

MFS outing to Deerfold Forest, near Wigmore, Herefordshire - August 17th 2017

The inspiration for this outing came from Mark Lawley's talk to MFS on 'Wildlife in the Marches', when he described the botanical forays made by the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club in Herefordshire around 1870. By this time, similar clubs were springing up all over England, although it wasn't until 1947 that Montgomeryshire Field Society was formed, thanks to Janet Macnair's initiative. The idea of the visit was to give us a chance to 'walk in the footsteps of the Woolhope Naturalists (Woolly Nats!)', and to discover that Deerfold Forest remains, as Mark explains in his book, 'an enchanting stretch of country, criss-crossed by quiet tracks and lanes, bosky banks and languid streams, still with much botanical interest in the 21st century'.

As Mark knows the area well, we were delighted that he offered to lead a walk, and to point out many of its botanical specialities. On this occasion, we also invited members of Herefordshire Botanical Society to join us, and it proved a happy mix of folk with shared interests in the flora and fauna of this fascinating part of the world.

Forty-three of us met at Wigmore, an attractive large village about 8 miles south-west of Ludlow, on a sunny morning, an hour earlier than our usual midday start, in order to fit in an extended walk for those who wanted to see all that Mark hoped to show us.

Walking the lane towards Wigmore Castle, once the stronghold of the turbulent Mortimer family, but later dismantled to prevent its use during the Civil War, there were several plants of note, including Hoary Plantain (*Plantago media*) in Wigmore Churchyard. Unfortunately, it had been strimmed very recently, and so lacked its pretty pink flowers, but its flat rosettes of leaves were easily seen. An old hay meadow dotted with anthills was a-buzz with insects, and was a good place to see Burnet-saxifrage (*Pimpinella saxifraga*) - neither a burnet nor a saxifrage, the distinctive almost linear leaflets of its stem leaves differing markedly from the broad toothed leaflets of its lower leaves.

A 'new' plant for many of us was the dainty Vervain (*Verbena officinalis*) on a steep bank beside our path, its stiff stems supporting spikes of pretty lilac flowers.

As we reached the crumbling castle walls, several walks were available, from shorter gentler routes to the longer more strenuous option to be led by Mark. There was plenty of interest around the castle itself, but the majority of folk followed in Mark's footsteps, admiring a good stand of Common Bistort (*Persicaria bistorta*) en route up a narrow climb to the road. Here we stopped to admire the view across Downton Gorge, and Mark explained that the River Teme would have originally flowed south from Wigmore Vale through the gap at Aymestrey, but when ice blocked its route it altered its course, forming the impressive gorge.

As the lane passed through the large woodland area known as Wigmore Rolls, there was plenty to thrill both botanists and lepidopterists. Unusually, a Herb Paris (*Paris quadrifolia*) plant sported a whorl of 5, as opposed to the usual 4 leaves beneath the flower, and several members went slightly 'off-piste' to see the patch of Common Wintergreen (*Pyrola minor*) in the wood. Good specimens of Meadow Saffron (*Colchicum autumnale*) and a few Greater Butterfly Orchids (*Platanthera chlorantha*) were also admired here. One of the highlights of the outing was the Wood White butterfly we watched, its dainty wings dancing in the dappled light amongst the brambles and vetches, and its characteristic 'floppy flight' leaving those of us who hadn't seen it before in no doubt that we'd correctly identified it, even if trying to photograph it proved more tricky.

A little further on, several members were observant enough picked out a Purple Hairstreak butterfly around the canopy of a roadside oak - another treat, as buzzards called and circled, and a raven cronked.

Our picnic lunch, just before the interestingly named Cross of the Tree, was very welcome, and was enjoyed from the high point of a field with lovely views across a wide valley to the hills between Knighton and Presteigne, and beyond. We were then treated to most people's first ever sighting of Asarabacca (*Asarum europaeum*), an alien, and member of the birthwort family. Although not in flower its kidney-shaped leaves clothed the shady banks beside our track. In a nearby field, we were surprised by an impressive patch of Meadow Saffron growing beside one or two Pyrenenan lilies (*Lilium pyrenaicum*).

From here, we made haste to be sure to include a look at the Mistletoe Oak, marked as such on OS maps, as mistletoe is rarely seen on oak. Having found what was probably the said tree, its foliage made any chance of seeing the mistletoe impossible - but it was growing on a nearby ash! Swathes of Red Bartsia (*Odontites vernus*) decorated the grassy banks nearby.

From here, we walked briskly as tea-time was drawing near. Possibly the greatest challenge of the day came on our return to Wigmore, where several group members were searching for one last rare species - the Castle Inn teacup. 33 specimens were expected, but despite detailed investigations only 20 could be located and positively identified.

However, there was an excellent spread of food, and, in a miracle somewhat akin to the loaves and fishes, everyone also received liquid refreshment.

Full species lists will be published in the 2017 Annual report and notes

Sue Southam