

THE STATUS OF *ANCHUSA SEMPERVIRENS* L. IN THE  
PLYMOUTH AREA OF SOUTH DEVON

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This study was carried out in the Summer of 1948 in an attempt to determine the status of *Anchusa sempervirens* L. in the Plymouth area of South Devon. The plant on the Continent extends along parts of the west coast of France and through the Iberian Peninsula to the western parts of the Mediterranean. In these places its natural habitats are along the borders of woods and in bushy places.

One might expect, from this geographical distribution, that the plant would occur as a native in S.W. England where it is to be found in some quantity. The plant was first recorded in Britain in 1724 by Sherard as *Buglossum latifolium sempervirens*, near Horns Place, Rochester (Druce, 1932). In Hooker (1831), the Rev. J. S. Tozer reports that *Anchusa sempervirens* is "certainly wild in Devon and Cornwall" but no definite stations are given. This statement is repeated by Watson (1835). In the Supplement to Vol. 2 of Watson's work, W. A. Bromfield reports the plant "truly wild in a retired lane, on a bank amongst weeds, a few miles from Plymouth." Bromfield (1856) repeats his claim of having gathered the plant wild in Devon, together with a similar claim for the Channel Islands. Briggs (1880) expresses the opinion that the plant is a denizen or alien rather than a native species because it is almost always found near buildings together with plants that have certainly been derived from gardens. He mentions Bromfield's claim of having found the plant wild near Plymouth and thinks that this station is Efford Lane [unfortunately Efford Lane has now been more or less destroyed by building]. Dunn (1905) writes of *Anchusa sempervirens*, "The distribution of this species is from Portugal to England. The confidence with which it is claimed as a native by the authors of local Floras decreases in proportion as it extends towards the north. It is, however, so claimed by botanists in Western France,\* Normandy,\* Jersey and Southern England, and, being a plant of decidedly western range, it may be admitted to our Flora. It is not uncommon as an escape from gardens." Davey (1909) regards the plant as a denizen. This, too, is the opinion expressed by Martin and Fraser (1939). Jones and Kingston (1829) give no definite information. Thus it is seen that, apart from a small number of early workers, most botanists regard the plant as a denizen or alien.

\*It should, however, be noted that Fournier (1946) treats it as rare and only cultivated or rarely spontaneous, and that Rouy (1908) questions its spontaneity in Normandy though apparently regarding it as native in Brittany, where he says it is not rare.

If this view is accepted then the origin of the plant in the south-west should be elucidated. It is well known that "Alkanet" has been used in herbal medicine. Hippocrates used the plant, while a list of its virtues is to be found in Culpeper's Herbal. The Whitworth doctors of Lancashire, who flourished in the early part of the nineteenth century, sold a "Red Bottle" composed of oil of Origanum, Anchusa root and Methylated Spirit (Leyel [n.d.]). Brook (1846) gives an account of the virtue of *Anchusa officinalis*:—"It has the credit of an astringent and vulnerary but it is little used. The best way of giving it is to add half an ounce to a quart of Hartshorn spirit; it gives a good colour and enriches the virtue." I have no definite information relating to the use of *Anchusa sempervirens* in herbal medicine in Britain although Dr. R. Melville of Kew reports a statement that, according to de Lobel, the species was cultivated in this country in the sixteenth century. My own investigation into the distribution of the plant in the Plymouth district somewhat supports the possibility that it was cultivated in this country a number of centuries ago. To-day Alkanet is used as a colouring agent for oily or greasy compounds such as pomades, hair oils and ointments (Wren, 1932).

My own investigations into these problems were carried out mainly in the Plymouth and Plympton districts of South Devon. I attempted, with the aid of local botanists, Briggs' *Flora of Plymouth*, and school children, to establish as many stations as possible for the plant. I then investigated each with a view to forming an opinion on the status of the plants found there—whether they were native or denizen.

The stations recorded by Briggs are indicated by (B). The numbers of plants are approximate. The dates of the old Plympton buildings mentioned are taken from Devonshire Association, *The Hundreds of Plympton and Ermington in Early Times*.

(1) 18 plants in and about Plympton St Mary churchyard. This church dates back to the end of the thirteenth century or the beginning of the fourteenth century and, even before these times, there was a Saxon monastery on the site of the present church (B).

(2) 50 plants in and about the Hay Farm (on the Plympton-Elburton Road) (B).

(3) 30 plants around an old workshop in Newnham Park. It is recorded that there were buildings in Newnham Park well before the seventeenth century (B).

(4) 15 plants in an old garden in a wood near Elfordleigh Lodge. This garden is said by local inhabitants to be "very old." The garden is in such a position that it is hardly likely that the plant has invaded the garden so it is probable that it was originally cultivated there (B).

(5) 4 plants in the hedge next to Efford Open Air School. This hedge borders a little lane known as Muddy Lane, which is a branch of Efford Lane. The main Efford Lane has now been more or less destroyed by building. Briggs stated that this is possibly the "wild"

station of Bromfield. To me this seems hardly likely because there are in the vicinity of Efford Lane, old farm buildings and orchards (B).

(6) 50 plants in the hedges around the Butlass Farm buildings. Butlass, or Batesford as it was then known, farm was known to exist in 1295 (B).

(7) 100 plants in hedges in the very near vicinity of old houses in Thornbury (B).

(8) 6 plants at the side of a road just outside Egg Buckland village (B).

(9) 13 plants on railway bank near St Mary's Bridge in Plympton St Mary. This is not definitely recorded by Briggs, although the station is very near to the Plympton St Mary churchyard.

(10) 4 plants at the top of Venton Lane extremely near to the village of Sparkwell. This is a very old village. In addition it appears that the plant is to be found growing just inside one of the village gardens. This kind of invasion by *Anchusa sempervirens* has recently been reported from the Kew neighbourhood (Hutchinson, 1945).

(11) 32 plants on the premises of the Hele Farm near Bickleigh. This is probably the Hayle to which Briggs referred (B).

(12) Briggs recorded the plant in Bickley itself. Mr E. M. Phillips of Plymouth has recently seen the plant growing near the village (B).

(13) 65 plants in a hedge at the side of the road as one approaches Halwell Farm from Elburton. It is recorded that Halwell existed in 1086. Briggs does not cite this station, although he mentions Elburton which is near Halwell.

(14) Cornwood—50 plants in a hedge and field near Houndall (Briggs' "Oundle") Farm. One plant near barn at Wisdome Farm (B).

(15) 9 plants near new houses (built 1938) at Wembury Point. This is a new kind of situation, for there are no old buildings and the plant is not cultivated in the gardens of the houses.

(16) 220 plants bordering a path that leads from Langdon Court through a wood to the West Wembury Road—also on the fringes of a wood at the side of this road. This wood contains various ornamental plants such as Conifers and Rhododendrons. This station somewhat resembles the true native stations on the continent, but the proximity of Langdon Court and Langdon Farm rather suggests that the plant here is a denizen. 100 plants a little further up the road towards West Wembury at the side of the road. This last situation is right against the Langdon Farm buildings which are very old (reported 1238) (B).

(17) 140 plants scattered throughout the village of Spriddlestone. Quite a number of the village buildings are very old, dating back to about 1316 (B).

(18) 100 plants to be found at various situations in the village of Brixton. This village is again very old, for the church, at least, was built about the same time as that at Plympton St Mary (B).

(19) A single plant growing on a bank on the right hand side of the road, 200-300 yards outside Efford Farm towards Stonycross. This is not very near buildings.

(20) 18 plants in a hedge and on a piece of waste ground just outside Plympton where the Exeter road branches to Sparkwell. There is a garden very near to this situation, but is a new one, associated with a reservoir building.

(21) 100 plants just outside Wembury on both sides of the road to Langdon Court. On the left side in the fringes of a wood; on the right side on ground overgrown with young trees. This ground was obviously cultivated at one time and there is a ruin of an old house nearby.

(22) 100 plants on the left side of the road going to Treby as a road branches off the main Smithhaleigh-Yealmpton Road (this is opposite the road that leads to Lyneham). There are no buildings very near to this station (B).

(23) 18 plants on the left side of an evergreen track that leads from the Smithhaleigh-Yealmpton Road to Worston. This situation is very near to an orchard and ruined farm buildings.

(24) 60 plants on the left side of the road as one enters Wilburton.

(25) 6 plants around the church at Yealmpton.

Two additional stations but outside the Plympton area are as follows:—

(26) 33 plants in the fringes of a wood on the left side of a road going to East Looe (Cornwall). This station is adjacent to the Lodge of Morval House.

(27) 50 plants both sides of a rough track (Fleet Mill Lane) near Totnes. This, at first, appeared to be a wild situation but, on following the plants, an old cottage was reached. The plant was found just outside the garden of the cottage in association with *Ballota nigra* L. and *Chelidonium majus* L. Briggs writes of *Ballota* as a plant growing near to dwelling places but not having originated from gardens. However, he regards *Chelidonium* as a definite denizen.

I think it is possible to draw, from the preceding account of *Anchusa sempervirens* in the Plymouth and Plympton areas of South Devon, a number of tentative conclusions. To begin with, the mass of evidence points to the plant being a denizen. Most of the stations are near buildings, there being hardly any stations like those on the continent. I have mentioned the plant in three places where it might possibly be native (stations 15, 19 and 22) but the small numbers of plants at these points suggest that they are the result of dispersal from other well established stations. A large number of the stations are near buildings a number of centuries old. To me, this indicates the possibility that the plant was at one time cultivated in the area investigated although I have not been able to find any records confirming this. The fact that the plant does not seem to have spread much since the days of Briggs is probably the result of its inefficient mechanism for seed dispersal (the simple separating of four nutlets).

I should like to thank Professor R. Good, Mr E. M. Phillips and the late Mr A. J. Wilmott for help when I was doing the work on which this paper is based.

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