwell (*Lithospermum officinale*), the milkwort (*Polygala vulgaris*), the eyebright (*Euphrasia nemorosa*), the rattle-grass (*Rhinanthus minor*), and there are fine bushes of the cornel (*Cornus sanguinea*), and of the spindle tree (*Euonymus europaeus*), with its fruit in autumn showing the same bizarre combination of tints as may be seen in the robes of the doctor of civil law. The maple (*Acer campestre*), and the buckthorn (*Rhamnus catharticus*) also occur, as well as the willows *Salix caprea*, *S. cinerea*, and *S. aurita*.

The scenic effects are very pleasing, as, in addition to the great charm which the sense of extreme solitude in itself confers, there is a pleasing combination of woodland, water and marsh, not separated by any abrupt line of demarcation or fenced by hideous barriers, but melting insensibly into each other. In spring one sees the bright green spears of the young grasses and sedges piercing through the russet browns of the dead rush and sedge vegetation, which persists till late in the season, when almost the only touch of colour given is caused by the golden palms on the shallows or the bluish haze where the bluebells are beginning to expand in the woodland. In summer the spikes of the marsh orchids make a brave show. Then, too, may be seen the large white cymes of the water-elder (*Viburnum Opulus*), the amethystine heads of the meadow thistle, and the rosy-pink spikes of the orchid *Habenaria conopsea*, while the milkwort and butterwort show their blues, the bog-pimpernel its pink, the small valerian its palest rosy tints, and the glistening silky plumes of the cotton-grass wave in the wind; while in autumn the magnificent reed-grass displays its blackish-purple panicles and glaucous bluish-green foliage, the cornel with its dull crimson leaves darkening to purple supports the significance of the specific name, while the flaming yellow of the maple and the russet tinge of the oaks form a pleasing relief from the sombre tints of the pines in the western horizon.

Nor must the mosses be forgotten, for the marsh is rich in uliginal species. The insect life, too, is rich and varied, and there is no doubt that Mr. Warde Fowler will be able hereafter to give us further charming tales about the birds which frequent this place, which for a long time has been a favourite resort of the snipe and nightingale.

Therefore, although not of large dimensions, naturalists will find that their possession is a very valuable one. It is one to be guarded with jealous care; specimens should not be ruthlessly gathered or collected just to satisfy a momentary curiosity; it is much better to observe than to destroy. The Sundew is very sparingly distributed, and the least thoughtful member of the Society might easily eradicate it. It once existed on the north side of Shotover; for the purpose of cultivation a small trench was made to drain the marsh, and now it has entirely disappeared from Oxfordshire. We may prevent drainage, but it will be more difficult to repress morbid curiosity.

The great charm of the 'Ruskin Plot' is that although sequestered, it is not too far removed from our growing city, whose expansion has practically destroyed the wild character which Boar's Hill once possessed, and has eradicated some of the rare species which once grew on that charming eminence, the haunt of the gipsy scholar. May it be said that under the aegis of the Ashmolean Natural History Society of Oxfordshire not one of the species I have enumerated as the present constituents of the Cothill flora will disappear, but that the Society's members in the centuries to come may still be able to observe these treasures in the pleasant reserve which the generosity and public spirit of its donor has placed in our hands by an act which I am sure would have appealed in the strongest manner to the eloquent expounder of the beauties of English scenery, and the strenuous advocate of handing down unimpaired and unsullied from one generation to another such spots as these, whose name is happily commemorated in the 'Ruskin Plot;' and not I think the less happily coincident is the fact, that within these very walls in which we meet some of his most eloquent addresses have been delivered, and in the erection of which he took such intense interest.

GEORGE CLARIDGE DRUCE,
Hon. Treasurer.

Jan., 1903