The Glasgow Naturalist (2009) Volume 25, Part 2, 57-58

Plant recording at the site of Dixon's Blazes and adjacent area

Peter Macpherson

15 Lubnaig Road, Glasgow G43 2RY

INTRODUCTION

This is a report of the plants growing 'in the wild' on the industrial waste ground between Govanhill and the Gorbals, Glasgow (VC 77). The area comprises parts of NS5863 & 5963. It is bounded by Cathcart Road and Crown Street on the west, to the north by Kidson Street and a play area, on the east there is the curved Lawmoor Street and Lawmoor Road, with the railway to the south (Fig. 1). It formed part of the Little Govan estate, the northern part of which was stated in the 1820s to be a "beautifully secluded place". That part to the south is notable for having been the site of the Dixon's Blazes Industrial Estate.

The mining potential of the area was recognised by William Dixon (1753-1822) who came to Scotland from Northumberland in 1777. He was originally the manager of the colliery, but by 1820 was the sole proprietor. He was also a railway pioneer, laying tracks to convey coal in horse-drawn wagons from Little Govan to the River Clyde. The community of Govanhill originated as a miners' village. The son, William junior (1788-1859) extended the collieries in Govanhill, but also founded the Govan Iron Works with five blast furnaces to the north of Govanhill in 1839. This was the famous 'Dixon's Blazes', so-called because the glare of the furnaces lit up the night sky and could be seen for miles around. The complex was acquired by Colvilles and remained in operation until closure in 1958.

The survey area is 18.75 % of a 1km square. Towards the northern end there is a hillock from which a fox once watched intently as I recorded round the base. This elevated part is L shaped, approximately 100 metres in an east-west direction and 30 metres wide, with the shorter north-south limb 50 metres long and 25 metres wide. It is probable that at one time it was more or less circular, but that material was subsequently extracted. The boundary wall to the east is covered with quite complicated and not unattractive murals.

PLANT RECORDING

Surveys have been done on a number of occasions annually since 2005. Overall less than 20% of the area has plant cover. There are broad areas of tarmac, as well as roads and paths. In between there is much industrial waste. Apart from its northern aspect, the mound has developed a significant shrub cover, particularly of butterfly-bush (*Buddleja davidii*). A total of 224 taxa have been recorded. There are 141 in the native category. Of these the most interesting have been common spotted–orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*), northern marsh-orchid (*D. purpurella*) and their hybrid *D.* x *venusta*. Other hybrids noted are the eyebrights- *Euphrasia arctica* x *E. nemorosa*, St. John's-worts- perforate (*Hypericum perforatum*) x imperforate (*H. maculatum*) = *H.* x *desetangsii*, docks- curled (*Rumex crispus*) x northern (*R. longifolius*) = *R* .x *propinquus* and the willows- white (*Salix alba*) x crack (*S. fragilis*) and goat (*S. caprea*) x rusty (*S. cinerea*).
Seventeen species of grass have been recorded, the rarest of which in Lanarkshire are:- wall barley (*Hordeum murinum*), flattened meadow-grass (*Poa compressa*) and rat's-tail fescue (*Vulpia myuros*) . Four rushes, three sedges, two horsetails and one fern were noted. Of the 83 aliens, 16 are considered to be on site accidentally. These include wild parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*) and wild mignonette (*Reseda lutea*). Forty five have been classified as hortal. A number of cotoneaster taxa are regarded as having been bird-sown. Orange-peel clematis (*Clematis tangutica*) and *Genista lydia* are new records for Lanarkshire and were probably dumped. In some cases it is not possible to be sure if a particular plant is hortal or a relic. Instances are Italian alder (*Alnus cordata*) and Firethorn (*Pyracantha coccinea*) which are known to be bird-sown elsewhere in the city. The latter grows alongside and through a boundary fence.

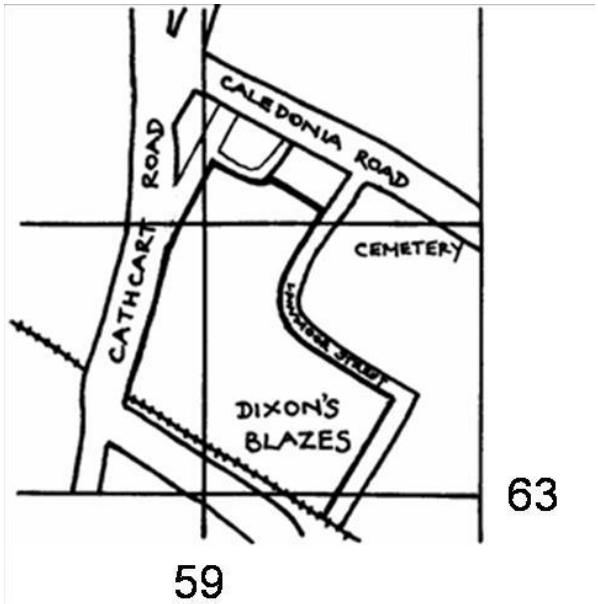

Fig. 1. Boundary of the Dixon's Blazes and adjacent area site. The numbers refer to Ordnance Survey Map 1km squares.

Relics of original planting are the most likely category in 22 cases although they now look very much in the wild. Examples are the quince (*Chaenomeles* x *superb* = *C. japonica* x *C. speciosa*), spreading oleaster (*Elaeagnus umbellata*) and Scottish laburnum (*Laburnum alpinum*). New records for VC 77 in this category are:- *Elaeagnus angustifolia*, *Euonymus fortunei*, *Genista lydia*, flaky juniper (*Juniperus squamata*), willow-leaved pear (*Pyrus salicifolia* 'Pendula') and laurustinus (*Viburnum tinus*) [no name in English for three rarities in this category].The juniper is a prostrate shrub of approximately 10 metres in diameter. I could not decide from the map into which 1km square the juniper should be recorded. Accordingly, I switched on my GPS and strode in towards the centre of the plant. I had taken four paces in when my right lower limb went full length down a hole! Fortunately the plant was over one foot thick by then and springy, so that no trauma was sustained. I have been informed that it has sometimes been used as a man-hole cover!

BRITISH DISTRIBUTION

With regard to national rarities, orange-peel clematis has several scattered occurrences and quince is stated to be very rare. Spreading oleaster has been seen before in Lanarkshire, but there are no other Scottish records and only five surviving records in other British vice-counties; *Elaeagnus angustifolia* is stated to have only unconfirmed British records, those made probably in error for *E. umbellata* (Clement & Foster, 1994). However, the Dixon's Blazes specimen has been so determined by two referees. There is one previous British record for *Euonymus fortunei*, and those for *Genista lydia* and flaky juniper are possibly the first records.

The area will undoubtedly be re-developed in due course, but has been one of great interest in which to record. However, on account of the industrial waste and it being mainly bare ground is in no way a 'Blaze' of colour.

Plant recording is never static, particularly in built-up areas. Since writing the above, excavations have begun in that part of the site through which the M74 extension will traverse.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to E.J. Clement, D.R. McKean and R.D. Meikle for help with identification, and to E.L.S. Lindsay for procuring historical information.

REFERENCE

Clement, E.J. & Foster, M.C. (1994). *Alien Plants of the British Isles*. Botanical Society of the British Isles, London.