

The Flora of Mizen Head. (TEXT ONLY VERSION)

By **Arthur Bennett 2014.**

The author of these notes is a New Zealander with Irish antecedents and family in Carlow who visited Mizen Head in August 2013 and May 2014 to photograph and identify some of the flora you might find there. This is an account of some of the wild flowers you might encounter on a visit to the Mizen Head. Over a hundred plants are listed and illustrated, but the full list of species would be many times that.

The Mizen Head Peninsula like the majority of the world is an altered environment, altered by man. Ice covered all of Great Britain except the south west corner of Ireland during the last ice-age and that last ice-sheet withdrew only about 13,000 years ago. Even that south west corner of Ireland would not have been exactly balmy. It would have been bleak tundra. Marshes, grasslands and eventually forests would have gradually re-established themselves with all their attendant species. All the seeds would have been carried from the south by wind and birds over a long period of time until the whole of Ireland would have been covered by oak/pine/birch/ash forest. Because it was recolonized by this happenstance dispersal of seeds, it would have been much less species-rich than say Spain which escaped the glaciation. Non-native, more southerly species have continued to nudge their way into Ireland to the present day. Then came man with his stone, bronze and finally iron axes to chop down the trees for charcoal and to clear grassland for his cattle until eventually Ireland was completely denuded of its forest cover and the bogs began to grow where once the forest was. The Mizen Head Peninsula could be considered to be one of the most remote and rockiest bits of the British Isles, but even here there is not an acre of it that was not farmed. Neolithic standing stones and tombs litter the peninsula. Tracks, lanes and roadways linked all the houses and settlements. The rocks were picked up from the fields and built into dry stone walls which contained the cattle and the sheep that selectively grazed the plants, enriched the soil with their droppings and pugged it with their heavy feet. As I said, the Mizen Head Peninsula is an altered landscape, but do not assume that it must therefore be entirely unsuitable for plant life. Many species have in fact benefited from

man's activities. Woodland species might have found their natural habitat vastly reduced, but for grassland species and moorland species it was now a land of opportunity. To be grazed was naturally not in a plant's best interest, but you could avoid that by being poisonous like the buttercups, ragworts or water dropworts or by growing briefly in the springtime with virtually no leaves on offer like the orchids. All those lanes and roadsides however were a wonderful habitat, very infrequently grazed and the surfaces of the walls facing the lanes even better, nice free-draining, sun-absorbing stone with millions of nooks and crevices available. If you were a species that could tolerate a little salt and an awful lot of wind then the sea-facing cliff faces offered a unique piece of botanical real estate where you would not suffer competition from the non-salt-tolerant species. There is an assemblage of wild flowers that simply love cliffs by the sea. It doesn't matter whether you are in Cornwall, Wales, Scarborough or Mizen Head, these are the flowers you will find and these are the flowers that are so evocative of holidays by the sea. Top of the list must be Thrift (*Armeria maritima*) [Fig.1] followed by Kidney Vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*), [Fig.2] Sea Campion (*Silene uniflora*) [Fig.3], Sea Plantain (*Plantago maritima*) [Fig.4] and Rock Samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*) [Fig.5]. All plants that grow close to the sea whether it be on cliff faces or on sand dunes or in salt marshes have to be able to tolerate a certain amount of salt. It is not that they need salt, but simply that they can grow where other plants can't and so they can exploit an empty niche. Nature helped to create yet another area of specific opportunity when in 1755 the Great Lisbon Earthquake sent a 4 metre tsunami crashing into the bay at Barley Cove helping to create the sand dunes that are such a feature of this site.

Do You Like Butter?

This was the question traditionally asked by children as they held the shiny yellow flower of a buttercup under your chin. I hope your answer was "yes" for butter is of course much, much better for you than any chemist's concoction called a margarine or a spread, especially butter coming from Irish cows fed on the rich, multi-species grazing of Ireland. The buttercups are a family of flowers that are nastier than they look. They might look like butter, but they don't help produce butter, because they are bitter-tasting and poisonous so the cattle avoid them. Buttercups live in most environments and many of them actually grow in water. They are immensely varied in the sort of leaves they have and some water species have no leaves at all, but they are immensely similar in their flowers. At Mizen Head you will find buttercups

exploiting every environment, the Creeping Buttercup (*Ranunculus repens*) [Fig.6] in garden lawns, the Meadow Buttercup (*Ranunculus acris*) [Fig.7] in hedgerows and the Bulbous Buttercup (*Ranunculus bulbosus*) [Fig.8] on the sand-dunes at Barley Cove. An hour's drive away at Clonakilty you will find a splendid species of Water Crowfoot (*Ranunculus sp. [peltatus?]*) [Fig.9] in the River Argideen. The land buttercups have all yellow flowers whereas the water buttercups have white and yellow flowers, so don't be fooled by the buttercup lookalike with white and yellow flowers that sprawls out of a gateway onto the road half way between Barley Cove and Mizen Head. This imposter is an American plant called Custard and Cream (*Limnanthus douglasii*) [Fig.10].

The Culinary Plants of the Seaside.

Several of our vegetables have been derived from seaside plants such as the Cabbage, the Beetroot and the Radish and the Carrot and their wild progenitors can still be found around the coasts of the British Isles. In the past many more seaside species were considered edible and even delicious. Shakespeare talks about the dangerous trade of gathering Rock Samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*) [Fig.11] which grows all along the walkways at Mizen Head. You will also notice Scurvy Grass (*Cochlearia danica*) [Fig.12] growing by the steps down to the lighthouse. As the name suggests this plant was used as a preventative for scurvy, a disease common among sailors on long sea voyages. Scurvy is essentially vitamin C deficiency and a glass of scurvy grass water was a useful remedy. Apparently this was very bitter and about a hundred times less palatable than a glass of orange juice.

The Spectrum of Wild Flowers.

When you look around, you pretty soon realize that the majority of wild flowers are yellow and the next main group is pinkish purple. It's probably something to do with the wave-lengths of light preferred by butterflies and bees. Night-flowering plants pollinated by moths are often white as are fly-pollinated daytime flowers such as the Wild Angelica (*Angelica sylvestris*) [Fig.13]. Occasionally though at Mizen Head you will catch a glimpse of a flower that is blue, often just one Harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*) [Fig.14] or one Sheep's Bit (*Jasione Montana*) [Fig.15] or perhaps a tiny splash of blue among the grass. This turns out to be the Common Milkwort (*Polygala vulgaris*) [Fig.16] a tiny flower easily overlooked. It has an Irish folk name "na deirfiúríní" meaning "the four sisters" because its flowers can come in blue, mauve, pink or white. This plant is exceeded in its variation in colour only by

the Kidney Vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*) [Fig.17]. The Kidney Vetch is a classic seaside plant occurring in a wide range of colours (yellow, orange, red, purple and creamy white). You just know you are on holiday when you see this flower. This vetch is common alongside the walkways at Mizen Head and down in Barley Cove it dominates a whole water meadow. Along the walkway it tends to be yellow whereas in the meadow it is mostly a creamy colour or pink. Other plants come in a range of colours. The handsome Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*) [Fig.18] generally has new fronds that are pea-green, but a population by the roadside between Barley Cove and Goleen has new fronds that at least start off as orange.

The Doctrine of Signatures.

In the Middle Ages there was a belief in the doctrine of signatures. It was believed that a plant would indicate by its colour, leaf shape or flower shape what medical condition it could be used to treat. Because of the shape of its flower, Kidney Vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*) [Fig.19] was believed to be helpful with kidney problems. Sometimes the plant was efficacious in treating that particular ailment, but it was just as likely to be counter-productive or even poisonous. To discover that the Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*) [Fig.20] could stimulate the heart was fraught with the danger of it killing you. Herb Robert (*Geranium robertianum*) [Fig.21] probably derives its name from the Latin word "ruber" meaning "red", for the stems and old leaves often turn a red colour. Because this colour resembled blood, in the Middle Ages the plant was thought to staunch the flow of blood. Herb Robert is common everywhere in the country. The pictured specimen was growing on a wall by the little harbour at Goleen. Each species has only one Latin name following the Linnaean principle of nomenclature, but the common names in English or Irish can be very revealing. *Oenanthe crocata* does not ring a warning bell, but Hemlock Water Dropwort [Fig.22] suggests very strongly that this flower would not be too wise to eat.

Fronds Made in Heaven.

Walls and Irish ferns were obviously made for each other. Ireland has barely twenty fern species and at least a third of them can be found growing on walls. You will find several of them growing on the walls next to the car park at the Visitor Centre or along the walkways. Keep your eyes open for one oddity there growing in a damp crevice. This is a specimen of the Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*) [Fig.23], Ireland's largest fern. Growing in a damp rocky

crevice you would hardly recognize it. When it was photographed in May, it was barely 30 cm tall whereas it is normally a tall stately plant of two metres. You should also find at least four of the Irish wall spleenworts: Wall Rue (*Asplenium ruta marina*) [Fig.24], Maidenhair Spleenwort (*Asplenium trichomanes*) [Fig.25], Black Spleenwort (*Asplenium adiantum nigrum*) [Fig.26] and Hart's Tongue (*Asplenium scolopendrium*) [Fig.27]. The Hart's Tongue fern is generally small and stunted when growing on a wall, but growing on the ground in richer soil it can be much more impressive [Fig.28]. A typical wall fern which is not a spleenwort is the leathery Rusty-back Fern (*Ceterach officinarum*) [Fig.29]. Ferns are not of course the only plants that colonize walls. There are the saxifrages and the stonecrops whose names signify "rock-breakers" and "stone-growers" such as the English Stonecrop (*Sedum anglicum*) [Fig.30] that you will probably spot. Perhaps the most typical colonist is the Navelwort or Wall Pennywort (*Umbilicus rupestris*) [Fig.31]. This is a striking plant which is rarely found elsewhere than on walls and one wonders where it grew before man constructed stone walls for its convenience. Sometimes the activities of man are very beneficial to wild flowers.

Daisy, Daisy, Give me your Answer Do.

Some flowers are just so common that your eye fails to register them. Two such are the Common Daisy (*Bellis perennis*) [Fig.32] and the Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) [Fig.33]. These are typical compositae, each flower head consisting of a collection of smaller florets. The Ox-Eye Daisy or Marguerite (*Leucanthemum vulgare*) [Fig.34] which brightens up the verges is also white and yellow, but the vast majority of this flower family are yellow and barely distinguishable from the Dandelion. The French call the Dandelion "pissenlit", which means "wet the bed" because of its diuretic properties, but oddly the English "dandelion" comes from French "dents de lion" and the rest of them have names recalling a taxidermist's bag of spare parts: lion's teeth, colt's foot, cat's ear, hawk's beard, hawk's bit, mouse's ear, ox's tongue, sow's thistle. Among others at Mizen Head you should come across Common Cat's Ear (*Hypochaeris radicata*) [Fig.35], Beaked Hawksbeard (*Crepis vesicaria*) [Fig.36] and Coltsfoot (*Tussilago farfara*) [Fig.37]. Actually you won't probably see the coltsfoot flowers because they appear in March before the leaves, but the distinctive horse-shoe shaped leaves are common around the Mizen Head. Don't worry if you can't positively identify a yellow-flower daisy. Even the experts can't. The hawkweeds for example are renowned for having hundreds

of micro-species. Gregor Mendel's competitors were trying to work out the laws of genetic inheritance using hawkweeds. They failed and Mendel was just lucky to have chosen peas for his own experiments.

The Ubiquitous Umbellifers.

These plants are very confusing to the uninitiated. Most of them have fern like feathery leaves and most have domes of white flowers. The common one around the Visitor Centre at Mizen Head in the late summer is Wild Angelica (*Angelica sylvestris*) [Fig.38] with its big bold heads of white flowers. Even earlier in the season it is still recognizable by its glossy green leaves [Fig.39]. The other umbellifer around the walkways is Rock Samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*) [Fig.40] whose fleshy stems were once esteemed as a vegetable comparable to asparagus. By the roadsides will find the occasional Hogweed (*Heracleum sphondylium*) [Fig.41] and Wild Carrot (*Daucus carota*) [Fig.42], but they are nowhere near as common as the Wild Angelica (*Angelica sylvestris*) [Fig. 43]. Cow Parsley (*Anthriscus sylvestris*) [Fig.44] by far the commonest umbellifer elsewhere in Ireland lining every roadside in May, seems strangely absent from the Mizen peninsula. In a field in Goleen we found two white umbellifers growing right next to each other – the small, highly edible Pignut (*Conopodium majus*) [Fig.45] and the extremely poisonous Hemlock Water Dropwort (*Oenanthe crocata*) [Fig.46]. By the sand dunes of Barley Cove you will find a most atypical unbellifer, the blue-flowered, highly ornamental Sea Holly (*Eryngium maritimum*) [Fig.47]. If you do find the flower of Wild Carrot (*Daucus carota*) [Fig.48] look out for one rather odd feature. Sometimes, but not always, you will find in the middle of hundreds of white florets in the umbel or head of flowers, just one little purplish red floret [Fig. 49]. If you still have difficulty with the large white umbellifers, then the place and the time of the year will be a great help. In May lining all the roads from the East of Ireland you will find almost exclusively Cow Parsley. On the Mizen Peninsula in May and June you will only probably find Hogweed occasionally by the roadside and Hemlock Water Dropwort by water. In July and August if you are lucky you might see some Wild Carrot by the roadside but blanketing Mizen Head you will certainly find Wild Angelica.

The Weird but Wonderful and Wildly Beautiful Orchids.

Compare an orchid to for example a foxglove and you will realize why orchids are both fascinating and frustrating. Your foxglove has big obvious leaves most of which are present for most of the year. Foxgloves are found virtually

everywhere and apart from the very occasional white one, all foxgloves are purple. Its seeds although small are quite distinct. Foxgloves are easy to find and very easy to identify. Your average orchid on the other hand has two or three slender leaves that clasp its stem, barely enough to photosynthesize by. During the winter there will be no sign of the plant at all. When it comes up it will be extremely local in its distribution. One particular species might be dark pink, but that won't stop some individuals from being pale pink or deep purple or even white. If you are lucky it will be a distinct species, but often it will be a hybrid between two similar species. Various orchids have interesting, devious and sometimes diabolically clever ways of attracting certain insects. Its seeds are a fine dust that blows away on the wind, thousands of intrepid aerial adventurers with virtually no food-store to maintain them. Many people are only familiar with orchids as tropical garden shop plants, but the wild orchids of Ireland have an unsurpassed delicate beauty. Around Mizen Head in June you will find a *Dactylorhiza* Orchid which is probably the Western Marsh Orchid (*Dactylorhiza occidentalis*) [Fig.50], [Fig.51]. You will see it by the walkway at the Visitor Centre, but you are just as likely to see it on the lawn of your rental cottage in Goleen. At the same time of the year you are likely to see the smaller, paler Heath Spotted Orchid (*Dactylorhiza maculata var ericaoides*) [Fig.52]. A month or so later you might see the Pyramidal orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*) [Fig.53] and in late summer if you are really lucky on the sand dunes of Barley Cove you might spot Autumn Lady's Tresses (*Spiranthes spiralis*) [Fig.54]. By all means photograph orchids and take an interest in them, but by no manner of means whatsoever should you pick them. If you need to identify an Irish orchid, I highly recommend ***Ireland's Wild Orchids – A Field Guide*** by Brendan Sayers and Susan Sex.

Eyes Get in Your Sand.

At least they do if you are wild-flower spotting at Barley Cove. The sand dunes at Barley Cove are a pretty challenging environment for plants. Sand drains too freely, does not hold nutrients and tends to be unstable. There is also a fair amount of salt around. Eventually plants can colonize sand dunes, stabilize the sand and enrich it with nutrients. Their job is made doubly difficult at Barley Cove by the large rabbit population that nibbles anything edible down to the roots. You can guess that many of the plants there that survive rabbit depredations are probably poisonous such as the Bulbous Buttercup (*Ranunculus bulbosus*) [Fig.55] and the Ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*) [Fig.56] and several spurges: Portland Spurge (*Euphorbia portlandica*) [Fig.57] and Sea

Spurge (*Euphorbia paralias*) [Fig.58]. The Germans call the spurge “wolf’s milk” because of the sticky white sap it exudes and for many people this will cause a skin reaction. A third spurge, the larger Irish Spurge (*Euphorbia hyberna*) [Fig. 59] you will find not on the dunes but in damp hedgerows. One can only assume that the abundant pretty little Sea Pansies (*Viola tricolor var curtisii*) [Fig.60] are equally poisonous or distasteful else the bunnies would have disposed of them. The Ragwort is poisonous to cattle and presumably rabbits, but for certain insects it is their staple diet. Invariably on the Ragwort of Barley cove you will find the orange and black striped caterpillars of the Cinnabar Moth [Fig.61]. Their colouration is obviously a warning to potential predators that they are poisonous. It is no use being poisonous if you get eaten by accident. The caterpillars of course use the poisonous compounds in the Ragwort to become poisonous themselves. The adult moths too are poisonous, have warning colouration and unlike most moths, are safe for this reason to fly in daytime. You are also likely to find dozens of little striped snails clustered on the Ragwort plants at Barley Cove. I can only assume that they too have been feeding on Ragwort and that they too are poisonous so they are advertising their presence to birds rather than hiding. In late summer there are other plants that grow on the dunes. You will find the Sea Bindweed (*Calystegia soldanella*) [Fig.62], a much more welcome sight than the Common Bindweed (*Convolvulus arvensis*) [Fig.63] invading your garden at home. The tall, grey-purple spiny Sea Holly (*Eryngium maritimum*) [Fig.64] is designed to withstand the salt and sand, the wind and the rabbits, yet is beautiful enough to actually be sold as a garden plant. And my final sand-loving plant is the pretty little Lady’s Bedstraw (*Galium verum*) [Fig. 65], enough of it in fact to stuff a mattress.

The Champion Flowers of the Mizen.

The origin of the word “campion” is in fact “champion” and I found three species of these flowers around Mizen Head in May and the fourth not too many kilometres away. By the walkway is the pretty little Sea Campion (*Silene uniflora*) [Fig.66] and in the hedgerows its larger but very similar close relative, the Bladder Campion (*Silene alba*) [Fig.67]. The third campion was difficult to avoid seeing, the spectacular Ragged Robin (*Lychnis flos-cuculi*) [Fig.68]. There was a great drift of it by the roadside in Barley Cove. You couldn’t miss it, a great vivid patch of deep pink. The fourth campion, the Red Campion (*Silene dioica*) [Fig.69] I snapped further East, but I have no doubt it will be growing

somewhere on the Mizen Head. There are other flowers that absolutely dominate with splashes of colour. Also in springtime you will see masses of white Triangular-stalked Garlic (*Allium triquetrum*) [Fig.70], (a fairly recent Mediterranean immigrant) and stands of Yellow Flag (*Iris pseudacora*) [Fig.71]. Bird's Foot Trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) [Fig.72] catches the eye with patches of vivid golden yellow. Later in the summer of course whole hillsides are purple and yellow with gorse and heather. Occasionally as you drive along the side roads and lanes you will see clumps of vivid orange or bright deep purple, much too showy to be a wild flower you think, but in both cases you would be wrong. The orange is the garden escape, Montbretia (*Crocasmia x crocosmiiflora*) [Fig.73] and the other is the glorious Purple Loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) [Fig.74]. By the way if you think Alien species are giving us trouble in Ireland, you should see what trouble our Purple Loosestrife is causing in America or our Gorse is causing in New Zealand!

A Prickly Pair and their Smooth Cousin.

All flowers of the pea family have the same shaped flowers. Most are small soft herbs like clover or vetch, some are small trees like laburnum or sophora and a few are woody shrubs, the brooms and gorses. Those of Mizen Head are quite interesting. Growing just over the fence from the car park at the Visitors' Centre you should see a small prostrate shrub smothered in yellow flowers from about May onwards. Technically this is Common Broom (*Cystisus scoparius*) [Fig.75], but this ground hugging coastal form actually deserves its own sub-species name of *Cystisus scoparius maritimus*. There are also two species of Gorse, Common Gorse (*Ulex europaea*) [Fig.76] and Western Gorse (*Ulex gallii*) [Fig.77] found commonly on the Peninsula. Western Gorse has finer leaves and flowers later in the season whereas Common Gorse has thicker leaves and flowers more or less the whole year round, hence the old saying, "When gorse is in flower, kissing is in season." In addition the extremely exposed environment of Mizen Head has produced an exceptionally hardy little variant of Western Gorse, which never grows higher than a few inches and maintains a nice compact little shape suitable for garden rockeries. It has not been accorded sub-specific status, but it has been recorded as a special horticultural variant, *Ulex gallii var Mizen Head* [Fig.78]. It is available in garden shops in Britain and on the Continent, so in a sense it is Mizen Head's flagship species.

Look for the Shamrock at Mizen Head.

If you believe that there is a plant in Ireland called the Shamrock which grows there and nowhere else, then I'm afraid I shall have to disillusion you. The name "shamrock" is derived from Irish "seamróg", which is the diminutive version of the Irish word for clover, "seamair" meaning simply "little clover" or "young clover". "Shamrock" is usually considered to refer to either Lesser Clover (*Trifolium dubium*) [Fig.79], White Clover (*Trifolium repens*) [Fig.80], Black Medick (*Medicago lupulina*) [Fig.81], Red Clover (*Trifolium pratense*) [Fig.82], or even Wood Sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*) [Fig.83]. There is no one "true" species of shamrock, but Lesser Clover (*Trifolium dubium*) is considered to be the shamrock by roughly half of Irish people, and White Clover (*Trifolium repens*) by another third, with the remainder split between Red Clover (*Trifolium pratense*), Black Medick (*Medicago lupulina*), Hop Trefoil (*Trifolium campestre*) [Fig. 84] and Wood Sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*). None of these species are unique to Ireland, and all are common European species, so there is no botanical basis for the widespread belief that the Shamrock is a unique species of plant that only grows in Ireland. All that now being clear, you will be likely to find Shamrocks of one sort or another all over the Mizen Head Peninsula. And while you are on your vain search for the elusive True Shamrock, you are bound to notice the tiny little yellow rose family herbs such as Common Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*) [Fig. 85] and the Silverweed (*Argentina anserina*) [Fig. 86].

Aliens and Monsters.

What is the difference between a weed and a wild flower and a garden flower? The answer of course is nothing. All garden flowers come from wild ancestors. We use the term weed to describe a wild-flower growing in the wrong place, generally our flower-beds, or else to describe a wild flower which is not particularly showy like dock or nettle. All flowers try to travel in order to establish themselves in new territory. This is simply called seed dispersal. Some do it by floating on the weed like a dandelion or a sycamore tree or like the orchids with their incredibly small light seeds. Some have burs that stick to the fur of mammals like the burdock or the teasel and some travel tens or hundreds of kilometres in the guts of birds before being deposited in their droppings. To use man as a dispersal agent is simply another sophisticated yet valid method. The pace and scope of modern travel have simply made this human method of dispersal more obvious in recent years. If a plant has established itself in the wild as a self reproducing species, then it is just another of our wild flowers despite its origin. The Mizen Head like the rest of

Ireland is subject to alien invasion. Some alien species are very plain and some are very pretty, but all of them are relatively new arrivals and some threaten to take over large areas of land to the detriment of native species. The bright red Magellan's Fuchsia (*Fuchsia magellanica*) [Fig.87] from South America is extremely common in the hedgerows and has become an iconic feature of the West of Ireland and most people are happy to see it there. Few too would question the purple Rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*) [Fig.88] from Asia or the orange Montbretia (*Crocsmia x crocosmiiflora*) [Fig.89] from South Africa which add bold splashes of colour to the landscape, despite the fact that both of these plants are considered invasive. All these are common around Mizen Head. But now we come to aliens that all agree are the nasties. If you pay a visit to Lisselan Gardens in Clonakilty, you will find growing more or less wild by the riverbank three species of exotic knotweed: Giant Knotweed (*Fallopia sachalinensis*) [Fig.90], Asian Knotweed (*Persicaria wallichii*) [Fig.91] photographed here at Heywood Gardens in County Laois and Japanese Knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*) [Fig.92]. They possibly all started life as garden plantings for their bold appearance, but now they have started their incursion into the wild. The impact of the first two is so far small, but the third, Japanese Knotweed is galloping away. Half way between Barley Cove and Mizen Head you will notice a farm track on the left side of the road totally covered in the stuff. Stop and have a look at how it totally smothers out any competing species. The Mizen Head peninsula appears as yet to be free of Giant Rhubarb (*Gunnera tinctoria*) [Fig.93], but it is common on the neighbouring Sheep's Head peninsula just a few kilometres away. This enormous and stately South American weed is in fact edible and is very unusual inasmuch as its cells contain a cyanobacterium which aids the plant in fixing nitrogen. In spite of its good points it is a plant that obliterates the landscape allowing nothing to grow in its shade. It proliferates profusely by producing an enormous number of seeds and by reproducing vegetatively as well.

New Zealand lies at the antipodes to Ireland which means that it is the furthest a plant has to travel in order to reach here, but it also means that parts of New Zealand such as the West Coast of the South Island enjoy a climate remarkably similar to the South West of Ireland and hence New Zealand plants do particularly well here. Irish gardens are now full of Cordylines, Flaxes, Coprosmas, Hebes, Griselinias and many others. New Zealand flax (*Phormium tenax*) [Fig.94] is common in gardens around West Cork, but I did not see any wild specimens on the Mizen Head itself, but just wait. It is already thriving along ditches in Galway. Once again this plant is seen as a welcome addition. It is striking in appearance and the birds love it because it produces copious nectar and is designed to be fertilized by birds. Our Irish sparrows and starlings

have cottoned onto this fact and have now become culturally adapted to feed on the nectar, so much so that people are frequently reporting a new bird sighting in Ireland, a sparrow or starling like bird with a bright orange head. New Zealand Flax was a deliberate official import. It was trialled in Ireland as an agricultural crop. Some Kiwi plants, however, slipped under the radar as weeds or seeds in potted plants. In late summer growing by virtually every roadside and riverside in Ireland you will find the big bold willowherbs, Greater Willowherb (*Epilobium hirsutum*) [Fig.95] and Rosebay Willowherb (*Chamerion angustifolium*) [Fig.96], but you might fail to notice the insignificant little New Zealand Willowherb (*Epilobium brunnescens*) [Fig.97], a prostrate little number that has made itself perfectly at home here on damp paths in woods and stony places. Its species name “brunnescens” means “becoming brown” and refers to how its leaves often acquire a brown colour. The word “burnet” apparently has the same origin and comes from the French word “brunette” referring to a flower that could be brownish. On and around Mizen Head you will definitely come across the Burnet Rose (*Rosa spinosissima*) [Fig.98] which is not brown but creamish and you could theoretically find the Salad or Greater Burnet, but the burnet you are most likely to find is in fact the New Zealand alien, the Bidi-Bidi (*Acaena anserinifolia*) [Fig.99] which was growing in our lawn at Goleen.

Where the Mountains and Moor Sweep Down to the Sea.

The Mizen Head Peninsula is a tightly interlocked patchwork of different habitats and eco-systems. Downhill of the walkways at the Visitors' Centre you have coastal cliffs including a few patches of cliff-top grassland, too steep to be grazed. Primroses (*Primula vulgaris*) [Fig.100] grow here in abundance in the springtime. The boundary wall between the walkways and the hillside above is in itself a unique habitat. Above the wall where it is reasonably well drained you have the moor and in patches where the water cannot drain away you have what are in effect mini pieces of bog. The moor is dominated by the three main heather species: Heather or Ling (*Calluna vulgaris*) [Fig.101], Bell Heather (*Erica cinerea*) [Fig.102] and Cross-Leaved Heath (*Erica tetralix*) [Fig.103]. The walkway seems to showcase all these and among them I was able to photograph in August complementary clumps of Wild Thyme (*Thymus polytrichus*) [Fig.104] and Bog Pimpernel (*Anagallis tenella*) [Fig.105]. The bog is characterized by being continuously wet and having very low oxygen content. A few plants such as the Asphodel (*Narthecium ossifragum*) [Fig.106], the Cotton Grass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*) [Fig.107] and the Black Bog Rush

(*Schoenus nigricans*) [Fig.108] seem to survive well enough, but a small specialist group seek to supplement their nitrogen supply by catching insects. These are the Butterwort (*Pinguicula vulgaris*) [Fig.109] and the Sundew (*Drosera rotundifolia*) [Fig.110], which is fairly common but difficult to spot until you get your eye in. The Butterwort traps insects by rolling them up in the margins of their sticky leaves and the Sundew by trapping them with glue-covered hairs on its leaves. This plant got its name because people believed the sticky substance was dew which magically did not disappear with the sun. The insects are then digested and the nitrogen from their bodies goes to sustain the plants. The name of the beautiful Bog Asphodel in Latin means “bone breaker” because people believed that sheep that ate the plant broke their bones. All the plant did however was indicate calcium poor soil, so the sheep which grazed there could not grow strong bones.

Arthur Bennett 2014