

## Flora

Dry Drayton has no specialised natural habitats harbouring unusual species of flowering plants, such as unimproved meadow, grassland or ancient woodland. It is a typical Cambridgeshire farming landscape, with large fields, very few old hedges in a healthy state, plus scattered spinneys and copses of secondary (planted) woodland. This paucity of habitats restricts the range of herbaceous flowering plants that grow in the parish to those species not exacting in their growth requirements, in other words usually the most common ones. However, there are some surprises and exceptions to these. A number of fine trees also exist. These include both native British species, as well as introductions.

## Historical perspective

Up until about the time of the 1939-45 war, before the push to become fully self-sufficient in agriculture and the advent of intensive farming methods, the plant life of Dry Drayton had been richer. Introduction of ever more powerful herbicides and enrichment of the soils with chemical fertilisers spelt the death knell for the more unusual plants, which depend on relatively nutrient-poor soils to survive. The old farming practices would have allowed a range of cornfield 'weeds' to thrive, such as Cornflower, Corn Marigold and possibly Corncockle. Only the poppies survive today, as their seeds have a resilience, lying dormant in the soil bank for many years before conditions for germination and growth are correct.

Because of the presence of Cambridge University and its long and famous history of plant study, Cambridgeshire has been one of the best known counties botanically. The first county list of plants was made in 1656 by Samuel Corbyn, although it was the illustrious John Ray, rector of Black Notley in Essex, who published the first work of real importance in 1660, *Catalogus Plantarum circa Cantabrigian nascentium*, a 182 page volume celebrated as the first comprehensive local British flora. Whether Ray included Dry Drayton in his travels is not known, but he was succeeded in later years by eminent men such as Thomas Martyn, who followed his father in the chair of Botany at Cambridge in 1761, and Richard Relhan, who in 1785 published the first of three editions of *Flora Cantabrigiensis*, which, besides the flowering plants, also included all the mosses, algae, fungi and lichens in the county. The fourth Cambridge Professor of Botany was J S Henslow, mentor of Charles Darwin, who added greatly to our knowledge of local plants and was the first person to make a herbarium collection of the county's plants, which is still in use today.

It was, however, one of Henslow's pupils, C C Babington, who published the *Flora of Cambridgeshire* in 1860 and recorded the localities for the county's plants, who made certain mention of some species occurring at Dry Drayton. I have been through Babington's *Flora* and noted 55 species with a Dry Drayton mention. Obviously this is far from a complete list as Babington did not single out our parish in any way and many plants were too common to list all places where they were found. It does however, provide some tantalising glimpses as to the floristic riches we have lost. Plants such as the pale lemon yellow Sulphur Clover and the parasitic Clover Dodder are listed, as was the lime-green Thorow Wax, now extinct in the wild in Britain, a victim of agricultural change. The tiny yellow and mauve flowered prostrate-growing cornfield annuals Sharp-leaved Fluellen and Round-leaved Fluellen were also listed; the latter plant being found still on a 1973 survey of Scotland Farm. Babington also refers to an earlier note of John Ray's concerning the exotic-looking burgundy and yellow-spiked candelabra flowers of Crested Cow-wheat as being '*very abundant between Madingley and Dry Drayton*' - if only the plant were present today ! It is a great rarity in the county now. There were four species of orchid recorded in 1860 by Babington, and Wild Asparagus '*in the hedge on the right-hand side of the road from the Huntingdon road to Dry Drayton*'. Other lost delights included Prickly Sedge, Small Toadflax (or Calve's-snout), Small-flowered Buttercup, Narrow-leaved Bird's-foot Trefoil, Dwarf Spurge and the two aquatics Thread-leaved Water Crowfoot and Fan-leaved Water Crowfoot - what a delightful litany of old English names alone !

The Reverend Walker's *History of the Parish of Dry Drayton* (1876) contains a list of 127 species of flowering plant, with about another 15 added as notes in the annotated copy of the

book by William Evans, Deputy Registrar, in 1879. This also makes mention of a number of introduced plants, including several wild orchid species, which are notoriously difficult, if not impossible, to transplant on account of their particular dependence on specific root-associated fungi (mycorrhizae). These listings are therefore somewhat of a puzzle since the soil in the parish is also not ideally suited to these mainly chalk-loving plants.

The majority of the plants on Walker's list have always been common and most of these we still have with us today. Of the more unusual plants listed by Walker but no longer present are species such as Ragged Robin, which needs unimproved damp meadows, Wood Sanicle, found in ancient woodland, the pale-blue flowered Chicory, poisonous Henbane, with its purple-netted pale cream flowers and six orchid species (Pyramidal, Early Purple, Green-winged, Common Spotted, Lesser Butterfly and Twayblade).

### **Trees and woody shrubs**

The landscape of the parish has changed markedly in the last 40 or 50 years as regards native trees. **Elms** used to dominate the lanes and hedges, large specimens lining Scotland Road so that their branches met overhead, so I am told by villagers. Old photographs of the church and farmland from the 1920s and 1930s show these stately trees were prominent features of the landscape, part of the accepted rural scene. Now virtually all are gone, victims of the Dutch Elm disease which has completely ravaged our English Elms in the last part of the 20th century. The dying remains of the last few elms from the avenue shown on the estate map of 1740 have already been alluded to, as well as others in various parts of the village. Much elm sucker growth remains in the hedgerows, but much of this succumbs to the disease again after some years. However, all is not completely lost for the elm in Dry Drayton. A large specimen tree stands beside the footpath south of the church and there is a row of surviving elms on the Edwards' land at Duck End Farm. These trees are presumably clones that are more resistant to the disease.

Two other familiar English native trees in the village are Ash and Pedunculate Oak. The **Ash** is one of the latest trees to come into leaf each year, not usually being fully covered until May. It also loses its leaves early in autumn, these frequently being shed with the first frosts. Therefore the tree has a short cycle of summer growth. Its charcoal black buds, and brown 'keys' (each holding one seed) in autumn are characteristic distinguishing features. Ash was widely planted in hedgerows because its timber was very useful on farms, especially for tool handles, and it is also an excellent firewood, burning well even when freshly cut :

*'Of all the trees in England,  
Her sweet three corners in,  
Only the Ash, the bonnie Ash,  
Burns fierce while it is green'.*

- Walter de la Mare

In the eastern part of Britain **Pedunculate Oak** (with unstalked leaves and long-stalked acorns) is the dominant oak species, while the Sessile Oak (with stalked leaves and unstalked acorns) prefers more acid soils in the north and west. There are few mature oaks in Dry Drayton, but one largish specimen dominates its namesake row of houses at Oak Crescent and there are one or two fine examples in the grounds of Derrymore House. Unfortunately one of these died and had to be felled late in 1999, showing growth rings dating it to about 150 years old. In fact an oak may take 100 years to reach maturity. It is one of our best-loved trees, and is the very 'essence' of England. Oak woods covered much of the country in mediaeval times and our ancestors quickly discovered that it made excellent wood and fuel.

Oaks are also the most valuable native tree for wildlife. Like a giant high-rise natural tower block, their branches, trunk, leaves and fruit support several hundred different organisms. Birds and squirrels build nests in the crown, insects such as wasps, moths, weevils and beetles

devour the leaves. Lichens, mosses, algae and fungi live on the bark and branches and birds, mammals and insects feed on the acorns. Even the roots of the oak are sought out by weevils and wildflowers are able to thrive underneath it in woodland settings. Whole books and television documentaries have been devoted to the interdependence of myriad creatures with oaks. The oak is one of the most significant native trees that we can plant for the benefit of future generations.

One tree that certainly deserves to be better known is the **Field Maple**. In fact we have some really beautiful mature examples of this tree in Dry Drayton, of a size that is not commonly seen. There is one fine specimen in Long Lane, but there are a number of very large Field Maples in the grounds of Derrymore House. Elsewhere it forms one of the components of our parish hedgerows, which is where it normally remains as a small tree with a rounded crown. This tree is our only native maple, the Sycamore having been introduced to Britain in the late fifteenth century. The fresh five-lobed young leaves hang limp at first and are an attractive pale yellow-green, later becoming darker green with a glossy sheen on their upper surfaces when they unfurl. A loose cluster of 10-20 yellow-green flowers appears shortly after this, which attracts insects to feed on its pollen and nectar. After fertilisation the ovary develops into a pair of broad-winged keys, called samaras. When these seeds eventually fall in autumn the wing gives them a spinning motion. Field Maples have brilliant autumn colour when the leaves change to vivid shades of golden yellow.

Renowned for the white downy underside to its leaves and dotted pattern bark, the **White Poplar** is an elegant tree. In fact the down covers the young shoots and both surfaces of the leaves when they first emerge, but the loose floss on the upper surface is soon blown off. There is a line of White Poplars at a field boundary about three quarters of a mile down the footpath running south from the church and a planted clump at the A14 slip road behind the pond. White Poplars have been planted for their ornamental value in rural areas and are far more attractive than the ragged specimens of battered **Lombardy Poplars** bordering the footpath alongside Chivers' former orchard land. The latter trees look very out of place in the British countryside. There is also one old **Black Poplar** growing on a field edge towards Beck Brook near The Shrubs in the east of the parish. This is in a very sorry state now, with the old trunk hollow like a needle and many of the old pollarded branches dead or dying. It is probably not long for this life, which is a pity, since Black Poplars are uncommon trees in this country. They are susceptible to a bacterial canker, which attacks the bark and wood beneath, causing weeping wounds which slowly kill the larger branches and eventually the whole tree.

The **Horse Chestnut** is a tree for all seasons. The fat, sticky, date-brown winter buds burst open in spring to reveal downy green leaves. In early summer the dazzling creamy white spires of flowers are a highlight and in autumn the giant 'hands' of the lobed leaves often turn into zones of yellow, gold and brown with the first frosts, while the shiny brown 'conkers' in their spiky lime-green cases have always been a fascination for children. Horse Chestnut is not a native tree but was brought here in the early 17th century. Its true home is in Greece, the Balkans and Iran. It is slow-growing and takes time to establish itself in the wild. There are some good examples along the High Street, at Derrymore House and in a front garden on Scotland Road.

**White Willows** are a typical Cambridgeshire tree, found along our rivers and streams. They grow readily and reach a height of 25 m (80 feet) in damp soil and flower very early in the year, the whole tree being attractive to a vast range of insects. The bark on the trunk becomes deeply fissured on old trees and the long narrow leaves are silver-white below and dark green above. When stirred by a breeze the whole tree has a shimmering silvery appearance. It is the subject of Greek mythology and in traditional folklore is associated with sinister spirits and witches. White Willows can be found along Beck Brook, beside damp ditches and there are some huge, old, rather dangerous-looking split-trunk examples growing on the site of the old reservoir adjacent to the Madingley road opposite Park Lane. Also a member of the willow family is the smaller **Goat Willow** (Sallow or Pussy Willow). In early spring these trees bear beautiful furry grey-yellow catkins, which provide nectar sources for bees. The tree also has many species of moth associated with it, whose caterpillars are dependent on the rounded felty dark grey-green

leaves. Like all willows, Goat Willows bear their male and female flowers on separate trees. The familiar grey pussy willow catkins are the emerging flowers of the male tree that turn golden yellow as their anthers mature. The tree gets its name because its young spring foliage was indeed once fed to goats. Examples can be found in many parts of our parish.

There is not space here to detail all the specimen planted trees that are found in Dry Drayton, but these include, for example, some **Holm Oaks**, **Common Limes**, a fine **Wellingtonia** in the Hawkes' garden, which was probably the one mentioned in Walker's annotated book, as these trees were very popular plantings in the Victorian era, and a number of **Common Walnuts**. These latter may have originally been introduced by the Romans, who were very fond of their nuts, but by the 15th century the Walnut was definitely established in this country. There are several examples of Walnuts of various ages in village gardens, but today most of their nuts are taken by Rooks and Grey Squirrels, who by burying them will probably ensure the tree's survival in one place or another. The garden at Honey Hill Cottage contains several old varieties of fruit tree (**Victoria** and **Czar Plums**, **Williams Pear**, and **Mulberry**), together with ancient coppiced **Hazel** clumps. There is also an unusual **Tree of Heaven** in the garden of the Black Horse pub.

Many of the parish hedgerows are now in a very sorry state, having been neglected or ill-treated for many years. However, off roads, along our lanes and footpaths, hedges have fared better. It is possible to identify a range of woody shrubs and trees in our hedges - **Hawthorn**, **Blackthorn**, **Cherry Plum**, **Crab Apple**, **Elder** and a few **Guelder Rose** - and by counting the number of woody species in a 30 m stretch a rough idea of the age of the hedge can be derived. Along the short stretch of hedge beside the Bar Hill golf course towards the A14 can even be seen different varieties of apple, probably seeded and gone wild at some time in the past. This stretch is very colourful in autumn, with the blue-black ripening sloes, the greens, golds and reds of the various apples and Crab Apples, intertwined here and there with the glossy red berries of **White Bryony**. Hedgerows are vital wildlife corridors and homes to many birds and small mammals, as well as many species of insect. It is to be hoped that people will try to restore lost hedges by replanting new ones composed of native species where space allows. Even short stretches of hedge form attractive, easily established boundaries that make good windbreaks when fully grown.

On the verge by the corner of The Park, opposite the church green, grow two **Wayfaring Trees**. These are compact bushes, with rounded, rather thick, velvety, deeply-veined leaves that are pale beneath, and tight flat clusters of scented white flowers in May, followed by berries which turn from a pale green at first to bright red and then black as they develop. These berries are much loved by birds and the juice from them was once used to make black ink. Despite its name the Wayfaring Tree rarely grows into a tree. It prefers a dry, alkaline soil, but the conditions at the spot where it is found must also suit it.

### **Herbaceous plants**

As stated earlier, the herbaceous flora of the parish is very impoverished nowadays, most of the more unusual plants having vanished, as in many other parts of the county. This is especially true of our roadside verges, where only the coarsest, commonest and toughest species survive! Herbicide spray drift and fertiliser run-off from farmland, pollution from vehicle exhaust, salt, and other road-borne dirt rapidly kills off any finer wildflowers and grasses. However, it was not always so, and John Hacker writes of his schooldays when *'road verges were studded with flowering plants along with a variety of grasses'*.

I will try to pick out some of the more notable plants that have survived in odd corners of Dry Drayton, mostly away from roads.

As a member of the Primrose family, **Cowslips** are a well-loved spring plant of old meadows but, because of the loss of such habitat, very few are found in the parish now. Their name derives from the Old English *cusloppe*, meaning cow-dung, because it was formerly thought

that Cowslips grew wherever a cow pat had fallen. The Doctrine of Signatures, which was based on the theory that all plants were imbued with some physical indication of their purpose and use, denoted the nodding flowers of Cowslips were to be given for the 'shaking palsy' and other afflictions of the head. One remedy for faintness extolled the virtues of sniffing the juice of Cowslip flowers through a quill ! Cowslips hybridise with other members of the Primrose family where they occur in proximity, including ornamental Primulas in our gardens, to produce hybrid swarms, which may include an amazing array of back-crosses and intermediates. However, away from cultivation, especially where spraying is not carried out, Cowslips are thriving. Although not quite in Dry Drayton parish, there is usually a wonderful display of Cowslips in spring on the steep banks of the A428 where it cuts through the low hills just south of Madingley.

**Lady's Bedstraw** is a fine, small, frothy yellow-flowered plant which grows in old grassland, such as The Park. Richard Mabey, in his *Flora Britannica*, describes the scent of the flower when fresh to be like honey, when dried like new-mown hay, which probably gave the plant its name. Being also effective against fleas, it was used, together with straw, to stuff mattresses at one time, especially for women about to give birth. According to a charming mediaeval legend of northern Europe, the Virgin Mary lay on a bed of Bracken and Lady's Bestraw; the Bracken refused to acknowledge the child and lost its flower, the bedstraw welcomed the Christ child, and blossoming at that moment, found its flowers had changed from white to gold. Another version of the legend alleges that Lady's Bedstraw was the only plant in the stable that the donkey did not eat ! Lady's Bedstraw also has coagulant properties and was once used to staunch bleeding. The plant flowers in July and August; it does not have a basal rosette of leaves but spreads by numerous underground stems produced from a creeping rootstock. The exact height and appearance of the plant depends on the height of the surrounding grasses, which support the bedstraw's weak, clambering stems.

There are several Cranesbills, or wild geraniums, in evidence in rough fields and on verges. **Meadow Cranesbill's** bluish blooms transform a verge in summer and it is a relatively large member of the family. Its common English name is fairly pedestrian; Loving Andrews or Blue Basins are much more apt names for it in other country districts. **Cut-leaved Cranesbill** has large, very deeply dissected leaves and relatively small, deep pink flowers nestling at their centre. It prefers drier habitats on both waste and cultivated ground, old grassland, hedgebanks and roadsides. Patches of it can be found in the grounds at Derrymore House and on The Park, flowering from May through to August. **Herb Robert** is another of the wild geranium family. This delightful plant can be found in flower in any month of the year. Its name may have derived from ancient association with Robin Goodfellow, the mischievous house goblin. However, it has a very large number of other country names, some of which reflect the acrid, mousy stench from its leaves (Stinking Jenny, Stinking Bob), others the association with Robins (Little Robin, Robin Redshanks, Robin l' Th' Hedge) and still others which are a complete mystery (Chatterboxes, Bachelor's Buttons, Granny's Needles, Knife and Fork, Kiss-Me-Love-at-the-Garden-gate).

In high summer, the old hedgerows along the top green lane from the end of High St and down the Drift towards Bar Hill are entangled with the pale pink and white blooms of **Dog Rose**, delicately fragrant and one of our best-known and beloved wild plants. It is of course the forerunner of many exotic garden roses and in the early part of the twentieth century village men used to gather the stems of this plant to send to nurserymen for grafting. The Dog Rose is very hardy, its long prickly stems resist damage and they freely sprout again if cut down. It is the most abundant and widespread of our native rose species, growing low as a scrambler or climbing 10 m (30') up into a woodland tree. The bright red rose hips last well into winter and are a rich source of vitamin C. If you examine the finely serrated dark green leaves you may notice neat oval or semicircular holes or gaps in the leaflets. These are the handiwork of leaf-cutting bees, nine species of which live in Britain.

We are so used to growing **Bluebells** in our gardens, but this is also a wild woodland plant in this country. In fact Britain has the finest Bluebell woods anywhere and foreign botanists make special pilgrimages to see these. There is a magnificent display of Bluebells in the wooded grounds of Derrymore House here in the village, where large drifts carpet the ground beneath

the old Ash and Field Maple trees in spring. They are especially good in Sheepclose Spinney. 'Bluebell' as a name did not come into popular use until the works of the Romantic poets early in the nineteenth century. But it was Gerard Manley Hopkins who really took the Bluebell to heart. In his journal of 1871, for example, he describes Bluebells coming *'in falls of sky-colour washing the brows and slacks of the ground with vein-blue'*. Fitting poetic tribute to another of our national floristic treasures !

There are four species of buttercup in our parish, out of 20 in Britain. The two commonest are **Meadow Buttercup** and **Creeping Buttercup**, told apart by whether the middle leaf lobe has a stalk or not. The others are **Bulbous Buttercup** and **Celery-leaved Buttercup**. Bulbous Buttercup, although superficially similar to the previous two species, has downturned sepals. A good colony exists on The Park; it prefers drier conditions to the commoner species. Celery-leaved Buttercup haunts the margins of ponds and ditches. It is a stout plant, with ridged stems and relatively small, pale yellow flowers. All buttercups have essentially the same, primitive, flower structure, in that the stamens and carpels (male and female parts) and petals and sepals are all arranged spirally and are separate from one another. More advanced plants tend to have their parts fused together.

Another plant that loves damp meadows is the expressively-named **Lady's Smock** or **Cuckoo-flower**, a member of the Buttercress family. It has shared the name Cuckoo-flower with at least a dozen or so other spring flowers, but the correlation of its flowering time with the Cuckoo's arrival is probably no better than for any of these other species. In the south of England it is in flower by March, for example, usually a whole month before the bird's arrival. The flowers vary in colour from very pale pink to mauve and are pollinated by Bee-flies and long-tongued hoverflies.

The Speedwell family is represented by about 20 species in Britain, many being very similar in appearance and difficult to identify. We have at least five here in Dry Drayton. **Germander Speedwell** is probably our most familiar, growing in lawns and carpeting hedgebanks and grassy places, with deep blue petals and a prominent white eye. A common name shared by many speedwells is 'Bird's-eye', the small blue flowers supposedly resembling birds' eyes among the grass. Speedwells have only four petals, and the upper petal, which is slightly larger than the others, represents two petals that have become joined. **Ivy-leaved Speedwell** has flowers borne singly at the base of the leaf, in contrast to Germander Speedwell, which has as many as 20 flowers on a single elongated stalk. Both Ivy-leaved and **Thyme-leaved Speedwell** grow in waste or bare places, or cultivated land. **Common Field Speedwell** grows on farmland in the parish, persisting at field edges. Speedwell is said to denote the old saying 'Speed-you-well'; indeed in Ireland speedwells were once sewn on to clothes to protect travellers against accidents. The last species is **Pink Water Speedwell** less familiar to most people, growing on the muddy edge of the permanent pond on The Park. It has dark green, spear-shaped leaves and the pink flowers have reddish-veins.

One common plant that we see on wayside verges, often in shade under hedges, has a very curious biology. **Cuckoo Pint (Lords-and-Ladies, Wild arum)** has a highly efficient way of ensuring cross-pollination. Its greenish leafy spathes unfold in April about midday and during the next 8-12 hours their central, club-like, purple spadix gives off a strong smell which attracts pollinating insects - mostly dung flies. It may attract 20-30 a day but up to 4000 have been recorded. They land on the slippery walls of the spathe and tumble down into the bottom chamber. Here, downward-pointing hairs prevent their early departure and the flies may be trapped for several days. With any luck they are carrying pollen from another Cuckoo Pint. This rubs off on to the stigma of the female flowers at the base of the spadex as the flies feast on the sugary liquid there and try in vain to escape. During the following few days the pollinated stigmas wither and the male flowers above shed their pollen (never at the same time so self-pollination is impossible). The hairs at the top of the chamber then wither and the insects, dusted with fresh pollen, clamber out and fly off to another Cuckoo Pint, to begin the process of cross-pollination all over again. The fruits eventually ripen by autumn to the familiar stalked clumps of shiny red, very poisonous berries, which are in fact the swollen female ovaries.

Up in The Plantation (the strip of woodland between the north of the village and Bar Hill) grows another unusual plant, the rather inconspicuous small shrub **Spurge Laurel**. This is an uncommon species, never growing more than about 1m (3') high, which tolerates the deep shade of woodland in summer and has long, leathery leaves atop thick, bare upright stems. It is mentioned in Walker's book : "*Daphne laureola, Spurge Laurel, occurs in what is known as Mr Daintree's wood along the ridge midway between Drayton drift and the lane leading to the Five Bells, again in the hedgerow of the Scotland Lane, the little spinney opposite the blackthorn and also in the back shrubbery, to which place I have caused some to be transplanted, but there was some there before, native or introduced*". And a little later, the note : "*Daphne laureola transplanted to back shrubbery from Mr Daintree's wood. February 21st 1877 - 200 in number*". As well as Britain, Spurge Laurel is found throughout much of Europe, North Africa and the Azores, growing at altitudes up to 2000m (6500'). The tubular, greenish-yellow flowers have a teasingly musky scent and appear early, in February or March, before the tree canopy leafs out. Later the clustered fruit is a glossy black, berry-like drupe, attractive to birds. The plant is oddly-named, since it belongs neither to the spurge family nor the laurel family, although the latter name probably relates to the shape and nature of its leaves. Daphnes have long been known for their purgative qualities and it could be that the name 'spurge' derives from 'purgative'.

One of the best wild plant rediscoveries in recent years has been a small colony of **Bee Orchids** at the Bar Hill nature reserve on the edge of the parish. A total of 17 flowering spikes were counted in summer 1999 and the plant has also started appearing in the back lawn of one lucky villager. Bee Orchid was listed as occurring in Dry Drayton by Babington in 1860 and by Walker in 1876. The stunning sight of the unusual flowers on their tall stems among the grasses, likened to '*sun-bathing, pink-winged bumble-bees*' (Richard Mabey, Flora Britannica) can be surprisingly elusive until the first is spotted. It is believed that the Bee Orchid flower evolved as a decoy, to both mimic and attract Bumble Bees to mate and pollinate it, although this behaviour has never been reliably observed in this country. Most of the time the flowers are self-pollinating. It is to be hoped that these small numbers of Bee Orchid continue to survive in the parish, although the plant is notorious for springing up, sometimes becoming very numerous for a while and then vanishing again.

The pleasant cool shade of Long Lane on a hot, summer's day harbours several interesting plants. One of these is **Hedge Woundwort**, a tall member of the Stinging Nettle family, with heart-shaped leaves and a terminal column of dull, dark purple-red flowers, with white markings. It has a rather unpleasant smell when crushed. Twisting round other plants to scramble aloft are two bryonies : **Black Bryony** and **White Bryony**. However, these are alike in their English names only for they belong to quite different botanical groups. Black Bryony is the only member of the yam family in the British Isles, while White Bryony is the only member of the gourd or cucumber family. The glossy, dark green pointed leaves spread out to catch and reflect the sunlight filtering down into the lane. In early autumn the leaves turn clear yellow, in striking contrast to the red berries, which persist in twisted 'ropes' long after the leaves have fallen. The 'black' in the plant's name refers to its black, fleshy roots. Both these and the berries are poisonous. White Bryony has greenish-white flowers, five-lobed leaves and coiled tendrils like mini-corkscrews. It, too, is poisonous although very small portions of the plant were formerly taken as a purgative, or distilled as an external treatment for skin infections. Once upon a time the roots of White Bryony were touted as fake mandrake, employed as a narcotic and pain-killer and were also believed to have magical or aphrodisiac properties. Charlatans would carve the bryony roots into humanoid figures, selling them to women to wear round their necks or waists to help them conceive !

Also in the shade of Long Lane, but found in many other parts of the parish, are four species of Umbellifer (or umbrella plants, on account of their flattened flower heads) : **Cow Parsley**, **Hogweed**, **Rough Chervil** and **Ground Elder**. These flower at different times, although with some overlap, but their frothy white flowers light up the hedgerows from spring into summer. The poisonous **Hemlock**, another umbellifer with dark purple-spotted stems and finely-divided fern-like leaves, grows up to 2m (6-7') tall and is found in odd corners of farmland or on waste ground.

**Self-heal** grows best in short turf and there is some on the road verges at the junction of the High Street and Scotland Road. It is also found in lawns that have not had weedkiller used on them, forming attractive purple-blue flowered clumps. Its old country name has derived from its use as a wound-herb until quite recently.

Late summer sees the deep pink thistle-like heads of **Common** or **Black Knapweed** (Hardheads) growing on The Park and elsewhere. It is very attractive to butterflies and the black and red Burnet moths. This plant was formerly used to treat bruises and wounds, sores and scabs, and the flower heads as a form of love divination, by picking off the florets. Another prolific plant growing at the same time of year on The Park is **Red Bartsia**, another semi-parasitic, dark pink-red annual member of the Figwort family. Once used as a cure for toothache, Geoffrey Grigson, in his Englishman's flora, refers to it as being '*without a strong character. No peculiarities, no beauties, no virtues. A red, dullish, disregarded annual of the cornfields, a weed which has not even incurred the hatred of farmers*'.

Other disregarded plants, although highly developed in evolutionary terms, are the grasses. These are attractive in their own right and amply repay closer study as they encompass a wide variety of flower heads, leaf structure, subtle colour ranges, heights and locations. More easily recognised common grasses include **Ryegrass**, **Cocksfoot**, **Timothy**, the **Meadowgrasses** (**Rough**, **Annual** and **Smooth**) and **Meadow Barley** as constituents of improved grassland and species such as **Creeping Bent**, **Wall Barley**, **False Oat-grass**, **Couch Grass** and **Barren Brome** on waste ground and roadside verges.

Sedges can be differentiated from grasses by their triangular cross-sectional stems. They grow mainly in damp or fully wet areas. There are a few common sedges at the Bar Hill nature reserve, including **Greater Pond-sedge** with black-brown flowerheads and **False Fox sedge**, with tawny-yellow flowerheads and a long bract on one side. **Common Spike-rush**, **Hard Rush** and **Soft Rush** also grow in this area in and near the pond.

For the lower plants, bryophytes (mosses and liverworts) and lichens have not been studied at all, but the parish is not a rich area for such plants. The old gravestones in the churchyard have a collection of the commoner lichens.

Eastern England is not renowned for its fern flora, the climate on the whole being too dry here. However, one gem that was rediscovered in old pasture at Derrymore House grounds was the diminutive **Adder's-tongue Fern**. It was also listed by Walker, although no parish location was given for it. This is a rare fern, often lost among taller grasses since it only reaches 5-20 cm (2-8") and does not show above ground between November and April. It has a single oval pointed leaf and a spike bearing the spores at the top, which has a supposed similarity to a snake's tongue. This led to a former belief that it could be used as an antidote to snake bites and was much in demand by herbalists.

## Fungi

Once the flowering plants have died down, autumn time brings a renewed interest in the fungi, although certain species can be found at other times of the year. The ink caps can often be found on lawns. The gills of all these species rapidly auto-digest, which results in the dripping of the black inky fluid from which these fungi get their name. As well as the well-known **Lawyer's-Wig** or **Shaggy Ink Cap** (*Coprinus comatus*), other species include *Coprinus domesticus* and the **Glistening Ink Cap** (*C. micaceus*), with its pale fawn cap crusted with tiny white spicules which can be found especially where there are stumps or buried wood. This can sometimes be found around the old tree stump in the verge at the corner of High Street and Scotland Road. I have also found the leathery grey-brown tiers of the bracket fungus *Bjerkandera adusta*, with white edges, smelling strongly fungussy, on this same stump.

In some of the older lawns of the village can be found the **Fairy Ring Champignon** (*Marasmius oreades*), one of several fungi whose underground threads (mycelium) gradually spread through the soil, getting wider each year as they produce mushrooms at the edge of the ring.

A very easily recognised fungus on account of its hard black exterior which persists permanently, especially on dead ash trees or elders, is the **Cramp Ball** or **King Alfred's Cakes** (*Daldinia concentrica*). It owes its latter name to the legendary result of King Alfred's disastrous episode in the kitchen! The former name derives from the habit of people carrying it to ward off rheumatism. If sliced across with a sharp knife, this fungus is seen to be made up of concentric dark grey zones, hence its specific Latin name. One other jelly-like brown fungus growing on elder trees is **Jew's Ear** (*Auricularia auricula-judae*), a wrinkled ear-shaped fruiting body which can be found commonly around the parish, in places such as Long Lane.

Pale mauve is not a colour we normally associate with fungi, but there are several species of varying shades of mauve which exist in Britain. The **Wood Blewit** (*Lepista nuda*) has a cap about 6-12 cm (2½ - 5") across, which is bluish-lilac at first, and a similar coloured stem. Found in gardens, woodland and hedgerows, it lasts from autumn to early winter. It is in fact edible.

The puffballs have a small exit hole at the top of their globular or flask-shaped bodies through which they discharge their spores when ripe. *Lycoperdon pyriforme* is a one such puffball, being a club-shaped fungus growing usually in groups, with a scurfy, white-cream flesh covered with warts or granules. It appears to grow in soil but in reality is attached to buried wood.

Fungi grow on all sorts of substrates and dung is an especially rich source. The fungi are important in breaking down the dead or rotting material and recycling the nutrients back into the soil. *Panaeolus semiovatus* has been found on pony dung on The Park. It has a bell-shaped, clay white cap, dark brown gills and a stem up to about 10 cm (4") tall and can be found from spring to early winter.

Most people think of fungi as typical cap and stem shapes, but in reality they are incredibly varied in form. One highly unusual specimen is the **Bird's Nest Fungus** (*Cyathus olla*) which is a tiny cup containing several 'eggs', which are in fact the spore cases. When raindrops splash into the cup, the spores are dispersed. They are found on soil, twigs and other organic debris.

Other notable fungi records have included the sulphur-yellow, piled lumpy tiers of the bracket **Chicken of the Woods** (or **Sulphur Polypore**, *Laetiporus sulphureus*), growing on an old apple trunk at Derrymore House and the pale pink capped *Rhodotus palmatus*, lurking on old elm stumps in the dark spinneys bordering the fields in the south of the parish. The large *Volvariella speciosa* grows on rich soils of ploughed fields in autumn.

This section merely highlights some of the fascinating fungi that grow, largely unnoticed, around Dry Drayton. It is hoped in due course to draw up a more complete list for the parish, after further field work.

Our local native plants, while not especially notable in botanical terms, are nevertheless very important to us. As well as their aesthetic appeal, even these common plants may have curious folk histories and all play a key role in the ecology of other living things, as well as forming the fabric of the landscape. It is to be hoped that further plant losses do not occur in the future and that this account may provide people with more information and understanding as to what grows in our area and deserves nurturing.