

Potted history of the organisation(s) which evolved to become the BSBI.

Compiled by Louise Marsh based on publications of, and personal communications from, David Allen.

1836: inaugural meetings of the Botanical Society of Edinburgh (BSE) and the Botanical Society of London (BSL). Driving force behind BSL was Daniel Cooper (19 year old medical student) until H.C. Watson became BSL's 'Distributor' in 1842(?).

Aims: BLS aimed to fill a gap in the existing provision (outside universities) for mutual instruction and co-operative research. BES was more closely aligned with Univ. Edinburgh Botany Dept. under Robert Graham.

Main activities: annual programmes of lectures (especially BSE) and field excursions (both); BSL also pioneered the exchange of herbarium specimens between members, who were encouraged to: keep a reference collection and take advantage of a system set up for the exchange of duplicates; aim for greater precision in recording localities with a view to compiling local Floras and ultimately a Flora of Britain. Membership of both societies soon extended beyond the two capitals, with networks of Local Secretaries and Corresponding Members. Women were admitted under the same terms as men (this was exceptional at the time).

By 1850: BSL had 250 members across the country; 40% of Council and Officers were medics but keen local amateurs were also active and the society appealed to the "less scientifically sophisticated" (Allen, pers. comm.) for whom election to the Linnean Society (founded 1788) "tended to lie out of reach". Under H.C. Watson's leadership, processes had been streamlined; members encouraged to send specimens to a network of plant referees for comments (the most interesting of these comments were later published in the leading botanical periodical of the time); a checklist *London Catalogue of British Plants* published (at an affordable price) which helped standardise nomenclature; Watson encouraged an interest in seeking to establish the factors determining the distributions of individual species; Coleman's *Flora of Herts.* pioneered methods of field recording (dividing a county into districts, allocating a helper to each, recording all finds) which were refined a century later for the first Atlas.

Watson favoured focusing on the exchange of herbarium specimens by members across the country rather than building up private herbaria and resisted attempts by some members to build up a large and expensive BSL herbarium and library in the capital. There were also personality clashes between Watson and BSE. Following Watson's resignation in 1850, meetings grew less regular, periodicals ceased, BSL "collapsed" and was wound up in 1856 but the Botanical Exchange Club persisted.

1873: Watson's 'Topographical Botany' published: division of UK into 112 vice-counties.

1903: G.C. Druce (enthusiastic amateur botanist) became Hon Gen Sec of the Botanical Exchange Club and began to "graft a new and different structure – a society in the full meaning of the word – onto this largely wilted stem of what had once been the Botanical Society of London" (Allen, 1976). Subscriptions to the "new" society were actively sought and special offers promoted although finances remained a

problem. Botany became fashionable pre-WW1 but wider interest had waned somewhat by Druce's death in 1932, when "the society was hurriedly put on a democratic footing".

Publication of the British Ecological Society's *Biological Flora of the British Isles* (1928) and Tansley's *The British Isles and their Vegetation* (1939).

1950: BSBI Conference on 'The Study of the Distribution of British Plants' at which the Atlas project was launched.

1954-1962: BSBI pioneered a distribution mapping scheme towards publication of the first Atlas in 1962, with records collected by (volunteer) members and the use of 'dot-maps' aligned to the OS grid; partnerships were forged with the newly-formed Nature Conservancy and Biological Records Centre.

Following completion of work on the first Atlas, many county Floras were published (1970s-1980s) using similar methods of recording and mapping.

2002: A repeat Atlas was published based on fieldwork carried out 1987-1999.

2013: the Botanical Society of the British Isles changed its name and structure to become the Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland, a charity and a company limited by guarantee.

References:

Allen, D.E.: *The Botanists: The history of the Botanical Society of the British Isles through a hundred and fifty years*. 1986

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