

MENTHA PRATENSIS Sole

By J. D. GROSE

The original description of *Mentha pratensis* by Sole (1798) concludes with the statement: 'I found this plant in the year 1789, in wet places in the New Forest, Hants, particularly in a common (Alderbury Common) near the Roebuck, between Salisbury and Romsey. It has not varied in the least by cultivation'. Alderbury Common is in South Wilts, v.c. 8, but the true site of the Roebuck has been in doubt for many years and the record for Sole's mint has been claimed for both Hants and Wilts. Townsend (1904) accepts the first part of the sentence as applying to Hants, and Preston (1888) quotes the second half for Wilts without qualification. Later writers, e.g. Druce (1928) and Fraser (1927) mostly credit a single locality to the plant, and that to Wilts.

There is now no 'Roebuck Inn' at Alderbury and extensive enquiries failed to reveal any evidence that there ever was, or that either of the existing inns ever bore the name. In a letter to Sir James Smith, A. B. Lambert stated that he 'ascertained that *Mentha pratensis* (Sole) was thrown out of the Roebuck Inn garden on Alderbury Common, and was merely a single plant; this Mr. Sole dug up, and the original specimen is at the Linnean Society'. The substance of this letter is contained also in a pencilled footnote by T. B. Flower in his copy of Sole's book (now in the writer's possession) but the words 'Alderbury Common' are omitted. A clue to the locality was provided when J. Britten (1905) discovered an alteration in A. B. Lambert's copy of *Menthae Britannicae* where 'Alderbury Common' had been deleted and 'Shervile Common' substituted. The following note was added: 'This common I examined in the year 1798 & was shown by the person who keeps the Roebuck the spot where Mr. Sole found the plant which was nothing more than a plant of *Mentha rubra* thrown out of the Roebuck garden'.—A.B.L.

In the light of this information the search was extended to Sherfield English but here, also, there is no Roebuck. Eventually Dr. B. Whitehead, of Downton, who has been helping with the enquiry, found that an incline about a mile east of the village was known locally as 'Buck Hill' and that the small general stores there was the original inn. The proprietress informs me that the name 'Roebuck' is still used by the Customs and Excise authorities for the tobacco licence. The locality is in South Hants, v.c. 11.

Sole's *Mentha pratensis* has never been refound either in Hampshire or elsewhere and must, I think, be regarded as extinct. It was described by Sole (1798) as a new species but was reduced by Sir James Smith to a lower grade. Sole, who was at issue with Smith on the ranking of this and other mints, wrote in his copy of *Menthae Britannicae*: 'Dr. Smith makes this new Mint a Variety of the following one (*M. rubra*),—and soon after in a future Observation he chooses it shall be a Variety of my *Sativa* pl. 21. Quere—Is not the Dr. full as ardent for Varieties, as he says I am for Species? See the Observations'. And a later note: 'The Dr. has in his last Flo. Angl. made it a *gracilis*'. J. Fraser (1927) places the plant under *M. × gentilis* and Mr R. Graham (*in litt.* 1953) agrees that it was probably a hybrid of the *M. arvensis-spicata* group being closely akin to *M. × gentilis* L. and *M. × gracilis* Sole, but adds that there is a morphological possibility that it arose as a hybrid of *M. arvensis* (♂) with *M. × piperita* (♀). The solution must await a new discovery.

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It should perhaps be remembered, with regard to Mr. Grose's paper, that some of Sole's names applied to mints different from those described under the original binomials. Thus, Sole's *M. sativa* is not that of Linnaeus (= *M. × verticillata* L.) but is in fact *M. × smithiana* R. Graham (= *M. rubra* Smith, non Miller). Further, Sole's *M. rubra* is *M. × gentilis* L. subhybr. *gentilis*, and his *M. gentilis* is *M. × gentilis* L. subhybr. *gracilis* Sole var. *cardiaca* (Baker) Briq. The *Mentha rubra* to which Lambert refers would presumably have been Sole's *M. rubra*, i.e. *M. × gentilis* L., and it might well have been that *M. pratensis* arose as a sport from this as a garden outcast. R. A. GRAHAM.