

## Montgomeryshire Field Society outing to Foel - 18th May, 2017

31 members met at Foel, about 20 miles west of Welshpool, on a beautifully sunny day. We picnicked in an idyllic spot, amongst the buttercups and daisies, yellow rattle and pignut on a meadow bank beside the Afon Twrch, and it was here that Alwyn Hughes and his friend John Roberts, a local farmer, were introduced to the group. Both live in the area, and are passionate about its history, farming heritage and natural history. They certainly kept a large group of us engrossed as they accompanied us on a walk exploring leafy lanes, small woodlands, unimproved meadows, open heathy hilltops, damp upland and the beautiful Twrch valley. A second group explored the lanes and tracks south of the main road, following a section of the River Banwy to its confluence with the Twrch and beyond.

Botanising along the lanes revealed a good variety of plants, including bitter vetchling, moschatel and climbing corydalis, as well as bird cherry and laburnum in the hedgerows. There was much in the way of bird life too, and redstarts, song thrushes, chiffchaffs, willow warblers, greenfinches and long-tailed tits had all been seen before we'd walked very far. A dipper was a particular highlight, as it flew low along the River Twrch. Interestingly, Alwyn explained that 'twrch' is Welsh for 'mole', and that the river could be said to have 'burrowed' its way downhill in a 'mole-like' fashion, carving the deep valley that we were admiring as we walked.

A delightful bluebell wood belonging to John was full of birdsong, including that of the pied flycatcher as it defended its territory in this lovely spot. Close by, a lake with the intriguing and rather amusing words 'Danger - thin ice - do not skate' displayed on an old sign at its edge, proved an interesting place for plants. Perhaps the most admired was the Water Avens *Geum rivale* at its edge, whereas the New Zealand Pigmyweed *Crassula helmsii* was less well received, being an alien which covered much of the water surface.

As well as botanical surprises, Alwyn had a few others for us - perhaps the most memorable of these being the true story of the double murder in 1906 of butcher John Evans and his wife, of Foel Lwyd, by Roland Llywarch. As we passed, Alwyn showed us an old photo of the funeral procession outside the house, on the spot where we stood. He also pointed out the site of the well where Roland Llywarch allegedly washed his hands of blood after committing the crime. Nearby was an interesting hollow tree, housing a rather incongruous porcelain toilet! Its former use was almost as unlikely, as it was apparently where the farmer kept his donkey.

Climbing up onto higher, wetter ground, we discovered Marsh Pennywort *Hydrocotyle vulgaris* and appreciated John's wonderful knowledge of local plants. The views from the highest point were far-reaching and clear, and Alwyn pointed out the routes which the drovers would have used in days gone by, as we listened to the all too brief but beautiful song of a skylark. Dropping down, we had a few minutes to enjoy the delightful Church of St Tydecho, of mediaeval origins, which stands on a piece of ground above Foel village.

A peregrine falcon was spotted across the valley as the group neared the end of the walk, bringing the total number of birds seen to 46, and resulting in some very happy birdwatchers. But maybe the most impressive achievement of all on the day, was the crossing of the River Banwy stepping stones by Sylvia Backhouse .....on crutches!! She certainly more than deserved her tea, which we all enjoyed at the Cann Office Hotel after the outing.

Thanks were given to Alwyn and John, and we all agreed that they were the perfect guides - wonderful raconteurs, with the ability to share their interests and passion for this fascinating and beautiful area.

Full species lists will be produced for the MFS Annual Report 2017

Sue Southam