

Historical background of the Wild Flower Society

The first 100 years 1886 to 1996

For many years The Wild Flower Society was run largely by its founders and other family members so much family history is also part of the history of the Wild Flower Society.

The Founding Victorian years

Although there is no record of the exact year the Society came into being, we think it must have been about 1886 as the first Magazine reports the activities of 1896 with a later mention of its having been in existence for some years earlier than that. From the first, despite its modest beginnings, it was boldly named **THE WILD FLOWER SOCIETY**, and this is the name it bears today.

The founder was Edith Vere Annesley, who was born in 1863. She was the eldest of the six children of the Reverend Francis Hanbury Annesley and his wife Maria Charlotte. Her father was the third successive Annesley to be vicar of Clifford Chambers, a small parish about three miles from Stratford-on-Avon. The family lived in the attractive old manor house at the end of the village and her father may aptly be described as the 'Squarson'.

Edith's mother is remembered as a gentle sweet old lady. There is still in existence a photograph of a family group taken on Edith's parents' Golden Wedding Day — he with racquet in hand, having just played two sets of tennis, and she, all in black with a lace fichu round her shoulders and a little lace cap on her head.

Seeking an occupation after having left school, Edith asked her parents if she could teach her youngest sister Alice who was ten years her junior. Permission was granted, so for eight years they 'did lessons' together providing interest and pleasure for both of them. Schoolwork occupied the mornings, but the afternoons were set aside for fresh air and exercise.

It was in order to make their walks more interesting that they first started looking for wild flowers. Edith wrote the names of the ordinary flowers in an exercise book with a space for entering the place and date of finding, and their mother gave them help with naming. In order to make it more amusing for Alice, five of her young friends were invited to join in.

That was the moment that it all began. No one at that point would have believed that a hundred years later a flourishing society would be in existence, having stemmed from those early, very amateurish beginnings. Nor, I am sure, did Edith realise that she was a forerunner of our modern 'conservation' movement when she instilled into those children a respect and awareness for plants in their natural surroundings.



Edith Vere Annesley (later Mrs E.V. Dent) Founder and President 1886 -1948

More children then wanted to join in, making the writing of plant lists by hand and keeping in touch by letter altogether too laborious. It was then that the suggestion came that a Magazine should be printed. Shortly afterwards, the first Diaries were printed as well.

While still unmarried and living at home, Edith enjoyed the local social life of visiting, and singing at concerts. In 1893 she married Robert Wilkinson Dent, and after a year of travel they settled for about nine years in Tunbridge Wells. It was here that her three sons and a daughter were born, with Hilda following after a year spent in Market Drayton. The family was now complete.

While the family were living in Tunbridge Wells, the first Wild Flower Society magazines were printed by Mr A.K. Baldwin's Grosvenor Printing Works. Four generations of Baldwins were printers to the society for seventy five years until the firm closed down. The early dairies used Bentham and Hooker's *Handbook of the British Flora* as a reference text. It listed 1,315 species. The society continued to use this as the reference flora until 1958 when Dandy's *List of British Vascular Plants* was published. Dandy's list contained 3,433 plants including 2,822 species, 538 hybrids and 73 extra sub species.

According to records, 100 copies of the magazine were printed 1899. Subscriptions were paid separately so there may have been more people receiving the magazine than 100 members of the society. So how much did the magazine cost? The clue comes from a notes which said that the February - March edition of the magazine was out of print and anyone who had not received it could claim back their 3½d. For those among our readers who are too young to understand pre 1972 currency, this would be slightly under 1.5p today.

In 1903 grandfather Dent died and, as Robert Dent was the eldest of his eight sons, the family moved up to Flass, the family home in Westmorland. It was to be the home of the Wild Flower Society until 1956.

The turn of the century

The Society was a very family affair in those early days. Our founder Edith (Now Mrs Dent) was both Secretary and Editor, and — since there were so few reports - her husband wrote interesting articles for the Magazine under the nom de plume of 'Associate'. Uncles and aunts were persuaded to contribute stories and articles and the children were encouraged to keep Diaries from an early age. Miss M. E. Hale became the first Branch Secretary, continuing for twenty years.

The March 1st Competition which was later called "The First Week Hunt" and now "The Spring Week Hunt" was very popular from the beginning, having some thirty or more entrants for each of the years around the turn of the century. Changing attitudes are brought to our notice when in 1903 March 1st fell on a Sunday and, as it was deemed unsuitable to collect on that day, the competition was postponed until the following day. Other competitions were also held with good response and members were very active in sending in their Diaries each year for the main collection.

In the winter the family visited India but the Society was not neglected during this time as Miss Charlotte Peck took charge in their absence, being both Secretary and Editor, and continued to give help for nearly four years. The membership increased enormously and Miss Peck wrote that spring that it was taking her five or six hours a day to cope. By now there were sixteen Branches and later Edith took over as Secretary again to share the work. This left Miss Peck to be Editor with the assistance of Harvey Goodwin as Treasurer, who received all subscriptions.

In the autumn of 1907 members received the following invitation which was printed in the Magazine:

Mrs. R.W. Dent AT HOME

Wednesday November 27th 1907 3-6

To meet the Secretaries and members of
The Wild Flower Society

St. Ermin's Hotel
Westminster
Tea and music

R.S.V.P
Flass, Shap
Westmorland

Editor's Note: It may seem strange in the 21st century, but in those days, and even in the 1950s and 1960s, a married woman not only took her husband's surname but was formerly addressed with his forenames as well. So Edith Vere Annesley having married Robert Wilkinson Dent became Mrs R.W. Dent not Mrs E. V. Dent. In later post war years though she was known as Mrs E.V. Dent which would be unsurprising today.

Afterwards, Miss Peck wrote in her Editor's letter: "A most enjoyable afternoon was spent by the members who accepted Mrs Dent's kind invitation. About fifty members were present including ten out of sixteen Branch Secretaries. For our entertainment Mr Davy Burnaby, the well known actor and Lady Davy's nephew, provided a programme which provoked even the most serious botanist to laughter, and Miss Ellensen contributed songs and whistled most tunefully."

In 1908 Edith returned home to Flass after a serious operation to be greeted by nineteen little boxes of flowers for the March 1st Competition. (In those early days of the Wild Flower Society competitors sent samples of the flowers not just records.) At about this time some members thought the Magazine was too dull for Juniors, so the Children's Page was started by Miss Bingham Stevens, using the name of 'The Brownie'.

The subscription was raised from 1s.9d. to 2s. a year to cover the increased costs of printing and postage: the six issues of the Magazine in 1910 appear to have cost £9 17s 6d, though there is no record of how many copies were printed. Early in 1910 Miss Peck resigned as Editor after nearly four years of valuable help to the Society.

From this time Edith Dent resumed the post of Editor in addition to being Secretary, checking the March 1st Competition, not to mention looking after a Branch or two, and sending out the Magazines. Miss Marsh undertook a Competition Page in conjunction with a series on field botany and her sound advice was laced with sharp reprimands if care was not taken. The rule that flowers should be picked for identification was questioned at this point, but it was upheld as Edith was so keen that they should be really closely examined and carefully identified.

The Great War

By 1912 rumours of war were beginning and as President of the Red Cross for the area, Mrs Dent was asked to organise VAD detachments for Westmorland and much other work. It was for this that she was later honoured with the OBE. War came in 1914 bringing anxiety and sadness. Though their house, Flass, was safe in the country, all three of her sons were fighting in France, and by the end only one of them — the eldest — returned. Mrs Dent wore black from that time until the end of her life.

The Society carried on. During the war some of its members co-operated in the growing and collecting of medicinal herbs and the collection of sphagnum moss (used for dressings). The Magazine included an article entitled 'How the botanist may help to capture German trade'.

Mrs Dent's daughter Violet was only 16 when she became Secretary of the Wild Flower Society which she continued to be for nearly twelve years. Violet also took on the Senior North Country Branch with up to twenty Diaries. An extra mark was then given in several branches for any flower found before anyone else in a branch, or on March 1st. She said "You can imagine the four of us sitting round the library table, my twenty or so Diaries

divided between the scrutineers, one person calling out the name of each flower, and the others checking for the earliest date!" The winner of the Junior Prizewinners Branch for that year (1916), with a splendid total of 924 plants to his credit, was young Noel Sandwith, later worked at the Herbarium at Kew.

Junior Branches flourished during the war though senior ones shrank considerably. The Junior North Country Branch grew so large that it had to be divided, so the Scottish Branch was formed with Mrs Williams as Secretary, bringing the number of branches up to twenty. Soon after the war, the Society celebrated a delayed Silver Jubilee. In an article entitled 'The Birth and Development of the WFS' Mrs Dent wrote: "I do believe the Society has supplied a want as the many grateful letters I have received have proved".

The inter war years

The Editor's Letter for April 1922 was written from Old Government House Hotel in Guernsey where the family was staying. It starts with an apology — "Not the first nor I fear the last" - for the late posting of the Magazines. "The Magazines arrived the day we left Flass" she writes, "and passengers must have been amused to see us rolling them up in papers already directed, first in the waiting room at Penrith and then in the train. At each station someone rushed out to post them, and at Preston we joyfully bundled the last lot into the letter-box."

Writing from Oxford in May 1922, Mrs Dent records not only her impressions of the city and University, but also in particular her meeting with Dr George Claridge Druce, "who you all know is one of the greatest living botanists." Dr Druce (1852 - 1932) was one of our early supporters. The Society were so fortunate to have this internationally eminent botanist as a good friend. He took such a kindly, helpful, and fatherly interest in the Society, wrote a number of useful articles for the magazine, and looked through some of our manuscripts before they went to the printers. Lady Davy wrote of him that he never failed to raise his hat on encountering one of his rarer or more elusive finds.

There have always been a large number of our members wanting to increase their botanical knowledge who have joined the (then) Botanical Society and Botanical Exchange Club of the British Isles (now the B..S.B.I.), as well as the Wild Flower Society. From 1924 up to the Second World War, when both Societies were much smaller, we enjoyed ten joint Conversations with the BEC at the Great Central Hotel in London, and were invited to join many of their field meetings. Dr Druce spoke of the WFS as a botanical nursery, in contrast to the scientific Botanical Exchange Club, and called us 'the Lumpers', while we called them 'the Splitters', for they subdivided the plants to a meticulous degree!

This happy relationship has in many ways continued, and we have been proud in recent years that several of our members, Dr Dony, Mr Lousley, Mr McClintock, and Mr Swann, have all been in their turn Presidents of the (now) Botanical Society of the British Isles, while still very active in our Society. The Editor's letters, and many of the other articles in the magazines of the early 1920's, record travels to many different places, so clearly enjoyed after the long years of the war. One finds in some of the articles the seeds of later developments, for instance (in 1923) "why not send some of your beloved wild flowers to the hospitals?" — perhaps a precursor of the later Invalids' Branch (which later became Arcadia) formed in 1926 at the suggestion of Miss Maude Robinson.

There are other pointers for the future such as the reference to Paul Furse (later the distinguished plant collector and Rear- Admiral) "I do not think any member has yet found 1,278 flowers in one year, though, as midshipman, he has had exceptional opportunities for collecting." The Society was flourishing — in 1920 there were about 338 members, twenty Secretaries, and twenty-four Branches: in 1923 Miss Robinson was confronted with no fewer than seventy little boxes of flowers for identification for the March 1st Competition, which must have been an all-time record.

In 1928 the family news takes up much of the Editor's Letter when it recorded Violet's marriage on July 4th to Commander C. M. R. Schwerdt, R.N. and her consequent resignation as Honorary Secretary, to be replaced by her sister, Hilda. Violet carried on with the secretaryship of the Northern Branch until she and her husband went abroad some years later; but Hilda who still lived at Flass, became our founder's main support.

Developments proceeded apace. In 1926 a new Branch, Valhalla (Branch Z) was established with twelve entrants in its first year. It was listed as Z for Zealots (members of the Society who had won their spurs, but who wanted to take life a little more easily while still keeping a cumulative Diary). Miss Bacon (later Mrs Foggitt) was the first Secretary, and the rules were changed to allow them to touch but not pick.

This was followed in 1931 by the establishment of Branch I, the Lotus Eaters, for those who wanted after two years of ordinary collecting to go into a cumulative Branch. The new Branch did not compete with the tired warriors of Valhalla as the following little rhyme about the proposed Branch I explains:

Here's a branch for the people who cannot attain

To such heights as the 'lions' of the Prizewinners gain.

But if Z's for the zealots who peacefully rest

In the fields of Valhalla, the land of the Blest,

Then I's for the idlers who, wand'ring at will,

In the land of the Lotus, are happier still."

This Branch too prospered.

Violet Schwerdt's children were introduced very early to the Wild Flower Society. Indeed the correspondence column on one occasion includes a comment from a member about our present Treasurer: "What a very young member your grandchild is! (two years). Quite a record I am sure. Dear little soul; what a nice interest to instil into her little mind."

A further reminder of how times have changed is the mention of the first of our membership lists, in 1930: "To save the trouble of copying out long lists for each individual. the Hon. Secretary has written and duplicated (with immense labour!) the names and addresses of all the members of the WFS, arranged alphabetically in counties.

This list occupied fifteen pages and could be bought for 6d. (2.5 new pence). A computer would have been an unbelievable alternative!

In 1934 five members agreed to keep lists of flowers found by members of the Wild Flower Society in their respective counties, a scheme for County Collections, later to be reflected in the County Records which were kept from 1930 to 1958 (when the use of Bentham and Hooker ceased, and Dandy's List became the basis of collecting).

The number of counties covered by diaries mounted over the years, and in the end included no fewer than forty-two. In England, Yorkshire (under Kit Rob) achieved a grand total of 1,021; Scotland (with fourteen counties) a total of 765; Ireland (with eight counties) a total of 626. When the scheme ended, Miss Gibbons collected together about seventeen of the county Diaries to lend out: the others were kept by their compilers who lent them to people writing county floras.

The Second World War

In January 1936 Violet Schwerdt and her husband with her two daughters, Rosemary and Pamela, went to Newfoundland upon her husband's appointment as Private Secretary to the Governor, Vice-Admiral Sir Humphrey Walwyn. This should have been for three years, but the second world war overtook their plans. Violet's husband became the first Naval Officer in Charge in St. John's, Newfoundland, and then (seconded to the Royal Canadian Navy) in Sydney, Nova Scotia. It was a long time until they could return to England in July 1945, and the family quickly went for an excited family reunion at Flass.

Much had happened while they had been away. Mr Dent, Violet's father, had died in 1940. Evacuees, and later, soldiers, had been billeted at Flass: Hilda, Violet's younger sister, was much occupied with the placing of Land Girls on various scattered farms. But the Society carried on, as it had done throughout the First World War.

Branch Secretaries found time to look after their scattered flocks, and one reads that "Miss Rob, busily cooking for the army at Catterick, even started a new Branch — the Forces Branch . . . One soldier wrote for a new Diary, saying his had been lost on the way back from Dunkirk".

The Magazine included articles on such topics as the flora of a bombed site in London, on Salisbury Plain, in France, and in Germany, and one on collecting wild plants for drugs (by Dr Roger Butcher, a very good friend of the Society, who was most enthusiastic about this venture).

The early post war Years

There was in fact a 'Butcherite' Branch for a short time — it later changed its name to the Pioneers. This was for people who wanted to go beyond the existing Diary and followed Dr Butcher's Further Illustrations to include in their collections a number of species not recognised in Bentham and Hooker.

This began in 1946 with Kit Rob as its Secretary and continued until 1954, when Dandy's List came into use. The Editor's Letter in the September - December 1948 Magazine was

exceptionally long — four full pages — in which Mrs Dent wrote on all sorts of topics, very lucidly, and to the point. She ended up by saying:

"I send my love and affection to all my members. They have brought me much happiness, and I am truly grateful for all the help I have received from Mrs Foggitt and many others.

I am 85 today and my daughter will soon succeed me. I hope you will give her the same loyalty and appreciation as you have given me. I know she will do her best. God be with you all. Your affectionate friend, Edith V. Dent, Sept. 29th 1948".

At the end of this very same issue, a last minute notice announced the death of our Founder and President, Edith Vere Dent on October 12th, 1948.

Miss Hilda S. A. Dent President 1948-1956



Violet's sister, Hilda, took over. She said in her first Editor's Letter *"It had always been Edith's wish that I should take her place as head of the Society after she had gone. I don't think it ever occurred to her that I wouldn't. So, as many of you know already, I am going to try and carry on, though it will be hard to live up to her tradition."*

For eight short years she did. The Society prospered under her leadership, record—keeping was improved, and a card index of addresses was instituted. The publication in 1952 of the first edition of the *Flora of the British Isles* by Clapham, Tutin and Warburg gave rise to requests for a new Diary based on the new arrangement and nomenclature, and discussions about this began.

Living at Flass, in a small country village, Violet and her sister Hilda had a series of three governesses, which meant they had no school friends, so were very close companions. The small shopping towns and station were from six to twelve miles away, which they had to reach by dogcart or carriage until they had their own car.

Hilda spent all her life in Westmorland and loved the county and the local people. She was also fond of poetry, and several of her poems were printed in our Magazines. She was a very

active Girl Guide, as Captain and Camp Adviser for Westmorland, taking her company camping to beautiful sites by Ullswater and other places in the Lake District. In 1942 she was appointed a Magistrate for North Westmorland, a task which she carried out conscientiously and sympathetically, and was a Governor of Penrith Grammar School and other schools, and on church committees.

Hilda took over the running of the family 100-acre home farm, and acquired a small herd of shorthorn cows. Mrs Dent, who was never strong, always required a great deal of attention.

Hilda died in 1956 aged only fifty-two. Since she was younger than her sister, Violet had never expected to succeed her, but it seemed that this was what members wanted. So in September 1956 the mantle fell to Violet Schwerdt.

Violet Schwerdt takes over the Wild Flower Society



Mrs Violet V.C. Schwerdt (nee V.V.C. Dent)

President 1956-1994

It was a time of many changes. Members of the Society subscribed to a fund in memory of our founder Edith Dent and her daughter Hilda, and the award of the resulting Dent Prize as an accolade for the most promising junior was first made in 1958. It is for progress and a high standard in the year's Diary and ancillary activities: many of the winners have since made their mark and some splendid Diaries and projects were submitted. Preparations continued for a new edition of the Diary based on Dandy's List and through the immensely hard work of David McClintock and Kit Rob, this appeared in 1958.

Editor's Note: Even with the aid of a computer and all the modern conveniences of the new millennium producing a new dairy of 1,000 plants after taxonomic changes is a daunting task requiring much work and careful proof reading. It must have been ten times harder to accomplish by hand.

Another new Branch, Parnassus, was started by Jocelyn Russell in 1957 for those Valhalla members not wishing to retire when they reached their objective of 2,000 flowers. Since then

it has had many members with totals varying from 2,000 to nearly 6,000 so that perhaps even Dr Druce would admit that the Wild Flower Society has some 'Splitters' too!

In 1959 the Exotics records were set up by David McClintock to receive entries of any plant found wild in the British Isles, not in Dandy's List.

In 1985 a similar arrangement was made by Rodney Burton for the receipt of foreign records. We had, at one time, a five-mile radius competition: this changed in 1961 to the Ten Kilometre Square competition and has proved both popular and useful.

In 1963 a Natural History Societies Series was started in the Magazine and one hundred and fourteen were described; in 1964 began our Colour Photograph Competition, the entries being shown at the London Tea Party (the tea party is now part of the Annual General Meeting weekend), Also that year there was a further (10th) edition of the Diary.

In 1968 Violet Schwerdt's husband died, and she moved from Esher to Horsmonden. In 1971 there followed an 11th edition of the Diary, with more alterations; the Scottish Tea Parties began that same year, followed by the first Northern Tea Party in 1979.

In 1973 the first of our illustrated Magazine series on different groups of plants by experts started. In that year Violet led the organisation of field meetings when Elizabeth Norman took over. The following year Dick English became Editor, after the closing-down of the printers, Baldwins, with whom the Society had had such a long and happy relationship since 1897; and the routine administrative work of the Society was transferred to the office of the Society for General Microbiology at Reading which had spare capacity to help other Societies.

The Wild Flower Society gains charitable status

The printing crisis of 1974 was followed by a financial one in 1975 which was overcome by the raising of subscriptions, other economies, and the generosity of members. Shortly afterwards, our aims and objects were revised and approved at a special meeting to enable the Society to be granted charitable status. We could then receive grants from certain trusts and reclaim tax on covenants: and a covenant scheme was implemented by Elizabeth Young. The tax thus reclaimed is put in a special Fund with which we have been able to assist conservation projects and the furthering of knowledge of the British Flora. That system of grants is still in operation today.

In 1975 also, the London Tea Party, formerly held in the YWCA and later the Charing Cross Hotel, moved to the large Conversazione Room at the British Museum (Natural History) where it was held immediately after the AGM.

The number of field meetings grew and in 1976 local meetings — some 17 in 1986 were added to the list of main ones, at the suggestion of Eric Philp. These are most enjoyable occasions, both for finding flowers and for making friends.

Elizabeth Norman kindly took over from Violet Schwerdt as the first General Secretary of the Society in 1980 and worked hard in revising our Rules and Regulations. An Executive Committee consisting of the Officers and three elected members was created, and it was

hoped that this mechanism would allow the Society to run smoothly and happily into the future. 1980 was memorable not only for the 80th birthday of Violet Schwerdt but for the preparation of the 12th edition of the Diary.

The first hundred years was adapted from an article in the Centenary issue of the Wild Flower Society's magazine written by the then President Mrs Violet Schwerdt who was the daughter of the founder of the society

Changes in recent years

Since Professor Clive Stace brought out his first edition of *New Flora of the British Isles* it was clear to many botanical associations including The Wild Flower Society that we could now use a more up to date reference than Douglas Kent's revision of Dandy's list of *Vascular Plants of the British Isles*. The Society chose this text now known simply as "Stace" as our reference flora but retained Kent's list with its more detailed list of the apomictic plants like Hawkweeds, Brambles, Dandelions and so on. The progress made in plant taxonomy using both cladistics and molecular biological techniques, led to major taxonomic changes in both Stace 3 and Stace 4. The diary was extensively revised following Stace 3 and is to be revised again following the publication of Stace 4 in 2019.

The most recent changes have involved social media. The Wild Flower Society now has Facebook group account and a Twitter account. This means that if you have a personal Facebook account, you can apply to join our otherwise private group. Once accepted this entitles you to post photographs of plants you have found and get them identified, assuming that is possible, by the expert botanists who are members of the group. In summer it is not unusual for an identification to be resolved within 10 minutes of it being posted. The Wild Flower Society at one time had over 1,000 subscribing members and although that membership is lower, near 680 now, those who are associated with the society through social media are in excess of 3,000 and increasing every week.