

The first British record of *Veronica filiformis* (Veronicaceae)

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Abstract

For almost 60 years, accounts of the history of *Veronica filiformis* Sm. in Britain and Ireland have described how, after an initial record in 1838, it was not recorded again until 1927, after which it spread very rapidly. An investigation of the 1838 record shows that, immediately after its publication, a leading botanist suggested that it was the species now known as *V. persica* (*V. filiformis* auct.). It is certainly far too doubtful to be accepted as the first record of *V. filiformis* in the wild. Once it is rejected, the history of *V. filiformis* in Britain and Ireland becomes much more straightforward.

Keywords: Arthur Wallis; Edward Forster; Essex; nomenclatural confusion; *Veronica persica*

Introduction

The spread of the Caucasian species *Veronica filiformis* Sm. (Slender Speedwell) in Britain and Ireland has been well documented by Bangerter & Kent (1957, 1962, 1965). They concluded that the first British record was from the neighbourhood of Colchester, N. Essex, in 1838, but that the species was not seen again until it was collected by R. Mackechnie on waste ground by the River Ayr near Ayr, Ayrshire, Scotland, in 1927. The second record marked the start of its rapid spread, and by 1935 it had also been recorded in the Channel Islands, England, Wales and Ireland. This history of an isolated early record followed by a spread from 1927 onwards has been generally accepted, and is recounted, for example, by Harris & Lovell (1980), Preston *et al.* (2002), Stace (1991) and Stace & Crawley (2015).

Details of the 1838 record

The 1838 record was not known to Bangerter & Kent (1957) but was included in their second paper (1962). Their source was the short-lived journal *The Naturalist*, of which five volumes were published between 1837 and 1839; this is not the long-running journal of the same name published by the Yorkshire Naturalists' Union from 1864 onwards. Bangerter & Kent (1962) reprinted the main text of the note in *The Naturalist* (Anonymous 1838a) but omitted the source cited for the information at the end, "*Essex Literary Standard, as quoted in Sheffield Chronicle, Aug. 1838.*"

The cited sources allow this note to be traced to the original. "*Essex Literary Standard*" is a confused reference to two separate publications. The note was

originally published as a single paragraph in the second issue of the *Essex Literary Journal*, 14 July 1838 (Anonymous 1838b). This journal was published at monthly intervals for just a year, from June 1838 to May 1839. The full text of the note (which differs only in title and in minor details of wording and punctuation from the version reprinted in *The Naturalist*) is as follows:

“NEW BRITISH PLANT.—During the past month, a plant, hitherto unknown as a native of Britain, was found in the neighbourhood of Colchester, whence a number of specimens have been gathered. This flower, which is the filiform Speedwell, (*Veronica filiformis*) is a native of the Levant, and was introduced into England in 1780. Its flowers are of a pale blue colour, on long slender flower stalks, and it partakes something of the habit of the common Germander species (*V. Chamaedrys*) and (*V. arvensis*.) The situation in which it was found clearly proved that it was of spontaneous growth, and the discovery is a truly valuable addition to the British Flora.”

This paragraph was reprinted, with the source acknowledged, in the weekly *Essex Standard* for 3 August 1838 (Anonymous 1838c). The 19th-century provincial papers copied items from each other to a quite surprising extent, and this paragraph must also have appeared in the *Sheffield Chronicle*, yet another short-lived publication, a newspaper which started publication in 1837 and apparently only lasted until 1838 (Leader 1875, p. 75); it is not represented in the on-line British Newspaper Archive. The article on *V. filiformis* thus found its way into *The Naturalist* with rather garbled details of its source.

The copies of the *Essex Literary Journal* available on-line from the Hathi Trust Digital Library, and from Google Books, come from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library and have manuscript additions identifying some of the authors of anonymous or pseudonymous articles. The identity of the author of the anonymous paragraph on *Veronica filiformis* is identified as ‘Mr Wallis’. This must be ‘A. Wallis (Chelmsford)’ who is identified in a similar annotation as the author of ‘Botanical & Floral Notes & Notices’, an article which occupies a full page of the first issue of the journal (15 June 1838, p. 8). Wallis is also named in manuscript as the author of another instalment of ‘Botanical & Floral Notes & Notices’, signed only ‘W.’, that appears on p. 20 of the next (July) issue, the same one as the paragraph on *Veronica filiformis*, as well as an article on ‘Fairy Rings’ on p. 17 of this issue, signed in this case ‘X’. He is also identified as the contributor of several further botanical articles in later issues. It is therefore possible to conclude with some confidence that the 1838 article on *V. filiformis* was written by Arthur Wallis (1816–1856), who is listed by Kent & Allen (1984) and whose specimens collected at Chelmsford, Colchester and other sites in N. Essex in the 1830s are detailed on the Herbaria@Home website.

Edward Forster’s comments on the 1838 record

So far this bibliographic investigation has merely added detail to the known 1838 record. However, there is more to the story than the dotting and crossing of historic i’s and t’s. For the most celebrated Essex botanist of the early 19th century, Edward Forster (1765–1849), wrote a letter to the *Essex Literary Journal* about the *V. filiformis* record which was published in the August issue (15 August 1838, p. 34):

TO THE EDITOR OF THE ESSEX LITERARY JOURNAL.

SIR,—In No. 2 of your Essex Literary Journal, you announce the discovery of a supposed new British plant, *Veronica filiformis*. I fear some botanical correspondent has misled you, for if the *V. filiformis* of De Candolle is intended, it has been some years known as a naturalized, though not a native plant, in various parts of this kingdom, and was first admitted into our flora by Mr. Johnstone [*sic*], of Berwick, afterwards by Sir Wm. Jackson Hooker, and since by Mr. Borrer, in the supplement to Sowerby's English Botany, as the *Veronica Buxbaumii*, of Tenore, and other Continental botanists, it being now generally understood to differ from the *Veronica filiformis* of Smith, a plant unknown at present in our gardens; so that if it were found near Colchester, great would be the discovery, if native, and still interesting if only an escape. The plant said to have been introduced in the year 1780, is evidently *Veronica Buxbaumii*; if this date be accurate it has spread wonderfully since that time. To the numerous stations mentioned by Borrer and Hooker, may be added one near Keston, in Kent, where Mr. Peete finds it in great abundance, and I greatly fear your's near Colchester; however, this might easily be ascertained if specimens were preserved and sent up to compare with those of *V. filiformis* in the herbarium of Sir James Edward Smith in the possession of the Linnean Society, which are authentic, one being from Tournefort, and therefore was doubtless before Smith when he described this species in the first volume of the Linnean Transactions.

Referring your readers to the figure and elaborate account of *V. Buxbaumii* in the second volume of the Supplement to English Botany,

I am, Sir, your's sincerely,

EDWARD FORSTER.

Woodford, 2nd August, 1838.

In this hitherto overlooked letter, Forster drew attention to the nomenclatural confusion that then surrounded the name *V. filiformis*. De Candolle (1815, pp. 388–389), misled by specimens sent to him by Gaetano Savi from Pisa named *V. filiformis* Smith, had taken up this name for the species we now know as *V. persica* (Common or Buxbaum's Speedwell). He cited the later name *V. buxbaumii* Tenore in synonymy as he could detect no difference between Savi's plant and the material of *V. buxbaumii* he had received from Tenore. The name *V. filiformis* was taken up in the same sense by Johnston (1829, p. 225) and Hooker (1830, p. 6) when *V. persica* was discovered in Britain. Johnston illustrated the species as his frontispiece but cited the name (p. 225) as the formula "*V. filiformis*, Lam. and Decand. Fl. Fr. v. 388 (excluding Sm. in Lin. Tr. i. 195)". However, Borrer (1833) preferred the name *V. buxbaumii* and later study confirmed the suspicions that Smith's *V. filiformis* was a different species, the Caucasian plant we now know under that name.

Conclusions

It is not obvious how confusion about the identity of the Essex plant came about, as a botanist possessing Hooker's flora (1830) might use the name *V. filiformis* but would know that the species was already recorded from Britain. However, the 1838

record clearly requires reassessment in the light of Forster's letter. The current view, that Wallis correctly recorded the true *V. filiformis*, a plant which was not then properly understood (as the nomenclatural tangle illustrates) and which was apparently not then cultivated in Britain, is scarcely credible in the light of this new evidence. Forster's conclusion that the Essex record was an early record of *V. persica* seems to me very plausible, and indeed a record of *V. persica* (as *V. buxbaumii*) from fields at Colchester was included in Gibson's *Flora of Essex* (1862) on Forster's authority. There was no further correspondence about the matter in the pages of the *Essex Literary Journal*, which suggests that Wallis was not disposed to dispute Forster's opinion. Indeed, there was, apparently, no further reference to the Essex '*V. filiformis*' for well over a century in the mainstream botanical literature. No voucher material has yet come to light, as Stace & Crawley (2015, p. 398) point out. The record, copied by a chain of journals needing material to fill their pages in the 1830s, lurked disregarded until it was extracted by Bangerter & Kent (1962) from the pages of *The Naturalist*. Once the 1838 record is treated as the error it surely was, the history of *V. filiformis* in Britain and Ireland becomes much more straightforward.

The date when *V. filiformis* was first introduced to British gardens requires further research. Bangerter & Kent (1957) regarded the first certain date as 1808, based on the presence of *V. filiformis* on a list of species grown in the Liverpool Botanic Garden (Anonymous 1808), but this evidence, and its inclusion in a slightly earlier list of plants grown in Cambridge (Donn 1804), is subject to the same problem of nomenclatural confusion that affects the Essex record. There is no indication in their discussion of the species that such well-connected botanists as Borrer and Hooker knew the true *V. filiformis* in gardens in the late 1820s and 1830s, and Forster explicitly stated that it was unknown there.

In addition to the rejection of the 1838 record of *V. filiformis*, can any broader conclusions be drawn from this story? The first is that it presents a further example of a very well-known phenomenon, that once erroneous records enter the literature they are virtually ineradicable. The second is that outlying and surprising records should be subjected to detailed scrutiny, especially when they have entered the botanical mainstream from rather peripheral sources. This *V. filiformis* record may have escaped such scrutiny for so long partly because the true source was not divulged by Bangerter & Kent (1962), who simply cited *The Naturalist* rather than the *Essex Literary Standard* or the *Sheffield Chronicle*. Readers of their paper can only have thought that the primary source was a natural history journal, and may well have imagined that it was the more prestigious (but later) Yorkshire journal of the same name. For an example of a similarly surprising record which, although from a highly dubious source, escaped scrutiny for many decades, see Preston (2009). My final conclusion is more encouraging. I consulted all the historic sources I needed to investigate this record on the internet, from home. Scrutinising the sources of published records is now, in many cases, remarkably easy.

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