

Coed Mitchen, Llanerfyl 11/6/21

Organisers: Fran Holland and Jane Hudson

Twenty-four MFS members gathered for a visit to Coed Mitchen in June. It was our first meeting for more than a year due to ongoing Covid restrictions and, with this in mind, the usual format was changed slightly to a morning outing followed by an open-air picnic lunch. It was a treat to be able to get together once again and our spirits were undimmed by grey clouds and a light drizzle.

Coed Mitchen is a 27 acre plantation on an ancient woodland site (PAWS) that was last planted with conifers (Douglas fir and Spruce) some 30-35 years ago. Nick and Beck Burton purchased the wood in 2013 with the long-term aim of restoring the wood to its natural state. A survey was subsequently carried out by the Woodland Trust which identified remaining ancient woodland features and provided a plan to prioritise work needed to begin the re-establishment of native broadleaved species and flora. A good start has been made over the past seven years by careful thinning of the conifers, using a horse to haul out the timber rather than heavy machinery, to preserve the ecosystem on the woodland floor. Native ground flora is already reclaiming the cleared areas and a large number of nest boxes have encouraged Willow tit, Wood warbler, Redstart, Nuthatch and Pied flycatcher (12 pairs this year) to the wood.

On our arrival, Nick gave a short introduction to the woodland and outlined plans for its restoration which, he said, will continue with careful and selective thinning of the conifers, rather than large scale felling. We were then set free to explore, winding our way down to the stream and keeping our eyes peeled for a glimpse of a goshawk – three young were raised in Coed Mitchen in 2020 – but to no avail on this occasion. We were, however, serenaded by a host of wood warblers sitting in the trees overhead.

We found an encouraging variety of flora where light has been allowed to penetrate through to the woodland floor, including Marsh Violet, Opposite Leaved Golden-Saxifrage, Slender St. John's-Wort and Pignut (all ancient woodland indicators); Broad-leaved Helleborine, and Red Currant. Ferns were in abundance, including Scaly Male Fern, Broad Buckler Fern, Male Fern and Polypody. An ancient woodland lichen (*Thelotrema lepadinum*) was also spotted on mature ash trees alongside the stream.

Our route through the wood crossed Nant Melin-y-grug and I was very pleased to see that, on the day of our outing, it was only ankle deep and easily forded. On a previous 'recce' visit after heavy rain it was raging fast and furious, and Sylvia Backhouse and I crossed, with some trepidation on my part, via the alternative high level route over a fallen ash trunk!

Our visit concluded with a picnic lunch in the welcome shelter of a tarpaulin strung between the trees, giving us the opportunity to recap on the morning's foray, catch up with fellow members after the long Covid break, and watch the pied flycatchers busily feeding their young just a few yards away.

Grateful thanks to Nick and Beck for their hospitality. I hope that we will be able to revisit Coed Mitchen in a few years' time to view progress on this fascinating project to transform a bleak 20th century conifer forest into a vibrant, diverse broadleaf woodland.

Postscript. After some detective work, Ruth Dawes identified an alien conifer on the edge of the wood as *Abies procera* (Noble Fir). The clincher was the smell of the crushed needles – like white paint!