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THE ESSEX FIELD CLUB

A LONG RAMBLE

An arduous but most successful botanical ramble from Chelmsford to Maldon was carried out by a large number of members of the Essex field Club on Saturday, June 27, under the able directorship of Messrs F. Chancellor, E. Durrant, and E. A. Fitch, the party being increased by a considerable contingent of Chelmsford botanical students.

Leaving Chelmsford at 1.30, the party drove as far as

LITTLE BADDOW

where Mr. Chancellor gave some interesting particulars of the ancient manor house known as Great Graces, taking its name from the family of De Gras.

The ramble proper then began through the thick of Blake's Wood and on to

"OLD RIFFHAMS"

where the ramblers were hospitably received by Mr. Charles Smoothy, and spent a few minutes resting and admiring the interesting old house, which was architecturally described by Mr. Chancellor. Here Dr. J. E. Taylor (of Ipswich) took the opportunity of pointing out how around such ancient houses may be found the flora of a bygone generation, which lingers on when bricks and mortar have crumbled away. He showed a specimen of a once-valued medicinal herb, which he contended, had been grown in the grounds of Riffhams when it was a religious house, and which still lurked in corners near the place.

Through Holly grove and past a wealth of foxgloves and many botanical treasures, which the Doctor glibly named as fast as they were found, over Lingwood Common where half Essex stretched in one grand panorama before the eye, the party pushed on to Danbury.

NEARLY THE HIGHEST SPOT IN THE COUNTRY

(366 feet above O. D.) The hostelry of the Griffin, immortalised in the preface to Waverly, was here besieged by the hungry crowd of botanists, and a capital meat tea was somewhat joyfully encountered. One of the party here waxed facetious, and one by one members of the Club were ushered into a room to inspect two knives of the curved Essex type, which were labelled "supposed to have been used by Sir Walter Scott when he visited Danbury."

The Church of Danbury, with its long hagioscope and quaintly carved benches, had a share of inspection and indefatigables (including several ladies) climbed to the top of the Church tower and gazed at the far-reaching prospect.

On the pleasant green sward in front of the Church the party then gathered together, and the group having been photographed by Mr. F. Spalding, of Chelmsford, Dr. TAYLOR delivered one of his delightful scientific lay sermons, and considerable regret was felt that time did not allow of a further treatment of his interesting and suggestive subject, which was

“THE ORIGIN OF PLANTS”

There was no record, said the Doctor, of any plant being preserved in Noah's ark, and the question naturally presented itself – How did the immense variety which flourish around us originate, and become spread over the surface of the planet? Taking as his first example the common white bryony, of which a specimen had been gathered en route, he pointed out that it was the only species of an only genus in England. It had no business here at all, for it was essentially a tropical plant, belonging to the order of gourds and cucumbers. It was a climbing plant – dioecious – that is, having pistils on one flower and stamens on another, and it was as out of place in this country as a Chinese family in an English village. The black bryony, belonging to another genus, was equally out of its element. It belonged to the family of yams and bread-fruit trees. And with so many other of our wild flowers. There was the Equisetum, belonging to the oldest family of plants on the earth, almost exactly resembling the Calamites, figured in representations of the scenery of the ancient coal forests, where it grew to a height of 80 feet, and met the circumstances of its surroundings by assuming arboreal characteristics. Yet now its representative, the Equisetum, lingered on, appearing on the first cuttings of railways, and telling us by its form that it was one of the first terrestrial plants on this planet. It had lived on ever since the time when the first dry land was separated from the water. The earliest plants of all were Clubmosses, and of that family was the Quillwort, familiar on the margins of the Lakes in Westmoreland and Cumberland. This Quillwort was a lineal descendant of the first plants found in the upper old Red Sandstone of Kilkenny. The fine grain of that deposit assisted in preserving the impressions of the plants of that period, and there we had restored in a fossil form what could be restored in a living condition by an inspection of the flora around the Westmoreland Lakes, while close by would be found ferns whose fructifying parts gave them the misnomer of flowering ferns, and which were also survivals of a distant epoch of altogether different climatic conditions. In the Eocene deposits, which might be not less than 4,000,000 years old, was found the familiar form of the common Bracken, which was to be met with all over the British Islands (which Dr. Taylor casually remarked number no less than 996), in Australia, in New Zealand, in all the great Atlantic Islands, near the Cape, in the northern parts of the United States, and even near the Equator. No fern in all the world was so widely distributed. And among the fossils of the coal-measures was one that could not be distinguished from the common brake. Why this world-wide distribution? The ancient Greeks, said Dr Taylor, were right in their speculation that the sea was the ancient mother of life. The algae (a word which was but the Latin for the “rubbish” of the sea) were the beginners of all the vegetable life in the world. All these “sea-weeds” grew from the union of germ cells and sperm cells. The former floated and the latter swam in the ocean, and up to 40 years ago were mistaken for animalcules, owing to their movements. Disclaiming all hard and fast lines between animal and vegetable forms, Dr. Taylor said that the whole story of vegetable life was connected with the operations of these cells, and again represented in land plants by the throwing of pollen into the atmosphere to be carried about by winds and insects till, by contact with the pistils of other plants, fertilization could take place. The lichen was a connecting link between land and water life, living in a state of symbiosis. Many plants, such as liverworts, ferns and mosses, told plainly of their ancestral conditions from the fact that while living in dry places, they brought forth

sensitive ciliated germ cells, adapted to swim about in water, like animalcules, for which they had also been mistaken, Thus the mosses on the house top were powerless to fructify without rain, owing to their inheritance of these old characteristics of their aquatic life. Their method of reproduction was like a whisper of their ancient conditions from which they had been transformed. The northern hemisphere appeared to have been the nursery of plant life, which had streamed forth southwards in radiating lines, many species becoming entangled by the modifications of sea and land at different geological epochs. They streamed over the chalk downs, which, possibly even since the time of man, united England to the continent. Our buttercups came to us dry shod. Some of the plants that lived in cold climatic conditions adapted themselves to our changed climate by appearing only in the early spring, others by surviving only on the mountains heights, all giving a new and fuller meaning to the words of Tennyson –

“Saxon and Norman and Dane are we.”

This little lecturette was received with hearty applause, and the journey was then resumed over a beautifully wooded and undulating country to Maldon, where the long ramble terminated. On the way the interesting sundew was met with, a carnivorous plant armed with sticky hairs, to entrap flies. A small copper butterfly was discovered, hopelessly entrapped in one of the leaves.