



Saltmarsh



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The village of Marcham, north of Wantage, derives its name from the Old English elements *merece* and *ham*. The Oxford English Dictionary gives the derivation of *merece* as the plant *smallage*, which was known to medieval herbalists under a range of names including *anglice merce* and *anglice smalache*. Over time this pungent member of the carrot family was brought into cultivation and bred into something more palatable. By the late 17th century it gained a name familiar to us; smallage became celery. Cole *et al.* (2000) offer a translation of the Anglo-Saxon place name of Marcham as the meadow where the celery grows. Wild Celery *Apium graveolens* is a regular component of the higher reaches of saltmarshes, often growing on the margins of ditches and runnels.

Wild Celery:

George Claridge Druce's *Flora of Berkshire* (1897) included records from a salt spring near the village. At that time Marcham fell within the administrative county of Berkshire and remains so for the purposes of botanical recording. The flora described by Druce included the familiar components of other inland saltmarshes including Wild Celery, Saltmarsh Rush, Distant Sedge and Sea Arrowgrass, as well as the scarcer Parsley Water-dropwort *Oenanthe lachenalii*.

Regrettably, the marsh around the salt spring fell to the drive for agricultural improvement in the 1960s and by the early 1970s it was regarded as lost to continuous cereal cultivation. Local botanists continued to monitor the site and in the 1990s were



rewarded by the rediscovery of Wild Celery germinating in a winter fallow following a breakdown in the land drains. A sympathetic farming regime was adopted, which has supported the Celery population in expanding to hundreds of plants. The Celery of Marcham is quite rightly a source of local celebration and pride.

Celery may not be the only species of Druce's marsh to have survived. There are teasing records from the 1990s of other species of the saltmarsh edge including Brookweed *Samolus valerandi* and Strawberry Clover *Trifolium fragiferum*, both of which may yet reappear. Recent surveys have confirmed the presence of Distant Sedge and have identified a putative population of Saltmarsh Rush. The saltmarsh flora of Marcham, at least in part, appears to have persisted in the seedbank. With the continuation of sympathetic management we can look forward to fresh surprises.

Dedication

To Dr Francis Rose (1921–2006), who got us thinking.

Half title: Thrift, Shetland.

Frontispiece: Common Sea-lavender on Warham Marsh, Norfolk.

Bloomsbury Natural History
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

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First published 2017

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN HB: 978-1-4729-3359-1

ePDF: 978-1-4729-4297-5

ePub: 978-1-4729-3360-7