

Fungus Foray – Pontrobert 22/10/2023

Organisers: Sue and Steve Southam

Forty eight hours before the 2023 fungus foray, storm Babet was battering the county and the country. She swelled the rivers and turned roads into torrents, washing away footpaths and flattening the undergrowth.

On the day, however we enjoyed a window of fine weather sandwiched between very unsettled spells. So it was that 28 members managed to travel to Pontrobert (some having to follow diversions where roads were flooded) and gather by the bridge for lunch and a briefing. The first area of study was the churchyard of St. John the Evangelist, located close to the bridge and bordered by the River Vyrnwy.

We were delighted that MFS member, Les Hughes, was able to join us again to share his specialist identification skills as a mycologist. As he pointed out, to date 2023 had not been very productive on the fungus front, so we were delighted to spot Golden Spindles almost immediately we entered the well-maintained churchyard. Our attention was then quickly drawn to something completely different - a slow-worm, the only legless lizard found in Britain, and probably nearing its hibernation period.

Les was surrounded by a large group of members eager to discover the names of their various fungal finds. Although he professed to be more confident with woodland species, his identification of the grassland species here was impressive and much appreciated by us all. In all, more than 35 species were identified, and thanks to Les's knowledge we learned not only their names, but also some interesting facts and features relating to them. Waxcaps were probably the most numerous of the grassland fungi, with 10 species found, ranging in colour from white to grey, yellow, orange and red. As waxcaps are in decline, this was encouraging, and shows the value of the unfertilised and generally undisturbed grasslands found in many sensitively-managed churchyards. Many of the fungi here had fascinating names - including various Dapperlings, Bonnets, Funnels and Clubs. The latter were represented by the rather weird- looking Pipe Club, looking rather like ballet- dancing worms, and the Scarlet Caterpillar Club, which is parasitic on underground moth and butterfly larvae, from which it emerges at this time of year. Coral fungi were also fruiting, with many clumps of buff-coloured Upright Coral visible beneath the conifers at the edges of the churchyard, as well as yellow Meadow Coral emerging in the mown grass. A small but eye-catching patch of the rarely encountered Violet Coral was one of the 'specials' of the day, as there are very few records of this for Montgomeryshire, but once home, Les identified a small fungus which he'd collected, and it was a county first - the interestingly named Charred Knight. In fact, he also collected another first for the county, *Leucoagaricus nymphaeum*, so an exciting and productive day.

From here, members followed one of two suggested walks. A short walk followed Glyndwr's Way to the west of the River Vyrnwy, and led to a small mixed wood, where a group of Shaggy Ink-caps (*Coprinus comatus*) were spotted on the woodland edge. The views across to Allt Dolanog and beyond were beautiful in the afternoon light, before drizzle set in.

A longer walk downstream of the bridge ran close to the swollen river past two old mills, the first a corn mill and the second a forge. At one point, the path veered left and steeply down to a lower level route along the riverbank. This spot was dubbed the 'slope on a rope' as a rope had been attached to a tree by Steve, who was on hand to assist people in lowering themselves carefully down the muddy bank, hanging on to the rope to slow their descent! The river was in full flow, but its level had dropped since Friday, as the 'watermark' showed. However, it was still too high to give us much chance of seeing dipper or kingfisher, and even mallard were absent, although a grey wagtail and a cormorant were spotted. Plants seen in the damp woodland included Great Wood-rush *Luzula sylvatica* and extensive patches of the Pick-a-back Plant *Tolmiea menziesii*, with its strange arrangement of new leaves appearing to emerge from the centres of more mature leaves.

As the weather was deteriorating, with heavy drizzle towards the end of the outing, we were glad to make for Meifod, where the ladies of the W.I served an excellent tea at the Village Hall. There was a chance for everyone to have a closer look at a display of the fungi brought in by Les and other members, and Sue and Richard Swindells showed us two Cherry Galls on an oak leaf that they'd found, resembling miniature apples. It was agreed that this had been a productive and thoroughly enjoyable excursion, the last for 2023, and Les was thanked for all his help and enthusiasm.

Postscript: Once home, we discovered that the Cherry Gall is formed by the Cherry Gall wasp, *cynips quercusfolii*, a tiny gall wasp that causes the galls on the undersides of oak leaves. The grub remains in the gall after leaf-fall, emerging as an adult wasp in winter. Interestingly, this asexual generation will lay its eggs on the oak tree trunk, which eventually mature to the sexual generation, and it is this generation which then mates and produces the galls. Cutting one of the galls in half, and expecting to find a grub, I was rather surprised to see a tiny wasp emerge!

Report by Sue and Steve Southam