

The Wild Orchids of Wigmore Park, Luton



Richard & Geraldine Hogg

**The Wild Orchids of
Wigmore Park, Luton**



*Bee Orchid (var. belgarum),
June 2018*

**Text by Richard Hogg
Photographs by Richard & Geraldine Hogg
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Front Cover Photograph: Common Spotted-orchids in Wigmore Park,
Early July 2013.

This work is dedicated to the
Friends of Wigmore

Contents

Preface	4
References	4
Introduction	5
The Orchids	6
Orchid Translocation	7
Common Spotted-orchid	8
Common Spotted x Southern Marsh-orchid Hybrid	12
Bee Orchid	14
Pyramidal Orchid	16
Common Twayblade	18
Other Places to see Wild Orchids around Luton	20

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Pyramidal Orchid	16
Common Twayblade	18
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Preface

At the time of writing there is much uncertainty on the future of Wigmore Park, as London Luton Airport Ltd (LLAL) and Luton Borough Council want to build a new airport terminal and a business park on the land.

Part of Wigmore Park is a County Wildlife Site (CWS), supporting a thriving Fauna, and Flora including Wild Orchids. This will be largely lost if the developments go ahead.

This small work details and records the Wild Orchids we have found in the park, from 2012 to the current day.

Richard & Geraldine Hogg, October 2018

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Introduction

Wigmore Park is a large open space next to London Luton Airport, incorporating mown playing fields, a pavilion, and a County Wildlife Site (CWS). The park started life as Luton's refuse disposal site from the inter-war years until 1975. After use, the old refuse site was then capped with a variety of topsoils.

If we go back a number of years, the book "The Wild Flowers of Luton" by John & Christina Dony, published in 1991, notes that:

".. It is proposed now to develop the site [Wigmore Park] for major sporting activities that will require changes in ground levels that will bring to the surface seeds of plants that have remained dormant. From 1987 to 1990 inclusive, 196 plant species were recorded from the site, the following seven being of garden or alien origin, Spear Mint, Sunflower, Canary-grass, Butterfly-bush, Opium Poppy, Common Millet and Salsify."

The Donys then list some selected species, but no orchids are shown. Today, most of the seven garden plants above may have gone, but other garden escapees have appeared including Michaelmas Daisies, which form large clumps.

Since the Donys' surveys, the park has continued to develop into a superb wildlife site with many visiting and resident mammals, including Rabbits, Hares, Foxes, Badgers, Roe Deer, Muntjac Deer, and a few species of bats. Other vertebrates include Common Frogs, newts, and many species of birds. Many invertebrates also thrive here including butterflies, moths, bush-crickets, and bees.

The plant life at Wigmore is very varied, and includes trees of all sizes, plus extensive areas of bramble. In the damper areas Willows can be found, with some growing around the temporary ponds that form in the Winter months. Many flowering plants can be seen, with Primroses putting on a good display in the Spring, followed by many wild orchids in early Summer.

This booklet records the wild orchids that can be found in the park, and details where they can be found.

The Orchids

Four species of orchid and one hybrid have been recorded in Wigmore Park. They are:

<i>Dactylorhiza fuchsii</i>	Common Spotted-orchid
<i>Dactylorhiza x grandis</i>	Hybrid between Common-Spotted and Southern Marsh-orchid
<i>Ophrys apifera</i>	Bee Orchid
<i>Anacamptis pyramidalis</i>	Pyramidal Orchid
<i>Neottia ovata</i>	Common Twayblade

How did the orchids get there? Orchid seeds are very light and can be easily transported to new sites by the wind. Also, the seeds could have been present in the soils that were transported to the old refuse site for capping.

Another important consideration is that orchid seeds contain no nutrients and are therefore reliant on feeding on certain fungi for germination. The right fungi in the soil are therefore needed for this to happen. After germination the orchids can take a number of years to get to flowering size. Also of importance, is the abundance of chalk in the soils at Wigmore as many of the orchids prefer alkaline conditions.

Most of the orchids at Wigmore are tuberous (except the Common Twayblade). The current year's new leaves and flower stalk arise from a tuber that was produced the previous year. The tuber gradually shrivels as the plant grows and one or more new tubers may be produced by the orchid. The Common Twayblade, unlike the other orchids in the park, grows from a rhizome. Typically, rhizomes are subterranean stems that grow horizontally rather than vertically, and bear roots and shoots. A single rhizome may produce more than one flower stem.

Most of the orchids are pollinated by insects looking for nectar, with the exception of the Bee Orchid which is normally self-pollinating. Insects are attracted to the plants by the colour or shape of the flower, or by the scent. Some species of orchid offer no reward of nectar and the insects are thus deceived. This applies to Pyramidal Orchids, Common Spotted-orchids, and the hybrid *Dactylorhiza* orchid that occurs in the park.



Map showing the locations of the Wigmore Park Orchids 2012-2018
The two Bee Orchids in the north-east corner of the park show the translocation areas.
(Background Map Layer: Map data ©2018 Google)

Orchid Translocation

In June 2018 groundworks were undertaken in the park and some orchids were translocated to two areas (see the map caption above). Small turves containing Bee Orchids and Common Spotted-orchids were moved to these sites. One area is on the mown playing fields and other area is of long grass. At the time the orchids were moved, it was hot and dry, and not the best time to move them. Hopefully, in 2019, some of the translocated plants will have survived.

Common Spotted-orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*

This is the most common and widespread orchid in Wigmore Park often occurring in large numbers.

The flowers are very variable usually pink or lilac, with darker looped markings and spots. The base of the flower's lip is three-lobed. The pure white-flowered variety, *var. albiflora*, occurs at Wigmore.

Common Spotted-orchids are pollinated by a variety of insects. However, the insects receive no reward, as the plants do not produce nectar.

Key Facts:

- Most common UK orchid
- Tuberous species
- Spotted or blotched leaves
- Leaves appear in Spring
- No nectar in flowers
- Flower spike with 20-70 flowers
- Pollinated by insects
- Flowers mid-May to July
- Height: up to 50cm



Common Spotted-orchids at Wigmore Park on 4th July 2012.



A very well-marked variety in 2017.



Another nice variety with pink flowers in 2018.

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8



Common Spotted-orchids at Wigmore Park on 4th July 2012.



A very well-marked variety in 2017.



Another nice variety with pink flowers in 2018.

9



Common Spotted-orchids at Wigmore Park in June 2017



An almost white Common Spotted-orchid. It has faint markings on the flowers.



*A true white var. **albiflora**.*



Common Spotted-orchid leaves in April 2013. The previous year's flower stalk is to the left.



Common Spotted-orchid leaves and developing flower stalk in May 2018.



Left: Achlorophyllous Common Spotted-orchid lacking chlorophyll. It had yellow leaves and stem. June 2016.



Close-up of a Common Spotted-orchid flower.

Common Spotted x Southern Marsh-orchid Hybrid
Dactylorhiza x grandis (D. fuchsii x D. praetermissa)

A few plants of this hybrid have been seen in 2017 and 2018 in a slightly damper area of the park (on the west side). The Southern Marsh-orchid (*Dactylorhiza praetermissa*), one of the parents of these plants, appears to be absent from the park, but it's possible it may have grown there in the past. Another possibility is that the seeds have been brought to the park, or they may have been wind blown. The nearest site with the two parents and the hybrid is Cowslip Meadow, Luton.

Key Facts:

- The most common hybrid in southern England
- Spotted or blotched leaves
- Leaves appear in Spring
- No nectar in flowers
- Pollinated by insects
- Flowers mid-May to July
- Height: up to 50cm



A beautifully decorated hybrid, June 2018.



A fine looking hybrid, June 2017. Spotted leaves can just be seen.



For comparison: On the left is a hybrid from Wigmore Park, and on the right is a richly coloured hybrid from Cowslip Meadow, Luton. Both of these had spotted leaves, just like the Common Spotted-orchid. (Note that the leaves of the Southern Marsh-orchid are usually unspotted.)



Another Wigmore Park hybrid, June 2018



A close-up of a flower showing a much more rounded base of the lip than on a Common Spotted-Orchid.

Bee Orchid
Ophrys apifera

Bee Orchids have been found scattered all across Wigmore Park. They can be found on the playing fields and in the wilder areas. Bee Orchids may disappear from one area after a few years, and new ones will appear in a completely different place. The disappearance may be due to the orchid coming to the end of its life, or from competition with other plants. It is also known that Bee Orchid tubers may become dormant.

In the winter it is easy to find the newly formed leaf rosettes, especially on the playing fields.

Two varieties of Bee Orchid have been found at Wigmore. The first is the normal variety *var. apifera*, and the second is the much rarer *var. belgarum*.



Bee Orchid flowers, June 2012



Bee Orchid, June 2018

Key Facts:

- County flower of Bedfordshire
- Tuberous species
- Wintergreen: Leaves appear in the Autumn
- No nectar
- Normally self pollinating
- Flowers June to mid July
- Usually 2-7 flowers
- Height: up to 40 cm



Typical Bee Orchid flowers, June 2016



var. belgarum, June 2016



A leaf rosette, 19th October 2017



A newly opened Bee Orchid flower, June 2013

Pyramidal Orchid
Anacamptis pyramidalis

The Pyramidal Orchid is a relatively common plant in Bedfordshire often occurring in large numbers. In Wigmore Park they are scattered and occur mainly in the south-west part of the site.

The flower spike can have up to 100 flowers, in various shades of pink, or very rarely white. Three white flowered plants were found at Wigmore in 2018. These are known as *var. albiflora*.

Butterflies, and both day and night flying moths, are the main pollinators. The insect's proboscis is guided straight into the flower's long narrow spur, by the guide ridges on the lip.



A pyramidal orchid with a few newly opened flowers, June 2016.

Key Facts:
 -Tuberous species
 -Wintergreen: Leaves appear in Autumn
 -Flowers scented
 -No nectar
 -Pollinated by butterflies and moths
 -Flowers mid-June to August
 -Height: up to 60cm



Two white Pyramidal Orchids, var albiflora. June 2018



Both plants, June 2018. Note the long thin spurs on the flowers in the photo on the right.



Close-up of a flower, June 2018. Note the guide ridges on the three-lobed lip.

Other Places to see Wild Orchids around Luton

Here are a few places where you can see Wild Orchids around Luton. For each place the species most likely to be found are listed. Other orchid species, including Common Twayblades, are a possibility at any of the sites.

Other species of orchids that have been found in Luton include: Broad-leaved Helleborine (*Epipactis helleborine*), White Helleborine (*Cephalanthera damasonium*), and Chalk Fragrant-orchid (*Gymnadenia conopsea*).

Blows Downs, Dunstable (TL 040 220): Common Spotted-orchids, Bee Orchids, Pyramidal Orchids.

Bradgers Hill, Luton (TL 096 240): Common Spotted-orchids, Bee Orchids.

Cowslip Meadow, Luton (TL 084 246): Common Spotted-orchids, Southern Marsh-orchids, hybrids between Common Spotted and Southern Marsh, Bee Orchids.

Dallow Hills, Luton (TL 072 214): Common Spotted-orchids.

Winsdon Hill, Luton (TL 075 213): Common Spotted-orchids, Bee Orchids.

Common Twayblade
Neottia ovata

The Common Twayblade can be seen in large numbers at some sites in Bedfordshire, but each year at Wigmore there are just a small number in one area.

The Twayblade, so called because of it having two leaves, is a green-flowered orchid. It does not have tubers, but does have a rhizomatous root system. They can be found in full sun, in semi-shady places, or even in deep-shade.

Key Facts:

- Common UK orchid
- Rhizomatous species
- Usually two leaves
- Leaves appear in Spring
- Nectar in flowers
- Flower spike with up to 100 flowers
- Pollinated by insects
- Flowers May to July
- Height: up to 60cm



Plants with unopened flower buds in early June 2018.



Leaves appearing in early May 2013



Common Twayblade, June 2018.



A close-up of single flower, June 2018.