

A guide to finding the localities of British plant records

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ABSTRACT

An account is given of the problems encountered while attempting to trace the localities for a large number of herbarium specimens from Britain, and a guide is presented on how this may be done.

INTRODUCTION

In the course of a pilot project to find the feasibility of producing a computerized catalogue of a herbarium, it was decided to find the grid references for all specimens and add them to the herbarium labels. This would allow the data to be used by the computer to plot distribution maps, which would not be possible from locality names alone. The sample chosen was some 12,000 specimens of British Caryophyllaceae in the British Herbarium at the British Museum (Natural History). These were chosen as they were the next group due to be remapped by the Biological Records Centre. Much experience was gained in the matter of finding localities on the map, as very few of the specimens were already provided with grid references. Writers of county Floras and recorders in general must also face this problem on occasion, and it is hoped that the following guide will prove useful.

GAZETTEERS

The principal and most useful gazetteers are those published by the Ordnance Survey (1953, 1972), with which grid references can be found directly. Even so, these gazetteers are based on a map series of quarter-inch scale which does not include some of the place names on the commonly used one inch, 2½-inch or 1:50,000 scale maps. An alternative is the new Bartholomew gazetteer (Mason 1977). Neither of these includes Ireland. The more recent editions are not necessarily more useful than the older ones. Some famous botanical localities are omitted, e.g. the Ordnance Survey does not give Cwm Idwal, and the reference given for Clova is not the 'right' one. The Ordnance Survey has two ways of labelling 100 km squares, by two letters or two numbers. The difficulty with the use of numbers is that the British Isles are more than 1000 km long from north to south, so that the second digit repeats. The Ordnance Survey get over this by adding a letter N for the far north, e.g. N30 for Orkney as opposed to 30 for part of Dorset. The Biological Records Centre recommends the use of numbers for labelling the 100 km squares, and uses its own numbering scheme for the northern squares, and for the Irish national grid (Heath & Scott 1972).

If the locality to be found is in Wales, then there exists the ideal gazetteer (Ellis 1968). This is based on the one-inch Ordnance Survey maps, together with other sources, and has proved to be better than any other reference. Certain county Floras give lists of localities with grid references, and these have also proved very useful. Those used include Floras for Wiltshire (Grose 1957), Essex (Jermyn 1974), Berkshire (Bowen 1968), Bedfordshire (Dony 1953), Gloucestershire (Riddelsdell *et al.* 1948), Staffordshire (Edees 1972), Rutland (Messenger 1971), Moray (Webster 1978) and Kintyre (Cunningham & Kenneth 1979). All these date from after 1947, when the national grid system was introduced.

Other gazetteers exist which do not give grid references, but which give localities as a distance and direction from some prominent town or other landmark. The exact locality can then be found with the aid of a map. The best of these, in spite of its age, is that of Bartholomew (1887), which has the advantage that Ireland is included. More specialized street maps, such as those for the London area, can also be useful. The census index of place names (H.M.S.O. 1955) only covers England and Wales, and gives only the names of settlements, omitting rivers, mountains and other features. The index quotes the name of the next larger administrative unit (parish or town, etc.), and so can give a hint as to where to search on a map for the exact locality. This is still useful, in spite of the name changes brought about by the Local Government Act of 1972. Finally, the publications of the English Place-name Society, from 1924 onwards, have helped in difficult cases. Volumes are available for only certain counties so far, but are well indexed and cover a long period of history.

One problem which no gazetteer can help with is that of homonyms, unless there is other evidence. An obvious example is the English place name Newton, of which there are more than 30, with more than one per county in some instances. Synonyms also occur, but are not common. Instances where settlements have changed their names are rare, but there are difficulties with English translations or transliterations of names in Gaelic or Irish. Examples of where this has caused difficulty are Angel's Peak (same as Sgor an Lochain Uaine, Cairngorms) and Conival (same as Coinne-Mheall, Sutherland).

MAPS

If gazetteers and other reference books are of no help, it may be worthwhile to search on a map, provided there are some other clues. If one knows the county or district name, this may give a start, or if the plant has a definite habitat, such as coast, mountain or riverside, this can restrict the search. Apart from the currently available maps of various scales, it may be better, especially for older specimens, to use older editions. The Ordnance Survey maps of the 19th century (e.g. 1898 edition) have been valuable in this respect. Many development features, such as reservoirs, roads, airfields, housing estates and the like can obliterate localities and their names, and useful landmarks for naturalists of earlier times, especially railways and railway stations, can have been destroyed.

Once a locality has been found, it is fairly easy to allocate it to the correct Watsonian vice-county by using the guide and maps prepared by Dandy (1969). One should be aware that political county boundaries have changed repeatedly, and are often different from the Watsonian boundaries.

INDIRECT METHODS

Duplicate specimens from the exchange clubs have proved to be badly or illegibly labelled from time to time, and on several occasions it has proved worthwhile to look up the club report, e.g. of the Botanical Exchange Club, or the Watson Botanical Exchange Club, in order to get more details. This can be done if the approximate year is known, but care must be taken as they often contained mistakes.

Badly labelled specimens also have sometimes been better cited in Floras, and this has sometimes enabled the label to be interpreted and expanded. Cases of this have occurred in Herb. Alfred French, cited by Druce (1927), and with the herbarium of Hugh Davies, cited by Davies (1813), both at the British Museum (Natural History).

One reason why specimens may have incomplete locality information is that the collector never anticipated that his or her material would be kept for posterity, and used local names which were of places close to home e.g. 'in the churchyard'. If this is the case, and if one can discover where the collector used to live, then the locality can be looked for on a suitable map. For example, some of the collections of D. Martha Higgins are labelled 'London Road'. This is not very helpful, unless one knows that she lived at Luton. Similar examples are of I'Anson from Darlington and E. Hodgson from around Ulverston. Some information about who collected where is to be found in the herbarium index by Kent (1957).

Finally, it sometimes happens that another specimen can be found, taken by the same collector at the same place and time, where the latter is more completely labelled, and which will help to locate the former. Such a find is largely a matter of luck, unless a computerized herbarium catalogue is available.

Sometimes the problem is not that the locality cannot be found, but that it cannot be read! Practice and familiarity will help, but large institutions such as the British Museum (Natural History) have collections of botanists' handwriting samples to help solve problems of illegibility.

REMAINDER

A card index was made of all the localities which were not in any gazetteer but which have somehow been located nevertheless. These amount to about 3% of all specimens examined. There is also a residue of untraced localities, amounting to about 70 in 10,000, or 0.7% of the total. It may be possible to resolve some of these by appealing to the general knowledge of botanical colleagues and friends. Another possibility is to approach local government planning departments, or a county archivist (if there is one), in cases where the county of origin is known. In most of these there is no indication of the county, so that it is not possible to approach a local person. Some of the localities must be permanently untraceable, such as the classic example of the sheet which is labelled 'on hill in Scotland'.

It might be supposed that the older specimens caused the most difficulty, but this is not necessarily the case. One 18th-century specimen of Davies was localisable to within 100m, whereas a specimen collected in Wales in 1950 has remained untraced. In the latter case, the collector himself has been asked, and cannot recall the locality! The moral for modern collectors is always to quote a grid reference.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks are due to Nicola Callender, John Rogerson, Ursula Preston and Mary Briggs, all of whom have worked to try and find localities for specimens.

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(Accepted August 1980)