

Fyfield Pea History

The **Fyfield Pea** is a bushy, hairless perennial with angular stems which scramble up any nearby hedgerow to a height of five feet or more and which carry a wealth of half-inch, crimson, slightly fragrant pea-flowers on long stalks in late June and July. It owes its Latin name to the small tubers which form underground and which distinguish it from other members of the peaflower family.

The Fyfield connection was established in 1859 when Octavius Corder, tenant farmer of Fyfield Hall and a keen naturalist, noticed the existence of a hitherto unrecorded peaflower "found abundantly in almost every cornfield and hedgerow in the parish", also in Willingale and, he thought, High Ongar. The following year his elder brother, Thomas Corder, a distinguished botanist and Fellow of the Linnean Society, published an account of the plant, reporting that in some places "it is so abundant as to damage the corn". And indeed it was abundant over a three mile stretch of the district; to the extent that local farmers, who had known the plant in the area for at least fifty years, called it "Tine Tare" (literally: fork vetch). It was at Thomas Corder's suggestion that the name "Fyfield Pea" was adopted universally for the plant and members of the botanic world wondered where it had come from and where else it grew.

The ensuing hunt revealed a number of other locations where *Lathyrus Tuberosus* was either prolific or had been seen just occasionally. Possible sightings were soon reported from as far afield as Blankney, near Lincoln, from Suffolk and from Plymouth. There was even a report of the plant growing near Wandsworth steam-boat pier but the authenticity of all these claims was not properly tested. Until a century ago, *Lathyrus Tuberosus* was distributed widely across mainland Europe. It was particularly common in France, Holland and Germany, where it was considered to be "nearly ineradicable". Circumstantial evidence grew that the plant may have been imported accidentally into Great Britain in ballast from Europe as reported sightings were checked and confirmed from several areas with a coastal connection: the shingle at Eastbourne, Cardiff Docks, Kings Lynn and close to the railway near Darlington.

Another origin was suggested by the discovery that the plant was growing in profusion in a marsh on Canvey Island, spilling into the nearby parish of Bowers Gifford. The plant had been well-known on Canvey since at least as early as 1730 and a case was built that the edible tubers of *Lathyrus Tuberosus* had been brought to this country by Dutch settlers in about the year 1620. Another, unattributed account puts the date at 1506. Unsurprisingly, there is little historical evidence to add substance to this theory but the story is plausible and certainly in the nineteenth century the little tubers had the country name of "Dutch mice".

Neither of these accounts explain how *Lathyrus Tuberosus* reached either Fyfield or Woolpit in Suffolk, the only other inland district with no railway link where it has been reported. Both villages were then, as now, in corn-growing areas and the most likely explanation is that imported seed-corn was contaminated with the pea seed.

Today, more than a century after these events, the Fyfield Pea clings on in just a few places in the district and even one of these was ploughed up recently. However, it is unfair to blame its demise solely on intensive modern farming methods and on the chemicals in use today because a general decline in abundance from the lush levels recorded by the Corders was being reported as early as the turn of the twentieth century. Perhaps the principal reason is that, not being native to this country, the Fyfield Pea was never destined to naturalise freely and more vigorous, indigenous plant species have slowly but inexorably supplanted it.

Lest this account should give the impression that Fyfield's proprietorial claim in respect of the Fyfield Pea is no greater than the claims of other places where it has been discovered, it is worth remembering that it was here that *Lathyrus Tuberosus* was first identified in Great Britain as a distinct and separate species. Nowhere in this country has this pretty plant ever been found to be growing in greater profusion than the parish whose name it carries and whose residents continue to take pride in the rare distinction of having a plant named after their village.

And what of the man who started it all by staking Fyfield's claim to distinction? Octavius Corder was born in 1828, probably in Exeter and he trained as a pharmaceutical chemist. He moved to Fyfield sometime in the late 1850s, taking the tenancy of Fyfield Hall which was then a working farm and part of the Forest Hall estate. While at Fyfield, his wife, Margaret bore him six children, two of whom died and were buried here. By the end of the 1860s, the Corders had moved on to East Anglia, where Octavius was President of the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists Society in 1880. He died at Brundall in Suffolk in January, 1910.

Marcus Dain, Wheel Cottage

Further information about the Fyfield Pea and source references for this article may be obtained from the writer.

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