

## The Ciliau Farm Project, Llandeilo Graban, nr Builth Wells 22/4/2023

Organisers: Julie Pearce, Jane Philips, Helen Siddons, Lizzie Beare

The first MFS outing of 2023 to The Ciliau Farm Project was organised by Julie Pearce who had visited there through other interests of hers and she felt members should definitely have the opportunity of seeing this remarkable place. The Ciliau has been farmed in the traditional way for hundreds of years and this method is being continued with the addition of organic status. The 200 acre hill farm is divided into 30 small fields none of which has been ploughed and would in the past have received little artificial fertilizer, perhaps some lime and certainly none in the last 20 years. Low density grazing by cattle and horses provides natural fertilizer and supports the diversity of meadow grassland and associated invertebrates and fungi. The project aims to develop the resilience of the farmland biodiversity through increasing habitat to create a wildlife corridor from the banks of the River Wye to Garth.

Our visit started with a path down through a wooded strip full of Bluebells and Primroses to the river meadow bordering the Wye. Here the Cuckooflowers were so numerous it was like a haze of the palest pink over most of the meadow. On the banks of the Wye was a large colony of Meadow Saxifrage, just beginning to flower, with the promise of many more to come. Amongst them were Great Wood-rush leaves and further up the bank Common Dog Violets. Right on the edge of the river are some large trees with much of their root structure exposed from regular inundation. These help to catch debris, provide sanctuary for fish and reduce flooding in times of high water level. On rocky strata in the river were Chives which are regularly submerged but persist nonetheless. In the river meadow we found Glaucous Sedge with Toothwort and Goldilocks Buttercup on the edge of the wood, pointed out by Ray Woods, who accompanied us on our visit. Ray Woods was a mine of information on virtually every subject that came up throughout the entire day.

Leaving this meadow we crossed under the road which uses the old railway line as its route and walked into the large field below the Farmhouse. There are some fine old veteran trees here, (Ciliau has around 60) and at the other end of the scale we saw masses of the delightful yellow 'flames' of Spring Sedge amongst the grassland. Photographs were taken of a number of Oil Beetles. Either Black or Violet amongst them a male with distinctive kinked antennae. They have an extraordinary life cycle dependent on solitary bees. Annual Nettle was pointed out, a new one for most of us. Up at the farmhouse, in the rocky yard where the grass is kept cropped by a few geese, we had our picnic lunch, attended by the three free-roaming horses who politely begged for apple cores. Roger Capps, owner and resident, generously allowed us to have a look inside the sixteenth century open hall house with its massive fireplaces and original painted panel wall; plus permission to roam freely along the tracks and through the fields. Beside the house is an orchard with elderly fruit trees in full blossom with a couple beehives, one of European bees and one of Welsh Black Bees.

The Ciliau has four SSSIs one of which is the unspoilt Rhos pasture. It was too early to search for the Petty Whin, Dyer's Greenweed and Whorled Caraway which have been recorded here but we saw Marsh Marigolds, Marsh Valerian, Lesser Spearwort and Water Horsetail. The views from the top of the farm were splendid. Returning downhill Ivy-leaved Crowfoot was spotted in the mud, two Red Kites displayed overhead, a Song Thrush sang in the hedge, and we came across a huge oak which had come down in a storm. Ray said he had counted the rings and reckoned it was 360 years old. Ruth found Moschatel, aka Town Hall Clock, in the track side with a flower-like rust on it *Puccinia albescens*. So much to observe and not enough time. We had tea at the newly opened Erwood Station Cafe where Roger joined us in his vintage Sigma and Ray in his hand-spun and hand-knitted patchwork sweater with individual squares dyed in colours derived from lichen. A brilliant day illustrating how preserving diversity benefits all wildlife and allows Nature to thrive.

Report by Lizzie Beare