

Minera Quarry 12/7/22

Organised by Sue & Steve Southam, Ruth Dawes, Lizzie Beare and Liz Wilson

In July the temperatures were unusually high (climate change with a vengeance) and some members were deterred by the forecast heat. The 23 who attended came armed with sunhats and umbrellas for shade. We gathered to hear an introduction to the site given by Simon Mills, a volunteer with North Wales Wildlife Trust who is passionate about Minera Quarry. The area has probably been mined since Roman times but has a recorded industrial history spanning over 400 years, originally mined for its lead and later quarried for valuable limestone until 1992. As quarrying advanced over the site nature reclaimed abandoned workings so the reserve now comprises areas at different stages of re-colonisation from mature woodland to bare rock. From the 1990s until 2017, when the NWWT purchased the site, nature had free rein and the variety of limestone loving plants is truly breathtaking.

As we set off soon after 10am Simon pointed out across the stream the lime kilns where several species of bats live: Natterer's, Whiskered, Brown Long-eared, Daubenton's and more. As we entered the open quarry floor we were staggered by the sheer numbers of rare plants on show, Pale Toadflax, Blue Fleabane, Yellow-wort and Carlina Thistle and above all the orchids. Pyramidal Orchids were at their absolute best in this area where the tailings from quarrying, crushing, grinding and sorting had been spread over a water retaining rock base. The first Fragrant Orchid seen prompted Simon to explain how the Marsh Fragrant-orchid is currently the subject of investigation into its DNA, with the services of a PhD student Ethan Watts concerned with the size and number of bracteoidal leaves up the stem. Whatever its final classification it is certainly delightfully fragrant. We moved higher over ground dotted with Birdsfoot Trefoil, Eyebright and Pearlwort to an area where the Fragrant Orchids grew profusely and so tall that one only had to bend to catch their scent. In a small sheltered valley were found Bee Orchids. Upwards again brought us to a bare rocky expanse where Autumn Gentian in their thousands were just beginning to flower and a fine Musk or Nodding Thistle was admired. We were now high up on the quarry's lip where a rift in the face of the wall was fenced off with some heavy duty metal work. Simon told us it was called Rhino's leap given its name because of an odd shaped rock looking like a rhino horn.

Minera is open at all times and is well visited by the general public as well as botanists, lepidopterists, bat enthusiasts, ornithologists, industrial archaeologists and even cavers, but some areas are fenced off and padlocked due to the danger of falling rocks. However we had asked our guide if we might see the fossil formations. Gates were opened for us. It was here that the sharp eyes of Jane Phillips caught a fleeting glimpse of a hare dashing away into the depth of the quarry. Steve Southam also caught a glimpse of the Mountain (or Bilberry) Bumblebee's orange tail but it flew off before it could be photographed and we had to be satisfied with admiring the Biting Stonecrop thriving here and the fossils laid bare by a recent rock fall. Later at lunch amongst some high rocks we scanned every patch of thyme looking again for this smart little bumblebee, but no luck. From here we descended through waves of Quaking Grass and Glaucous Sedge where in a more open patch flowered a pure white Fragrant Orchid. A little further on we found the Hairy Rock-cress with "everything pointing to heaven" beside the track and as the path narrowed came upon a few fine Frog Orchids in the grassy vegetation alongside. On the top of a bank more very small 'Frogs' were seen. A short diversion took us to a little pond with a fossil in a rock looking like a petrified mooring ring, but thought to be the burrow of a marine Annelid/worm. By now we were beginning to

think about a cup of tea, but Simon had more to show us. We crossed the stream and passed a patch of Common Spotted Orchids and emerged onto the track which led us down to the Hoffman Kiln built as an oval with its numerous tunnel-like entrances furnished with strong screens to prevent entrance by humans but access for bats. Nature has truly taken over here with mature trees growing in front of some entrances and the whole structure covered in soil and vegetation. Restoration advocates and Bat Protectionists argue about what should be done. Luckily we have the restored Hoffman Kiln at Llanymynech to see what it would have been like. Simon also showed us a low entrance in the rock face which a caver had investigated and found a huge underground lake into which he dived, found an exit underwater and emerged in a different area of Minera Quarry. It is suitably secured!! In one of the last kiln arches before crossing the bridge over the stream into the car park we spotted the Brittle Bladder Fern hanging from the brickwork.

What a marvellous day, the threatened heat didn't materialise, in fact it was overcast but warm and the umbrellas came in useful once or twice for protection from a few spots of rain, rather than sun. Simon and his colleague Geoff were brilliant guides, both passionate and full of information and very patient with the stragglers. It is hard to imagine from this inadequate report the sheer numbers of orchids on the site in July. Almost everywhere you look or tread there are orchids. I haven't even mentioned the butterflies or insects, but Sue and Richard Swindells sent a list of birds seen or heard: Stock Dove, Wood Pigeon, Jay, Magpie, Jackdaw, Carrion Crow, Raven, Kestrel, Great-spotted Woodpecker, Nuthatch, Chiffchaff, Wren, Robin, Long-tailed Tit, Song Thrush, Goldcrest and Linnet.

Tea was taken at The Golden Lion in Coedpoeth, the first time we have had "Tea in a Box" provided by Top Nosh. And very good it was too. Report Lizzie Beare