

## Sir Maurice Abbot-Anderson and Flora's League

In the Herbarium Room of the Dorset County Museum, stacked among many similar containers storing the Natural History Manuscript Collection, are two small, grey cardboard boxes marked 'NHMS VII and VIII Abbot-Anderson M.' The papers inside reveal the remarkable life of a man whose character combined charm and courtesy with determination and persuasive powers. After a distinguished medical career, Sir Maurice Abbot-Anderson turned his considerable talents and energy to the conservation of wild plants, founding Flora's League in 1925 and becoming a leading figure on the Wild Plant Conservation Board of the Council for the Protection of Rural England.



*Sir Maurice Abbot-Anderson wearing his Flora's League badge*

William Maurice Abbot-Anderson was born in January 1861 in Sandgate, Kent. He was the son of Major-General Edward Abbot-Anderson and his wife, Martha. He married first Maude Shaw in 1899 and, secondly, Muriel Porter in 1929. He studied medicine at University College, London and at Newcastle-on-Tyne, graduating as M.B., B.S. of Durham University. After various medical appointments he was appointed physician to the Princess Royal, Duchess of Fife (1867-1931), the daughter of Edward VII. For his services to the Duchess he was appointed M.V.O. in 1908 and received a knighthood in 1912; he was advanced to C.V.O. in 1925.

Following his retirement from medicine, he devoted most of his time to organisations concerned with the preservation of the countryside and, in particular, wild plants. For much of his retirement he lived at Madeira Cottage on the seafront in Lyme Regis, where he became the first President of the Lyme Regis and District Preservation Society. He and his wife were involved with Lyme Regis museum, where they had a collection of native flowers of Dorset on display. He died in Bath on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1938 after a short illness.

### **The Need for Protection of Wild Plants in Britain**

From the earliest times in Britain wild plants were used for practical purposes such as the preparation of medicines and dyes, for household decoration and as tokens of love. During the nineteenth century, however, they were also collected for growing in gardens or

indoors, or to form herbarium collections. Some of the most active collectors were professional plant hunters who gathered large quantities for their customers. The growth of the railway network and other forms of transport made easy access to the countryside for these purposes available to much of the population. By the second half of the century several rarer species - often the prime targets for collectors - had become threatened. Ferns and orchids were particularly vulnerable to collecting, reflecting the Victorian enthusiasm for these plants. For example, the rare Killarney Fern was collected almost to extinction and even the relatively common but attractive Royal Fern was ruthlessly plundered. One colony in Sussex was raided regularly by professional collectors who travelled by train and removed large quantities on each visit.

Orchids were similarly targeted: collecting of the rare and flamboyant Lady's-slipper had started as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> Century and by Victorian times the population was already severely depleted. Other rare orchids sought after by collectors included Summer Lady's-tresses: local people in the New Forest sold roots for one shilling each. Even commoner species such as Bee and Green-winged Orchids were regarded as desirable with substantial numbers sometimes being uprooted in a single attack.

Against this background, there was a growing feeling that wild plants should be protected. Many of the county field clubs established at this time included in their aims the protection of plants and other forms of wildlife. For example, The Dorset Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club, inaugurated in 1875 and the forerunner of The Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society, included in its initial object that "its influence is used to prevent, as far as possible, the extirpation of rare plants and animals." This did not, however, prevent John Mansel-Pleydell, the club's first President and author of the first Flora of Dorset, from uprooting no less than twelve rare Bog Orchids from Morden Heath on one day in 1885 to add to his herbarium collection!

It was not until the Local Government Act of 1888 that limited provision for the protection of wild plants in public places was first enabled, allowing, but not compelling, local councils to adopt by-laws for this purpose. However, such by-laws appear to have had little impact on the problem due to the difficulty of enforcement and lack of public sympathy with their objectives.

### **Flora's League - The Society for the Protection of Wild Flowers, Ferns and Trees**

Sir Maurice's love of wild flowers led him to found Flora's League in 1925. He recognised that urgent action was needed to protect wild flowers from destruction due to excessive picking, uprooting and ill-considered development. He had no objection to moderate picking of common flowers if they were plentiful, but aimed through the League to persuade the public to enjoy plants in their natural habitat rather than destroy them.

By 1932, the League had 45 local branches and over 18,000 members, rising to over 21,000 by 1936. Members paid a shilling for an enamel badge, and a composite badge was available for 2d (later 1d) for children under 16. They were asked to abide by a set of rules concerning the right way to pick flowers, to minimise any adverse impact and to protect rarities. Initially, Sir Maurice and Lady Abbot-Anderson ran the League from their London home and met all expenses themselves. After five years, supporters (who included Sir Edward Elgar) were invited to subscribe one guinea a year to a Propaganda Fund to meet expenses. The Council for the Preservation [later Protection] of Rural England (CPRE), which was founded in 1926 as a central council for various bodies concerned with the protection of the countryside and with which the League was affiliated, then allowed the League to use its own London address without charge for all correspondence and enquiries.

One of the League's main activities was to publicise the by-law forbidding the uprooting of "ferns or other plants growing in any road, lane, roadside waste, roadside bank or hedge, common or other place to which the public have access." In 1934, the Model By-law was amended to include "primroses" after "ferns" to ensure protection for all kinds of plants by referring to the two most commonly uprooted. Offenders were liable to a fine of up to forty shillings for a first offence and £5.00 for a subsequent offence. By 1934, the by-law (or an adaptation) had been adopted by all but nine counties and sub-counties. It is doubtful whether many convictions arose from contravention of this by-law, but it made the public aware that such behaviour was unacceptable, thus acting as a deterrent.

The League was also much concerned with the education of children and was actively supported by many teachers and Directors of Education. In schools, it enrolled members, ran essay competitions, distributed posters and gave lectures accompanied by lantern slides. These lantern lectures were also popular with adult audiences throughout the country. The League had stalls at horticultural and agricultural shows to distribute literature and enrol members, and was also successful in getting much support and coverage in the press and through the BBC.

Flora's League had links with similar organisations in Commonwealth countries, sharing experiences and ideas.



*Flora's League stall at a horticultural show*

### **Flora's League and the Wild Plant Conservation Board of the CPRE**

Sir Maurice was very keen to bring together and work in close cooperation with all societies and organisations concerned with the protection of wild plants in order to avoid duplication of effort and expense. Flora's League was among those responsible for the establishment in 1931 of the Wild Plant Conservation Board (WPCB) under the CPRE to decide on action and policy concerning all aspects of wild plant conservation. The 28 organisations represented on the WPCB included the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, the British Museum (Natural History), the Royal Horticultural Society, the National Trust, the Linnean Society, The Botanical Society and Exchange Club of the British Isles and the Wild Flower Society. Flora's League was represented on the Board and on its Technical Advisory Sub-committee and Sir Maurice was chosen to represent the WPCB on the Executive Committee of the

CPRE, demonstrating his central importance to its work.

The activities carried out by the WPCB included attempting to extend the by-law protecting wild plants from uprooting to privately-owned land; preparing schedules of plants needing special protection for the 31 County Councils requesting them; urging councils to regulate the cutting of roadside verges to favour wild flowers rather than destroy them; recruiting countryside wardens (with persuasive powers only) throughout the country from members of the various organisations affiliated to the CPRE; promoting the establishment of nature reserves managed as sanctuaries for wild plants; and opposing the intensive picking and sale of wild plants.

### **The effectiveness and legacy of Flora's League**

Towards the end of his life, Sir Maurice was becoming despondent that various initiatives of the League and the Board were failing to progress as quickly as he would have liked. In 1937, he published an article entitled *Good Manners towards Nature* in which he addressed the effectiveness of Flora's League's activities to date. Among his concerns were the lack of government funding for the work; the limited value of the by-law against the uprooting of wild plants; and the lack of evidence that County Councils used the schedules of plants needing special protection.

Despite Sir Maurice's rather pessimistic assessment in this article, there can be no doubt that the League was successful in drawing attention to the need for protection of wild plants, obtaining widespread support for its objectives, particularly in schools and local authorities, and working with other organisations with similar objectives. He gave a more positive assessment of the League's effectiveness in a letter drafted in March 1938, only a few weeks before he died, which was to have been sent to each member of the Council of Flora's League. This included the following:

"Flora's League has accomplished its purpose. It has helped to set the ball rolling in the interests of the protection of plants in the wild, and I firmly believe it will roll on for ever, gaining force as it goes. The formation of the Wild Plant Conservation Board, under the aegis of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, has admitted the necessity of the object for which we and others have striven for years past, and has centralised the efforts of all bodies interested in the preservation of our wild flora."

Sir Maurice, through the League and the WPCB, addressed the threats to wild plants which he saw at that time, especially uprooting and indiscriminate and excessive picking. In most circumstances, he believed that the needs of development and farming, although sometimes harmful to wild plants, should take precedence over the need to protect them. He could not have predicted the scale of the threats which would arise after his death from large-scale building and industrial development, changes in farming practices detrimental to wild plants and the use of marginal land for timber production.

Nevertheless, he and his fellow campaigners helped to lay the foundations for many of the later conservation successes. For example, the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 created Sites of Special Scientific Interest to provide some protection for areas outside reserves and set up the Nature Conservancy. The Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981 (as amended) prohibited, except under licence, the intentional picking, uprooting, destroying or sale of protected wild plants listed on a schedule, reviewed every five years. The legislation also prohibited the uprooting of plants not on the schedule on public land. Sir Maurice would have been delighted!

Flora's League continued for a short time after Sir Maurice's death as a memorial to him, with Lady Abbot-Anderson as President, but it appears that it was suspended after the outbreak of the second World War and was not subsequently revived.

Sir Maurice Abbot-Anderson was buried in Lyme Regis cemetery in a grave lined with bluebells, ferns and foliage. On his gravestone is the following citation:

"In dear and happy memory of  
SIR MAURICE ABBOT-ANDERSON  
C.V.O., M.B., B.S., M.R.C.S.  
(The Beloved Physician)  
Knight of Grace of St. John of Jerusalem  
Founder of Flora's League  
1861-1938  
He went about doing good"

followed by these lines by the nature poet James Thomson (1700-1748):

"And here his gentle spirit lingers still  
In yon sweet vale on this enchanted hill,  
Bidding us prize the favour'd scene he trod  
And see through nature's beauty, nature's God"

## Acknowledgement

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([www.wikitree.com/wiki/Abbot-Anderson](http://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Abbot-Anderson)).

**Peter & Margaret Cramb**