

The urban saxifrage - Rue-leaved Saxifrage
Saxifraga tridactylites in Evesham, Worcestershire

Gary Farmer

I first became aware of Rue-leaved Saxifrage *Saxifraga tridactylites* in Worcestershire when I noticed a stripe of white under metal rails in a parking area in Brick Kiln Street, Evesham in May 2023 (01). A small amount of detritus had gathered below the rails, and had been colonised by mosses, just enough to allow seeds to germinate. On closer inspection I was able to identify the species and then noticed it at the base of old walls along the same road. I did not recall seeing it there or anywhere else in the county before so I looked into the species' distribution and history and found that this little Saxifrage has abandoned the countryside for an urban life.



01. Rue-leaved Saxifrage in Evesham 02.05.23. Gary Farmer

Saxifraga roughly translates as 'stonebreaker' (Gledhill 1996) referring to some species' ability to root in niches and crevices of rocks, possibly causing the rock to split. The 17th century herbalist Nicholas Culpeper took this idea and recommended a distillation made from Saxifrage seeds for dissolving kidney stones. Rue-leaved Saxifrage *Saxifraga tridactylites* is able to grow on almost bare rock, and is locally common throughout most of the British Isles on bare dry ground, sand, rocks and walls (Stace 2021). This small, low-growing plant is found on base-rich substrates, often on skeletal soils and is also often found in urban environments on mortared walls, pavements, churchyards, car parks and railway tracks (BSBI Plant Atlas online). Rue-leaved Saxifrage is an annual, often very small but able to grow to 15cm tall if conditions allow (02). It is one of the many 'little-white-jobs' of spring, with flowers made up of five 2-3mm long white petals showing from March to May (03), and its red-tinted stems and leaves are covered in red-tipped glandular hairs (04). The leaves are divided into three or five lobes and are not toothed (05) (Harrap 2013).



02. Rue-leaved Saxifrage can grow to 150mm tall. Evesham 02.05.23. Gary Farmer.



03. Five white petals show from March to May. Evesham 05.05.23. Gary Farmer.



04. The plant is covered with red-tipped glandular hairs. Evesham 05.05.23. Gary Farmer.



05. Its red-tinted leaves are divided into three or five lobes. Evesham 05.05.23. Gary Farmer.

The first recorded occurrence of *S. tridactylites* in Worcestershire was from Powick Bridge in 1834 (Amphlett and Rea 1909) and this little plant has had mixed fortunes since that time, losing ground in semi-natural habitats, but increasing in its abundance in urban areas. It is much reduced in numbers and has contracted in range over the last hundred years in the county (Maskew 2014) but its distribution has increased in many parts of Britain and Ireland since 2000. This has been notable in urban areas where there are several new clusters of 10 km square records, possibly the result of a reduction in sulphur dioxide pollution.

The widespread declines in southern and eastern England last century are probably related to the loss of its semi-natural habitats (BSBI plant Atlas on-line). The switch from semi-natural to man-made habitats is evident in Worcestershire with Maskew (2014) reporting that apart from a limestone ridge near the tower on Bredon Hill, Rue-leaved Saxifrage is now only to be found in man-made habitats in Worcestershire. It usually occurs in small quantities but is occasionally more abundant with a major colony known from Evesham Abbey walls. This site has undergone a major restoration project in recent years with the remnant walls being repaired and capped with concrete or turf, so the delicate saxifrage and other small annuals have disappeared. The Brick Kiln Street population may well be descended from the Abbey colony, but it is fascinating how plants move around, and how on this occasion a little native plant that was being lost from the countryside has been able to exploit human-made habitats and remain a common and widespread species.

That leaves a few questions; Is the Bredon Hill colony of Rue-leaved Saxifrage still extant? Does it occur in any other semi-natural habitats in the county or is it now a truly dependant on urban sites? Will the Evesham Abbey colony return following the restoration work?

Editor's Note (BW)

Rue-leaved Saxifrage has increased considerably in the last few years in and around the town centre of Stourbridge where it grows especially at the base of buildings in cracks in tarmac and on gravelled driveways, often with in company with Common Whitlow-grass *Erophila verna*. Being an early flowerer, it sometimes avoids the attentions of herbicide sprayers and in places, street populations are replenished by rooftop colonies whose seeds fall to the ground below.

References

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Images

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