

***Cephalanthera rubra* (L.) Rich**

Red Helleborine

Native

Critically Endangered

Schedule 8

UKBAP

Nationally Rare

VC5 Extinct; VC6 Absent

A perennial rhizomatous orchid of beech woodlands on calcareous well-drained slopes. Only ever recorded once in Somerset, found by J.C. Collins in 1836 (or 1835) near Merridge in VC5. He wrote "One specimen, and one only, I discovered near Hawkridge Water, on the Quantocks" (Murray, 1896). The record was included by Murray in his flora because it was accepted by Watson and Hooker, however Murray himself had little faith in it. Marshall (1914) gave it more credence, believing that confusion with any other orchid was unlikely and Miller (1933) wrote "It is almost impossible that Collins in 1836 could have been mistaken as to this most unmistakeable plant". Despite diligent searches of limestone outcrops in the area, by 1933 there were no further records. Roe (1981) stated that there had been "other reports of this very rare plant having been seen in the county", yet there are no other records listed in his card index, implying that they were unsubstantiated (or closely guarded secrets?). Nationally this rare orchid has dwindled to just a few plants at three scattered sites in southern England: in Hampshire, Buckinghamshire and Gloucestershire.