

NATURE

WILDFLOWERS

Downland

The Cholderton Estate sits on the chalk underlying much of Wiltshire and North Hampshire, and its flora is largely dictated by that geology. Until the middle of the 19th Century this landscape was almost entirely downland sheepwalks, with a flora that had been maintained by grazing for centuries.



By the late 20th Century much of the original downland flora of the Estate had disappeared, apart from an area overlooking the A303 trunk road and isolated pockets elsewhere. As the Estate began to make active moves towards downland restoration, it became clear that much more had survived than could have been predicted. As tree and shrub cover was removed, dormant 'seed banks' began to germinate, and now many restored areas have a rich and diverse chalkland flora. Some assistance has been given, with the manual spreading of seeds such as cowslips, and the addition of plant 'plugs'.

The chalk downland is full of milkwort and horseshoe vetch in the spring. In summer the pasture is dominated by birds foot trefoil and three species of purple knapweed, as well as field fleawort, dropwort and sainfoin. There is also a scattering of orchids – common spotted, fragrant, pyramidal and frog.

Hedges

Celandine makes a contrast with the bare wood of the winter hedge. As spring advances so do the climbing tendrils of bryony and wild hop. Soon Oregon grape, wayfaring tree and wild crab burst into flower, followed by a multitude of the delicate pink and white blooms of wild briar. Many of the hedge bottoms are lined with violets, cow parsley and Jack-by-the-Hedge. In summer knapweed grow in purple clumps and bramble flowers turn into a berry laden autumn: blackberries and buckthorn fruit with bullace, plum fruit dusted in talcum white, pigeon blood spindle splitting to scarlet and white hidden seeds. Cascades of sloes plumb and purple, wither to a crinkled ripeness in winter to feast the marauding flocks of redwing and fieldfares hungry after their oceanic adventures – crossing from the high arctic to here.

Woodland

The woods are shady and sunlit or dappled with moving shadow. Many environments merge in one place, damp with ferns and early purple orchids. Dark hazel grows with toothwort and common twayblade, and under the high beeches are white hellibornine and birds nest orchid. A few woodlands on the Estate have native bluebell, solomons seal, wood anemone and woodruff.

Arable Weeds

Arable land can have its own special flora, and the 'gentle' farming regime practised at Cholderton throughout the 20th century ensured that many now rare arable 'weeds' survived. That richness is now being further encouraged by grant-aid, and some fields have as many as 76 plant species. The introduction of organic farming has led to further increases in plant diversity.

The arable fields hold populations of the rare blood red prickly poppy and the crimson rough poppy. Red hemp nettle, very attractive to bees, occurs on some of the heavier fields. Other interesting arable weeds include corn gromwell, field penny cress, Venus looking glass, round and sharp leaved fluellen and many other more common species.

Cornflowers are now spreading in the absence of herbicides and it is hoped that pheasant eye *Adonis annua* may appear, given the favourable conditions for its survival. The seed of both these plants can remain viable for decades before germinating when conditions are right.

Strips down the edges of fields have been left in a cultivated condition to foster arable weeds. This had been very successful, and there are now spectacular shows of flowers every summer which are viewed on a regular basis by interested botanists and others.



Brome Grasses

Brome grasses are generally regarded as persistent and troublesome weeds of agriculture. Barren brome is a short very aggressive annual grass that rapidly colonises suitable habitat – particularly arable fields which it can quickly dominate. However, several bromes formerly associated with agriculture have become very rare:

Field Brome – a weed of cornfields was last recorded in Hampshire in 1917.

Interrupted Brome – found in a field of Sainfoin, was last seen in Hampshire in 1906.

Rye Brome - also a cornfield weed and probably persisting from ancient times, was last recorded in Hampshire in 1942. This species occurs commonly in most cereal fields at Cholderton. It is an elegant grass with large nodding heads, clearly visible above the ripening crops of barley and oats. In oat crops the brome can grow to over 6ft in height. The seeds are large for a grass-like small grain. This interesting relic has survived at Cholderton because of the rotational system of farming and very low use of herbicides before the farm became organic.

Rye Brome seed from Cholderton was welcomed by the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew for the Millennium Seed Bank.



Sainfoin



One of the most remarkable plants at Cholderton is sainfoin.

A native British wildflower, it has been grown as a fodder crop on the Estate since the 19th Century. It is now thought that this sub-species survives only at Cholderton. Sainfoin is a symbol of the continuity of the Cholderton Estate and demonstrates how 'wild' and 'cultivated' growing side by side can promote conservation and economic success