

Nature Notes 8: The Chalk Grassland on Alderford Common

If “brownfield sites” can simplistically be defined as ones created by past industrial/commercial activities, then paradoxically one of the greenest parts of the parish would qualify! Until about seventy years ago the marl pit on Alderford Common was a busy industrial landscape as marl (a very chalky clay) and chalk were dug out and stacked in alternate layers with charcoal in the cone shaped centre of the lime kiln then fired to produce lime to be spread on the fields. The kiln was worked until the second world war by Mr Munford who lived in Ugate.

The grassland that grew in the disused marl pit contains a number of plant species that



Germander speedwell

are only found in chalk rich soils. In the whole of east central and north Norfolk these soil conditions are only found in three sites: here on Alderford Common, at Ringstead Downs and Warham Fort. On all three of these sites calcium-loving plants form a distinctive and characteristic community including species such as wild strawberries and the pyramidal orchid.



Pyramidal orchid

Five other species of orchid have also been recorded in the marl pit : common spotted orchid with white – pale



Bee orchid

mauve flowers dotted and lined with crimson and darkly spotted leaves are particularly abundant in the bottom of the steep sided “valley” (locally known as “orchid canyon”) at the east end of the marl pit. Also in bottom of the “canyon” can be found the closely related early marsh and southern marsh orchids which do not have spots on their leaves. Bee orchids which have flowers that closely mimic the bodies of bees and twayblades which have broad leaves and yellow-green flowers can both be found in the main part of the marl pit.

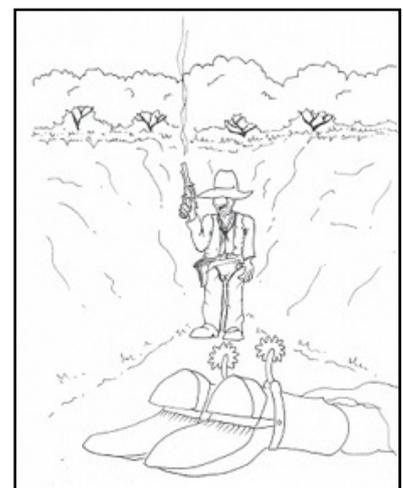


Adder's tongue

“Orchid Canyon” had become very overgrown with hawthorn and black thorn scrub, until last autumn and winter conservation volunteers spent several days removing the scrub there. Their labours have been rewarded because one rather special and particularly unusual looking plant, which I had not seen on the common for several years, called adder’s tongue, has suddenly sprung up where the scrub was removed, now that light can reach the ground layer just to the north of the path in the middle of the valley. Adder’s tongue is not a flowering plant. It is a species of fern more closely related to bracken than to higher plants. It has a single, undivided, curved, frond surrounding a spore-bearing central spike.

“Orchid Canyon” was where the most bizarre event I have ever witnessed on the commons took place some years ago. I was quietly ringing birds when a whole coach full of people tramped across the marl pit carrying bags and picnic baskets. A little later the idyllic peace of a sunny summer’s afternoon was shattered by the “bang..... bang.... bang” of small arms fire. I crept very stealthily through the undergrowth and crawled, with great caution, to peer over the edge of the valley. There beneath me, sporting spurred boots, chaps, gun belts and complete with stetsons a wild western shoot-out was being re-enacted, with six-gun toting cowboys firing at each other along the canyon.

When they left, not only was the valley NOT strewn with corpses but there was not a scrap of litter to be seen. As the orchids had died down by then and the bird breeding season was over, I reflected that although rather a rather unusual form of “amenity recreation” ,the visit by thirty plus wild west enthusiasts had done no harm at all. I wondered if perhaps they had seen me catching wild birds just to put tiny aluminium rings on their legs, they would have considered me to be every bit as strange as I had found that memorable shoot -out at Alderford’s very own version of the OK coral.



The Wild East

Mark, with cartoon by Matthew (May 2017)