

Blakeney Point Nature Reserve and University College, London.

by D J B White

Synopsis: An account of Professor F W Oliver's part in securing Blakeney Point as a nature Reserve, and of the consequent relationship between the Botany Department of University College, London with the Point which has lasted for 95 years. Blakeney Point became a National Nature Reserve in 1994.

Introduction

Blakeney Point was well known to naturalists long before it became a nature reserve. It had for many years been famous for its breeding colony of Common Terns. It is known with certainty that there had been a ternery on the Point since 1830 and it may well have existed there much earlier than this. Ornithologists have also known the Point as an excellent place to observe both autumn and spring migrants.

Botanists too, had not overlooked the Point. Professor C.C. Babington (1808-1895) recorded in his 'Journal' for 1834 visiting the Point "May 22nd. Left Cambridge to spend a few days with W. Whitear at Cley-next-the-Sea, Norfolk. May 23rd. We went upon the bank of shingle that divides the marshes and the harbour from the open sea. Walked as far as the Blakeney Meads (low hills of sand nearly surrounded by the sea)". Babington went on to record the plants they found, all of which will be found growing there today although some of them we now know under other names.¹

Professor F W Oliver

That Blakeney Point, from Cley Beach Road westwards, eventually became a Nature Reserve was largely due to the foresight, enthusiasm and inspiration provided by one man, Professor F.W. Oliver (1884-1951). He was the son of Daniel Oliver, Professor of Botany at University College, London. F.W.O., at the age of twenty-four, succeeded his father as Head of the Botany Department in 1888 and became professor two years later, occupying the Chair until his retirement in 1929.

F.W. Oliver, who studied at the Universities of London and Cambridge spent two of his vacations in Germany where, at that time, the best training in research was to be obtained. He spent the summer of 1885 at the University of Bonn under Professor Eduard Strasburger and

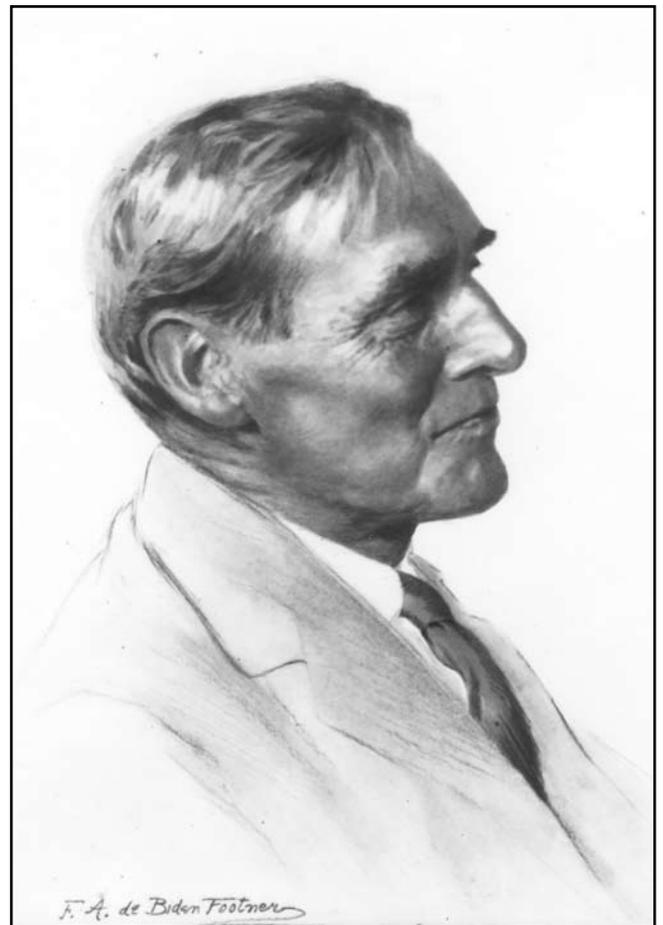


Figure 1. Crayon drawing of Professor F W Oliver by Frances de Bieden Footner c1930

there he met A.F.W. Schimper and H. Schenck. This association with two distinguished plant geographers was the starting point of Oliver's interest in plant ecology. Up to the end of the nineteenth century the general outlook on vegetation was a static one; but already Oliver had been particularly impressed by the mobility of sand dunes and shingle systems.²

In 1903 Professor Oliver took his students on a visit to the Norfolk Broads. In the following year he took an expedition to the Bouche d'Erquy on the north coast of Brittany, where the

salt marshes were studied. This became an annual event until 1909.

In 1908 Oliver had an attack of pleurisy and spent his convalescence on the Norfolk coast, and paid his first visit to Blakeney Point. He saw clearly the possibilities that the Point offered for the study of the dynamic processes which shaped maritime habitats.

In 1910 the Sixth Lord Calthorpe, shortly before his death, gave Professor Oliver and his students from University College, London, facilities to carry out an extended survey of the vegetation of Blakeney point. Thus began the long association between the Botany Department of University College and Blakeney Point which still exists to this day.

In the summer of 1911 the Blakeney Estate (including Blakeney Point) of the late Lord Calthorpe was sold. However the purchaser was agreeable to selling off the Point as a separate lot.

The same summer the International Phytogeographical Excursion visited the Point and "its members formed the strong opinion that no area could be more suitable for a Nature Reserve than Blakeney Point, and that it should be so secured".³

Oliver obtained the help of Mr. G. Claridge Druce, a distinguished amateur botanist, and through him influential interest was aroused and thanks largely to the generosity of the late Mr. Charles Rothschild and the help of the Fishmonger's Company, Blakeney was purchased in the summer of 1912 and handed over to the National Trust to be maintained as a Nature Reserve.

The National Trust

The National Trust expressed its intention "to preserve intact this beautiful spot and especially the natural vegetation and fauna for which it is famous". The trust appointed a committee, under the chairmanship of Mr. A.W. Cozens-Hardy, to manage the property. Professor Oliver was appointed Secretary, a position he occupied until his retirement from the College in 1929. Dr. E.J. Salisbury of the Botany Department was also a member of the Committee.

The Committee drew up regulations designed to protect the flora and fauna, and stated clearly that these regulations were not intended to interfere with local "industries" such as gathering Samphire or bait digging.

When the property came to the National Trust there were some house-boats and a number of small huts which had been sanctioned by the late Lord Calthorpe on payment of a small annual "beach-right". The Trust granted annual agreements to the various owners at

somewhat increased ground-rents (Annual Report, 1913).³

In 1910 the Old Lifeboat House, the long, low, tarred building which had been moved to its present position was brought by Professor Oliver for £50. This was renovated and used to accommodate his students. The College Council insisted on refunding the money and so the Old Lifeboat House became the property of the Botany Department. The refunded £50 was used by Oliver towards refurbishing the interior of the building.

A new Lifeboat House was constructed, but this became redundant when the sand dunes grew and made it impossible for the Lifeboat to be moved in or out of the Lifeboat House. The Lifeboat remained anchored in the channel until the Lifeboat Station was discontinued.

This ex-lifeboat House was later acquired by the National Trust to provide accommodation for the Warden and now also functions as an information centre, by which name this building should be known.

Lord Calthorpe had, in 1910, approved a proposal that a Laboratory for use in connexion with fieldwork should be built on the Point and had allocated a site for this purpose. His death occurred before this plan could be implemented. After the Point had become the property of the National Trust, the Trust approved the plan and agreed to a laboratory being built on the suggested site, just to the south of Glaux Low. An appeal in March 1913 for funds for the project soon raised the required sum and the building undertaken by Mr. W.R Allen of Blakeney was ready for use by July 1st 1913.

University College, London

From 1910 until 1929 Oliver took his students and colleagues to Blakeney every summer, and he himself, alone or with others was frequently there at other times of the year. He recorded in 1927 that "in this way in twenty-four years, many hundreds of students have not merely enjoyed an experience they will never forget, but have also come face to face with the operations of Nature in its most dynamic form".³

During these years much original work was carried out on the physiographical changes taking place and on the relation of the vegetation to these changes. Studies on the vegetation of the shingle banks, marshes and sand dunes in relation to their respective habitats were made. Results of the work undertaken appeared in various journals and by 1929 twenty-nine Blakeney Point Publications had been published. A series of Blakeney Point Reports were issued for the years 1913-1929³. In addition an Annotated List of the Birds of Blakeney Point was published.⁴



Photograph 1. The laboratory built just south of Glaux Low

Some idea of the amount of pioneer work achieved by Oliver and his associates may be gained by looking at the section on Maritime and Sub-maritime Vegetation (Chapters 40, 41 and 42) in Tansley's "The British Islands and their Vegetation" (1949).⁵

This area, the scene of much fundamental research and teaching is indeed one of the best documented Nature Reserves in Britain.

In the decade following Oliver's retirement in 1929 from the Quain Chair of Botany at University College, visits to the Point became less frequent but some useful work was published. All such work was in abeyance during the war years.

In 1946 the Department renewed its relationship with the Point. The new head of the Department, Professor W.H. Pearsall visited the Point and Dr (later Professor) Frank Jane restarted the regular visits each year of the undergraduate students of Botany.

The local Committee was reformed with Dr Jane (as Chairman) and Dr D.J.B. White as the two College representatives along with local people representing local interests. Mr E. de Bazille Corbin, the National Trust agent was the Secretary.

During the ensuing period an increasing

amount of scientific work was undertaken. An up-to-date bird list and a plant list were published.

Among the work undertaken by the students as part of their training was a study of the vegetation of different areas of the Point by means of quadrats and line transects. The students normally worked in pairs and the results of all the pairs were pooled. In this way over the years a considerable body of data was accumulated which would reveal any changes which were occurring. Such data was, of course, invaluable whenever the Management Plan for the area was under consideration.

Much useful data was also provided by the Warden and his assistants who were on the Point full time. In particular they were responsible for monitoring the populations of breeding birds. They would also record details of unusually high tides and any changes to the shingle bank or dunes that followed.

Many ornithologists visit the Point, especially during migration times, and their observations add to the bird records for the Point, as can be seen by reference to the annual Norfolk Bird Reports published by the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society.



Photograph 2. Ted Eales, Professor W H Pearsall and a student arriving at the Point

The Point Warden

The Warden in the immediate post-war years was Mr W.E. (Ted) Eales, whose name will always be associated with the Point. Ted had been appointed Warden in 1939 following the death of his father, but the war came and Ted served in the Royal Navy. On his return in late 1945 Ted was faced with a more difficult task than any of the Wardens before or since have had to deal with. There were two main problems. Before the war visitors were relatively few and they were able to wander at will over the Point without causing much trouble (or damage) in the ternery. But each year after the war visitor numbers increased steadily and it was no longer possible to allow visitors to walk through the ternery because of the continued disturbance to the breeding birds and also damage to the nests.

Ted Eales suggested to the Committee that the ternery should be wired off. Not all the Committee members were entirely happy about this. It was finally agreed to give the idea a trial. The ternery would be wired off with a single strand of wire in the spring when the terns would arrive and removed by 15th August when

breeding would be over. In the event wiring off the ternery in this way worked well and has been done each year since. The boatmen bringing visitors to the Point have been a great help in this by explaining to their passengers the purpose of the wired off areas.

The other problem faced by the Warden and his assistant (Mr Reggie Gaze) was caused by people referred to by the Wardens as “bush-bashers” or “bush-beaters”. These were people who walked the Point from Cley hoping to see migrant birds. When they reached a stand of Suaeda bushes they would ‘beat’ the bushes hoping to drive out the birds. Recently arrived migrants would be tired and needed to rest and feed. The efforts of Ted and Reggie to stop this activity caused some ill-feeling on the part of the birders. But happily such behaviour was stopped and indeed would now be frowned upon by all bird-watchers.

UCL Conservation Courses

In 1960 an event took place at University College which was, indirectly, of importance to the work done on the Point. On the joint initiative of the College and the Nature



Photograph 3. The Old and New Lifeboat houses

Conservancy (now called English Nature), a post-graduate Diploma in Conservation was started. This was an innovation and a pioneer course because the importance of Conservation was not generally recognised. The establishment of this course owed much to the foresight and understanding of Professor W.H. Pearsall and Mr Max Nicholson then Director-General of the Nature Conservancy.

The University converted the Diploma course into an MSc and this course over the years has provided a cadre of young men and women who have gone on to work in Conservation both in this country and overseas.

Other institutions have since followed the lead of University College and now there are many such courses available.

The University College Conservation Course came to Blakeney Point regularly – usually in September. Among other things during their training they did a lot of mapping and surveying and in particular provided us with maps which recorded the changes in the shingle ridges which form the Far Point complex.

In 1963 Professor Frank Jane died unexpectedly and was succeeded as Chairman by Dr D.J.B. White who held this office (except for an interregnum of two years when Major A. Athill was Chair) until July 1993 when the Committee

was subsumed into a larger committee (the Blakeney Area Advisory Committee) responsible for all the National Trust properties in the area. A small scientific sub-committee was charged with looking after the Point.

While the Botany Department continues to bring undergraduates annually to Blakeney Point, it is probably true to say that there is not so much ongoing work on the Point as in the past. This is due partly to changes in the particular interests of present members of the staff of the department but such work has by no means ceased.

There is yet another strand in the relationship between the College and the National Trust. In 1947 Sir Arthur Tansley became the Honorary Advisor on Ecology to the National Trust.⁶ Tansley had worked at University College under Professor F.W. Oliver who introduced him to Blakeney Point.

Conclusion

I have dealt in this article with the relationship between the Trust and the Botany Department – a relationship which has existed for 95 years, to the great advantage of both. The Trust has had the scientific work and recording (which needs to be done on any

Nature Reserve) done for it and many generations of students have had the opportunity of doing fieldwork in a wonderful area. An area to which many return to visit in later years. Blakeney is inevitably a topic of conversation when former Botany Students meet.

This article deals with the relationship between the College and the National Trust. But of course there is another important relationship – that between the people of Blakeney, Morston, Cley and other nearby villages and the Point. This relationship is well dealt with by Ted Eales in the book he wrote about his work after his retirement.⁷ It also contains a fine appreciation of Professor Oliver who clearly made a great impression on the young Ted Eales.

In 1994 Blakeney Point received the accolade of being designated a National Nature Reserve as recorded on the plaque in the Information Centre on the Point. The accolade was felt by some of us as being somewhat over due.

I have been glad of the opportunity to write this article. Ninety-five years is a long time, and many of the people involved with the Point have passed on. The memories of others are growing dim. I hope this article will be of value to all who come to the Point, and future generations of Botany Students at the College and to the staff, present and future of the National Trust.

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