

ACANTHUS MOLLIS L. IN ST AGNES, ISLES OF SCILLY

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Acanthus mollis L. (for a description, see Warburg (1952)), a species of southern Europe, was first recorded for St Agnes in 1851 (Babington, 1851), when the Rev. J. P. Mayne sent flowers to Babington for naming. Local inhabitants at that time said they remembered the plant growing wild 40 to 50 years earlier. According to Mayne, it was not known in any other of the Scilly Islands or elsewhere in St Agnes. He suspected that birds had brought the seeds from the continent. Babington wrote that it could hardly have been introduced into gardens at the beginning of the 19th century, for Mr. Mayne had ascertained that there were no gardens in the Island even as late as 1830; only potatoes, rye, and cabbages being grown by the islanders who lived almost wholly by the sea. In 1851 the plant occupied an area of about 20 feet by 5 or 6 feet, on the south side of a hedge and separated from some houses by a narrow field. It grew upon some heaps of stones which collected there upon the destruction of an old lane that formerly passed the spot.

The station is noted by Watson (1852) and in the 4th to the 10th editions of Babington's *Manual* (1856-1922), by Key (1868), and by Hooker (1884). Sowerby (1866) says the plant was "formerly found in the island of St Agnes; no doubt introduced." "Mr. F. Townsend, in 1863, was unable to see or hear that it was still in existence, so that it is probably extinct." Townsend (1864) "did not observe it" in 1862 and Smith (1912) in 1906 failed to find it, "but saw two plants in St Mary's, where in all probability they were escapes from cultivation." A note in a copy made by E. D. Marquand (Marquand, 1893) of J. Ralfs's unpublished manuscript of a Flora of Scilly indicates that Ralfs searched in vain for the *Acanthus*. The *Acanthus* is given, on the authority of Tellam, for 'Scilly Isles' in Davey (1909) but I do not know whether this refers to St Agnes, since Tellam's herbarium is not at present accessible. The Misses Millett's (1853) record of 1852 may have referred to St Agnes but the plant is cited merely for 'Isles of Scilly'. Thurston's (1936) record presumably refers to the Babington note of 1851.

In July 1950 I found a patch (20 feet by 12 feet) of *Acanthus mollis** in St Agnes growing on some waste ground on the south side of a wall. It was in a farm enclosure, separated from the house by a narrow field, and could not be seen from a road or any other public place. The plants were well established and had obviously been there for several years at least. The tenants of the farm have known the plant always in the one place, and the former tenants say the plant was there in 1912 when they took the farm and it continued to increase "although it was cut

*Specimen in Herb. University of Glasgow.

down and burnt as well". Thus the plant may well have existed on the same site for a century and possibly since c. 1800. I have not been able to trace the present patch back beyond 1912 and the only possibility of doing so would seem to be the elucidation of Tellam's record. Major A. A. Dorrien-Smith tells me that he is of the opinion that it was introduced from Tresco Gardens some time after 1834 by Augustus Smith, the then Lord Proprietor, probably into the St Agnes parsonage garden where he lived occasionally. This may be the explanation of its presence, although the possibility of a small piece having been introduced by some cottager or visitor, long before 1834, cannot entirely be discounted; especially since there is no mention in the 1851 note of the parsonage garden and the present station is about one-sixth of a mile from the parsonage.

Acanthus mollis does not occur anywhere else in St Agnes (the present occupants say there is none in the parsonage garden) and the existing patch seems to be increasing only by rhizome growth. It is, for this reason, regarded as a pest and is cut down every year. There is apparently no spreading by means of seed and the present tenant reported that no seeds could be found in the dried capsules in the autumn of 1950. The plant has been known as a garden escape in various places on the Cornish mainland since 1820 (Jones, 1820) and it appears to be increasing. It is also known (Lousley, *in lit.*) in a cottage garden in St Martin's, Scilly, and was reported by Grose in 1939 from Rocky Hill, St Mary's.

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