

Montgomeryshire Field Society Thursday 28th June 2018

Hurdley Hall, near Churchstoke (SO294943) and Roundton Hill (SO292946)

Hurdley Hall nestles in a bucolic valley close to the borderland hills of Todleth and Roundton. The Hall itself is a restored Grade 2 listed seventeenth century house, and its owners, Simon Cain and Simon Quin had kindly agreed to provide us with not only an introductory few words about their garden, meadows and woodland, but also with our afternoon tea! No wonder that thirty-six Field Society members and a visitor signed up for the outing. We met in Churchstoke, and regrouped to reduce the number of cars, before arriving to a warm welcome and a continuation of the hot, sunny weather which had been persisting for several weeks.

Simon Cain explained that their 2 acre garden, (which opens for the National Garden Scheme), is set within an additional 18 acres of meadows, pastures, and new and ancient woodland with a brook. Mown paths lead to a 5 acre Coronation Meadow, which was bursting with colour and buzzing with insects when I'd 'reccied' on 12th June. From here, it was an easy walk to either Roundton or Todleth Hill, with a choice of routes back.

Most members took advantage of the shade under trees or an umbrella in the delightful garden to enjoy their picnic lunch, before heading off to enjoy all that was on offer. Some stayed within the garden, observing the flora and fauna around the pond and flower beds. Others sought the shade of the woodland and stream area, from where meandering paths brought them up into the wildflower meadows. It was amazing to see the difference a couple of weeks of sunshine can make to the flora in a meadow - we'd picked mid-June for this trip in order to try and catch the flowers at their peak..... but since my recent visit the colours had been bleached out, and the flowers were largely over! It took rather more detective work to identify plants by their seed-heads, but one that was relatively straightforward was the Goatsbeard *Tragopogon pratensis* that was spotted in the far field. Yellow rattle, red clover, buttercups and knapweed were also easy to pick out, and a comprehensive list was made which included the less obvious species too. Simon was keen to discover whether the plant he suspected was Rough Hawksbeard *Crepis biennis* was in fact this species, as it is rare in Montgomeryshire, and only found in one site, the MWT Ty Brith reserve. Kate Thorne was able to confirm that his identification skills were indeed correct, and this was a surprising find, until it was realised that seed which had been scattered over the Coronation Meadow when it was sown a few years ago came from Ty Brith! Despite the relative lack of colour from flowers, butterflies including gatekeeper, common blue, meadow brown and even an unexpected painted lady jewelled the area amongst the grasses and seed heads

The meadow path wanders towards Roundton Hill National Nature Reserve, designated as such because of its botanical diversity. Its wealth of wild flowers, fine-leaved grasses, mosses and lichens thrive on the site, because it has never been ploughed, seeded with modern grass varieties, or artificially fertilised. From the top of Roundton Hill it's easy to see why an Iron Age hillfort was once sited here - the vantage point offers great viewing across the surrounding countryside, and with the help of the slate topograph on the summit it is possible to pick out many of the distant hills, including Cadair Idris, the Dolfor Hills, the Wrekin and even Snowdon. In the past, miners worked the hill for lead and barytes, but today, the geological and industrial landscapes of Roundton Hill have created a variety of habitats where specialist plants have taken hold, and lesser horseshoe bats are protected in roosts within the old mine adits. Several people explored the paths on and around the hill, which is Open Access land. Some completed the steep climb to the summit, and agreed that the views were well worth the effort, although on this occasion the Wall butterflies which I'd seen for the first time ever dancing over the hilltop on my 'reccying' trip were not to be seen. There were plenty of small heaths enjoying the sunshine though, and several birds, including red kite, buzzard, redstarts, stonechat and linnet were also recorded.

Other folk discovered the path onto Todleth Hill, from where once more the views were spectacular. Unfortunately the damp area which may have been botanically interesting had virtually dried up, but there were plenty of the commoner plants associated with heathland and upland grassland to be found, and several butterflies and other invertebrates too, including, a little surprisingly perhaps, blue-tailed damselfly.

By the time some of us returned at the appointed time for tea, others were already looking very relaxed and comfortable, and had enjoyed the wonderful hospitality given by the two Simons, who had made sure they were all fully hydrated with cups of tea throughout much of the afternoon! On top of that, they provided a phenomenally good tea, the likes of which we are very unlikely to see again on a similar excursion! They were certainly exceptional hosts, and after giving them heartfelt thanks we left, feeling happy in the knowledge that the house, garden, meadows, woodland, and visitors, are all in such very good hands.

Sue Southam