

# Coming with the swallow

I was interested to note in the spring 2005 issue of *Devon & Cornwall Notes and Queries* a reference to the greater celandine, *Chelidonium majus*, a plant that is connected etymologically with the swallow but continues to flower when that fascinating bird is far away seeking milder climates.

In his comments, J. B. Smith observes: "The first thing to notice about this member of the poppy family is that, although it is yellow like the lesser celandine, *Ranunculus ficaria*, and bears a similar English name, any relationship stops there." He remarks that the plant is widespread in Devon and shows signs of having once been cultivated there, since it occurs close to habitations and farmsteads and in proximity to walls, on banks and under hedges. A reason for its local cultivation is indicated by the local names of "kill-wart" and "wart-flower".

Curiously enough, Dioscorides, writing in the first century AD, explained that the old Greek name *chelidon*, meaning a swallow, was used because the plant starts to flower at the time when that bird arrives in Europe, or because mother swallows dropped its juice into the eyes of their nestlings to counteract blindness. When it was taken to the New World by the settlers it was called "swallow-wort".

Dioscorides notes that the juice, heated with honey, sharpens the sight. The leaves and root, dried in the shade at the start of summer, were formed into balls for future use. These were chewed to relieve toothache. Taken internally with aniseed and white wine, they cured dropsy, jaundice and scurvy, and were effective against snake-bite, accord-



ing to Pliny. However, John Hill in 'The family herbal' of 1772 insists that celandine should always be used fresh, "for it loses the greatest part of its virtue in drying".

The plant's main indication still seems to be the application of the yellow acrid juice to warts, which it is reputed to remove after several nightly treatments. "At the very least," comments Smith, "you will no doubt experience a reassuring burning sensation." But I would advise anyone to proceed with great caution, nevertheless. If in doubt, leave it out.

# Discovery of dwarfish human remains in Indonesia is still causing fierce controversy

A report in *Nature* for 13 October describes the continuing saga of the discovery of the remains of a midget human, attributed by some experts to a new species, *Homo floresiensis*, in the cave of Liang Bua on the Indonesian island of Flores. The original discovery was of a partial skeleton, dated to about 18,000 years ago. It was of a female, just over one metre tall, with a brain volume of 380cc, roughly the size of that of a chimpanzee. With it were found stone tools, evidence of fire-making, and the bones of a dwarfed elephant species, apparently the product of hunting.

Interpreting the evidence caused a stir in anthropological circles. If the discovery really represents a new species, then our own race of *Homo sapiens* has co-existed with primitive hominids more recently than was previously thought, and long after the extinction of the Neanderthals. Some experts took the view that *Homo floresiensis* was really a dwarfed form of *Homo erectus*.

During new excavations in 2004, more fossils were unearthed, including bones which some consider represent nine individuals. Among them are a mandible, a tibia and arm bones. All suggest an individual only a metre tall with relatively long arms.

Further research is being hampered by the refusal of a local expert, who believes the bones come from a genetically deformed homo sapiens suffering from microcephaly, and other officials who fear political repercussions, to allow further access to the site. Last year some remains were detained for some four months and then restored to the investigators in broken condition.

It is argued that it is unprecedented to close so spectacular an archaeological site so that foreign experts cannot have access and pursue their investigations, when there is so great a difference between them and the local interpreters over evaluation of the finds.

# Intelligent design vs evolution: the US argument continues

The interminable arguments over whether religion has any justifiable place in the teaching of science subjects in state schools continue with controversy in Pennsylvania over the legitimacy of insistence that intelligent design be taught as an alternative to Darwinian evolution. The argument reverts to a famous legal decision in 1925 when John Scopes was found guilty of teaching evolution to schoolchildren in Tennessee.

Defenders of the evolutionary theory put forward by Darwin in 1859 to explain biological differentiation over the ages have always been criticised on the grounds that evolution is "only a theory" and is not based upon factual findings. The counter-argument that intelligent design is equally "only a theory" has naturally been disputed in the same circles.

When parents in a Pennsylvania school last year brought a legal challenge to the decision of its governing board to instruct teachers that they must not only inform students of the problems of the Darwinian theory but also explain other theories of evolution, including intelligent design, the two parties started a fierce argument. The parents claimed that teaching intelligent design amounted to an unconstitutional establishment of religion. The Darwinians called on experts in philosophy, theology, science education and mathematics to make their case. A clear distinction was drawn between admitting that there are some scientific discrepancies in evolutionary theory and teaching intelligent design as established fact.

The continuing saga demonstrates the strange insistence in many communities in the US of clinging desperately to religious dogma that came with the first settlers in the face of political and scientific assaults upon some of its more doubtful aspects.

**A most honourable science**  
 "When we consider the study of plants, as the search for remedies for diseases, we see it in the light of one of the most honourable sciences in the world; in this view, no pains are too great, to have been bestowed upon its acquirement; and in this intent, the principal regard ought to be had to those of our own growth." — Sir John Hill: *The family herbal* (1772).

**Where rights become obligations**  
 "The liberty of the individual must be thus far limited; he must not make himself a nuisance to other people." — John Stuart Mill: *'On liberty'* (1859).

And I quote . . .