

Marcham, *merece* and the Wild Celery Story

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Summary

The reappearance of the wild celery (*Apium graveolens* L.) at Marcham, Oxfordshire (GR SU 454961) after an interval of nearly thirty years caused a stir not only among local botanists but also among the place-name fraternity. Place names often contain names of crops, trees, rushes and reeds, but names for wild flowers are not common unless the plant is either useful or distinctive in some way. When I heard in 1998 that the wild celery had reappeared at Marcham, a name which means “wild celery flood meadow” (Old English *merece-hamm*) my curiosity was aroused.

Introduction

The wild celery was known to the Ancient Greeks (Sturtevant 1919). Its remains were found in Silchester and several other Roman sites because it was an economically useful plant (Godwin 1975). It is referred to in the Anglo-Saxon leechdoms (books of herbal remedies), and herbals published in later centuries for the very good reason that its seeds and leaves yielded a useful medicine. Uphof (1968) records that wild celery seeds and leaves boiled in water were used as a carminative, stomachic, stimulant, emmenagogue, anodyne poultice and nerve tonic. It was also used by country folk to relieve rheumatism and arthritis.

Sturtevant (1919) mentions that an earlier Latin name “sativus” suggests that it was merely cultivated, but that the terms “palustre” and “officinarum” used in the seventeenth century indicate a medicinal rather than food use (“palustre” no longer carries this implication). Celery does not seem to have been eaten as a vegetable until it had been improved by the French in the seventeenth century, although its seeds had always provided flavouring for soups.

The wide variety of names for wild celery in medieval England is an indication that the plant was well known. These names link its Anglo-Saxon name *merece* to an alternative modern name “smallage”; some of the names noted between 1280-1310 were “gallice ache, anglice merche, anglice smalache” and in 1310-1400 “anglice smalache vel merche” (Hunt 1989).

The BSBI atlas of 1962 shows that the wild celery is typically a coastal plant, (Hepburn (1952) describes it as subaritime), but with a number of inland localities. Between 1930 and 1962 it became extinct in about half its inland localities, although it survived in most coastal ones. By consulting county floras and Geological Survey memoirs (where available) it became apparent the wild celery usually survives inland where there are salt springs, as in the Droitwich area, or seepages of slightly saline ground water, as near Leamington Hastings, Warwickshire. Presumably competition from other species is a little less at such sites. It seems likely that wild celery was cultivated for its medicinal value in many areas and escaped into the wild. With the decline in herbal medicine it went out of cultivation and wild colonies in some places faded away, from lack of replenishment by seed from cultivated plants or from habitat loss.

There are three places, all mentioned in the Domesday survey or earlier, with *merece* in their names: Marchwood, Hampshire, on the west bank of Southampton Water adjacent to the woodland which became the New Forest; Marcham, Oxfordshire; and Marchington near the river Dove in Staffordshire. (March, Cambridgeshire and Marchamley, Shropshire have different derivations).

The BSBI atlas shows that in c.1960 the wild celery grew at Marchwood and Marcham and about ten miles southwest of Marchington. In Anglo-Saxon times places were named so as to distinguish them from their neighbours. In the case of Marchwood, a series of places with “wood” in their names lay on the edge of the New Forest: Ringwood, Arnewood, Gatewood, Malwood and Marchwood. The first elements of these mean rim, sea eagle, goat, gravel ridge (?) and wild celery respectively; and these qualifiers were used to distinguish one place on the edge of the forest from another nearby. At Marchwood, the only coastal site, the celery would have occurred naturally.

Marchington was originally called *merece-hamm* (Marcham), *tun* was added later (Cole, Cumber and Gelling 2000). The flood meadows of the river Dove would have been suitable for celery growing although the area around Tixall and Ingestre ten miles to the southwest, with its many salt springs and notable assemblage of salt marsh plants, might have been even better. Here it seems likely that the people of the village were well known for their celery and may have been supplementing their subsistence farming by producing celery for herbal medicine.

Our own Marcham fits well into the general picture. The celery was grown by the Romans at Silchester thirty miles away. It could equally well have been grown at some of the Roman settlements near Marcham, and later by the Anglo-Saxons – the name appears in the records in 900AD (Gelling 1974). It would have thrived on its present site, in a field significantly called Salt Marsh because of the nearby salt springs and stream. Bowen (1968) records seeing about 100 plants in 1964. Killick saw the colony between 1992-6 (Killick, Perry & Woodell 1998), but the farmer’s wife, Janey Cumber, did not become aware of its presence until 1998. It seems to have been absent or unobserved for much of the period between 1964 and 1992. The field is thought to have been drained in the early 1960’s and brought under continuous cereal cultivation. It was not until a winter fallow and a breakdown of the drainage that the plants were seen in 1998 by Janey Cumber and then came to my attention (Cole, Cumber & Gelling 2000). It would not be surprising if the drains had cracked after thirty or so years allowing the soil moisture to become contaminated, favouring any celery seedling which might appear. Mapping in the autumn of 1999 revealed about 300 plants, all within a limited area which is liable to water-logging in wet seasons. Five plants of brookweed (*Samolus valerandi* L.), another sub-maritime species, were noted in the same area on the same occasion. The farmer is putting this small area into setaside, and the field as a whole is undergoing organic conversion.

It is heartening to think that future generations will be able to stand in Marcham’s meadows seeing and smelling the wild celery remembering that it was the reason for the name Marcham being given for the settlement by our Anglo-Saxon forbears over 1,000 years ago.

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