

# The Orchid Garden of Kent

Trip Report  
19th May 2018  
Led by Jon Dunn



Lady Orchid © David Potter

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Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> May dawned bright and sunny in east Kent, and the participants of our inaugural *Orchid Garden of Kent* day tour gathered in the picturesque village of Wye, nestling at the foot of the chalk downs that bisect Kent and provide pockets of ideal conditions in which some of Britain and Ireland's rarest and most beautiful orchids can flourish.

This was market day, so the village was bustling with people. Happily our transport had arrived before the thronging villagers, so once our guests had arrived we were able to leave the busyness behind us and dive straight into the maze of narrow lanes that meander their way through the surrounding countryside. Spring was in full swing, so the verges were awash with frothing cow parsley punctuated with the pink accents of red campion... but it was altogether rarer flowers that we would be looking for today.

Our first stop, a little way outside Wye, was at the edges of Denge Woods. This woodland, managed by the Forestry Commission, contains a gem deep within it – an area renowned amongst orchid-hunters for its remarkable colony of lady orchids *Orchis purpurea*, a species that is almost entirely restricted to Kent in a British context. On the near continent it may be found, in places, growing with vigorous abandon in swathes on roadside verges but here, in England, it is on the edge of its European range and is altogether rarer. Our roadside verges are a shade of what they once were where biodiversity is concerned, and while the odd lady orchid may still be found, unexpectedly, growing at the side of a lane deep in the Kentish countryside, it is colonies such as that we were visiting this morning that hold the bulk of the British population,

We walked along a pleasant undulating track into the heart of Denge Woods, chattering amongst ourselves, renewing old acquaintances and forging new friendships as we went. Distracted only briefly by such delights as seething wood ant nests at the trackside, we soon arrived at the edge of the area we sought – a sloping shallow hillside studded with small trees and shrubs that forms a large general clearing in the midst of the surrounding dense woodland. One or two lady orchids outside the clearing hinted at what lay within, but could ill-prepare our guests for the treat in store – many hundreds of lady orchids grew in tremendous profusion throughout the site.

We spent a leisurely hour or more wandering amongst them, marvelling at their varied colours – while many sported the usual white and burgundy flowers, others had blooms the colour of pink lemonade; some were such a deep purple they appeared almost black from afar; and amongst all this variety we even found one of the rare, wraithlike, pure white examples. This was an intoxicating start to our day of orchid-hunting.

Better yet, the ladies of Kent were not alone – they shared their secluded clearing with countless common twayblades *Neottia ovata*, a subtle green orchid that rewarded a closer look, for each individual flower resembled a small green angel. The cold winter and early spring appeared to have slowed down the emergence of two other orchid species, for we could only find common spotted *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* and greater butterfly orchids *Platanthera chlorantha* in bud – the latter tantalisingly close to opening! The site also boasts white helleborines *Cephalanthera damasonium*, and we found a number of these just coming into flower, the icing on an exceedingly orchid-rich cake.

This wonderful site is not all about the orchids, for there were other distractions for our attentions while we wandered amongst the flowers – occasional bursts of song from a late-singing nightingale came from the surrounding woodland margins and, in our midst, freshly emerged duke of burgundy and green hairstreak butterflies basking in the sunshine were greatly appreciated by all.

We headed back towards Wye but, before we could enjoy a tasty lunch in one of the village's charming pubs, we had orchids on our minds. Having seen the lady orchids it seemed only fitting that we should see their 'male' counterparts – a small colony of man orchids *Orchis anthropophora* nestling at the foot of the Wye Downs. Far less obvious than their statuesque 'female' equivalents with their white Regency dresses and burgundy bonnets, the man orchids took a practised eye to spot them in the surrounding sward of grass and crosswort. Each flower-spike was a slender chartreuse spire edged with garnet tracery, and each individual flower formed a slim human-like figure with trailing arms and legs, befitting their common English name. Jon explained that their name on the continent was altogether darker – in Spain, for example, they are known as "flor del hombre ahorcado", or the hanging man flower...

Lunch was a relaxed affair in the pleasant surroundings of the Tickled Trout pub – over our food we swapped wildlife tales and anticipated what was to follow in the coming afternoon. Our first stop was to a secret site high on the top of the downs. Here we met Alfie Gay, the conservationist to whom many of Britain's extraordinarily rare late spider orchids *Ophrys fuciflora* owe their continuing existence and prospects for the future. Alfie is responsible for managing the sites on which some of the very few late spider orchids found in Britain prosper and, in the absence of the bees that pollinate late spider orchids on the continent, he is also the main pollinator of late spider orchids in Britain!

We would see the result of his painstaking care and attention in the form of one of the very first late spider orchids to flower in Britain in 2018 – an impossibly exotic flower that looks too extravagant to possibly be a British wildflower. They're found only in Kent here, and only a few hundred plants exist in the county. Theirs is a precarious existence and, shocked to learn that these precious plants are still illegally dug up by shameless plant thieves, we were all grateful for both Alfie's dedication to his beloved orchids and his generous explanation of their status and conservation in Britain.

Their counterpart, early spider orchid *Ophrys sphegodes*, is somewhat commoner, though this is relative – they are still a scarce orchid in Britain, found only in a few colonies strung along the south coast between Dorset and Kent. We next made our way to one of the most easterly of its stations on the downs above Dover at Temple Ewell. As the name suggests, they flower before late spider orchids and, had the spring been a little warmer, would probably have finished flowering by the time of our orchid tour in Kent – but Jon's preparatory explorations of the county in the preceding days had paid off for us, as there were still some examples with flowers to be seen here. Much less colourful than the late spider orchids, each flower bears a striking resemblance to an insect, complete with furry brown body and glossy black pseudo-eyes.

They were, however, mere understudies to the greatest insect-mimic of all our native orchids, the remarkable fly orchid *Ophrys insectifera*. At our final destination, the Hector Wilkes reserve, we would see many of these incredible flowers growing in the herb-rich meadow sward. Each flower is uncannily insectiferous – a long brown furry body replete with reflective bluish wing-patch, glossy

black eyes, and thin filiform antennae. As if all this visual deception weren't enough to lure a passing digger wasp to attempt to mate with the flower and, inadvertently, pollinate it, they even emit a scent that mimics the pheromones released by female digger wasps! Jon told the story of this remarkable deception, and recounted his efforts to witness the act of pseudocopulation for himself – a story told more fully in his critically acclaimed new book, *Orchid Summer*.

This chain of meadows had more to offer, however, than fly orchids. Common twayblades carpeted the ground in their thousands, while greater butterfly and chalk fragrant orchids *Gymadenia conopsea* were just days away from bursting into bloom. Early purple orchids *Orchis mascula*, meanwhile, were running late this year and we enjoyed seeing several dozen of these richly-coloured flowers still in good condition.

The main event, meanwhile, were the monkey orchids *Orchis simia* – this site is one of only three locations in Britain at which this rare orchid may be found. Jon shared the tale of their decline as a British species from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, their discovery as a precarious inhabitant of east Kent in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the efforts made to save them thereafter. This was a story of high drama, great threat, good intentions, and a hungry horse...

Time, sadly, ran out upon us, and we needed to return to Wye in the early evening for our guests to begin to make their way home after a most successful day of orchid-hunting in East Kent. We had seen a dozen species of orchid, nine of which were in bloom, on a day bathed in warm sunshine and in great company. We are already looking forward to seeing you in Kent again next year!

Orchids seen (not yet flowering in parantheses)

Monkey Orchid

Lady Orchid

Man Orchid

Early Purple Orchid

(Greater Butterfly Orchid)

Common Twayblade

White Helleborine

(Chalk Fragrant Orchid)

(Common Spotted Orchid)

Early Spider Orchid

Late Spider Orchid

Fly Orchid

Photo Gallery





Lady Orchid © Sally Ducker



Monkey Orchid © Sally Ducker



Fly Orchid © Sally Ducker



Late Spider Orchid © Sally Ducker

Common Twayblade © David Potter



Greater Butterfly Orchid © David Potter



Early Purple Orchid © David Potter



Fly Orchid © David Potter





Lady Orchid (dark specimen) © David Potter



Lady Orchid © David Potter



Lady Orchid (heavily spotted) © David Potter



Lady Orchids © David Potter





White Helleborine © David Potter



White Helleborine © David Potter



Monkey Orchid © David Potter



Duke of Burgundy © David Potter



Green Hairstreak © David Potter



Duke of Burgundy © Jillian Macready



Lady Orchids © Jillian Macready



Jon & members of the group © Jillian Macready



Group shot © Jillian Macready



Fly Orchid © Jillian Macready



Action Shot © Jillian Macready



Lady Orchid © Jillian Macready



Monkey Orchid © Jillian Macready





Early Purple Orchid © Jillian Macready



Early Purple Orchid © Jillian Macready



Early Spider Orchid © Jillian Macready



Early Purple Orchid © Jillian Macready



Early Spider Orchid © Jillian Macready



Group shot © Jillian Macready



Dingy Skipper (male) © Julian Dowding



Dingy Skipper (female) © Julian Dowding



Group shot © Julian Dowding



Group shot © Julian Dowding



Group shot © Julian Dowding



Group shot © Julian Dowding



White Helleborine & admirer © Jon Dunn



White Helleborine © Jon Dunn



Lady Orchids © Jon Dunn



Late Spider Orchid © Jon Dunn

Lady Orchid trio © Julian Dowding



A lovely clump of orchid enthusiasts! © Julian Dowding

