

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

Recording all plants growing wild in Somerset, not just the rarities



Meeting Report



Simon demonstrates an alternative use for wallpaper. Photo: GEL

Sunday 18th April 2021 at Quants SSSI

Leader: Simon Leach

Report: Simon Leach

It's never wise to start an account of a day's botanising with an apology. But these were exceptional circumstances in that (due to COVID-19 regulations) our first field meeting of the year had to be restricted to just six people, meaning that some members who were hoping to attend unfortunately had to miss out. So this apology is directed squarely at those who couldn't be with us.

Our aim, on a day of unbroken sunshine and barely a breath of wind, was first of all to visit the Butterfly Conservation reserve in the eastern half of Quants SSSI. We last visited this area as a group five years ago as part of the SRPG/BSBI Dandelion Workshop

led by John Richards; ten years ago, we had a joint meeting here with SANHS when the highlight for many wasn't a plant at all but a butterfly, a beautiful just-emerged Duke of Burgundy (*Hamearis lucina*). We noted that it was actually five years ago *to the day* since that flying visit to check out the dandelions; and what a day it was, too, with 16 species recorded in less than an hour including two new to Somerset, Bluish Dandelion (*Taraxacum melanthoides*) and Retz's Dandelion (*T. retzii*). Three of our party (Graham, Alastair, and Simon) had been here on that occasion.

Today, though, we would make a zigzag traverse of the reserve, then take the track/footpath skirting the northern edge of an SWT reserve (also called 'Quants'), through Buckland Wood to a second SWT reserve at Ruggin. The whole of the area, including

all three reserves, lies within Quants SSSI, which is also a 'Special Area for Conservation' (SAC)—this being a European designation conferred on the site due to the (former?) presence of Marsh Fritillaries (*Euphydryas aurinia*).

This was to be the first 'official' SRPG field meeting since the beginning of the pandemic more than a year ago; in fact, our first since the New Year Hunt in Taunton at the start of 2020. The highlight of the day was surely just the pleasure to be had from being out as a *group* again rather than on one's own or maybe with one or two others. In the year and a bit since our last meeting our leader had clearly forgotten the pace at which a day's botanising progresses: the two to three hour walk he'd planned could easily have taken us seven hours had we let it. As it was, we just about made it round in five, the walk back from the meadows at Ruggin being done without stopping, although still at a speed that allowed us to make a few useful records along the way.

The great thing about botanising in a group is that each person tends to be attuned to slightly different things; so, if you're part of a group, you end up seeing/being shown far more than if you'd been there on your own. Graham's eye for hybrids, for instance, turned up *Rumex x dufftii* (the hybrid between *R. obtusifolius* and *R. sanguineus*). He sees this a lot in the west of VC5, while the rest of us don't seem to see it at all. More obviously, amongst the Cowslips (*Primula veris*) we spotted several clumps of 'False Oxlip' (*Primula x polyantha*), plus some long-pedicelled Primroses (*P. vulgaris*) that looked as if they could have been back-crosses between the hybrid and Primrose 'proper'. Graham also had us peering closely at violets, with the possibility that some of what we were calling Early Dog-violet (*V. reichenbachiana*) could have been *Viola x bavarica*, the hybrid between 'Early Dog' and 'Common Dog' (*Viola riviniana*). If confirmed, this would be a third record for VC5 of this obviously much-overlooked taxon.

Cath's determination not to be beaten by grasses led to a number of species being recorded that the rest of us would quite happily have ignored until later in the year. She and Chris shared clipboard duties, filling in cards for the two monads we visited—mainly ST1817, plus the south-east corner of ST1818. And it was in ST1818, in the largest and northern-most of Ruggin's meadows that we turned up one of the treats of the day: a lovely colony of

Adder's-tongue (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*). The plants were tiny, at least a hundred of them scattered across about 10 square metres of tightly-grazed turf, plus a few outliers about 20 metres away. Chris, sadly, had left us by then (it was already three o'clock), but Linda noted the spot and intends to return with her one day soon.



Adder's-tongue (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*). Photo: CM

One or two of us, as you might surmise, had our heads turned by dandelions, especially in the meadows at Ruggin where these were almost the only things in flower. There's an old (1985) record from this area of a dandelion with black-spotted leaves called *Taraxacum drucei*. But then in 2007 another species, also with black-spotted leaves, was described by Len Margetts, which he called *T. ronae* (touchingly named in honour of his wife, Rona). Ruggin's *T. drucei* was re-determined by Len as *T. ronae*, presumably from a pressed specimen as, frustratingly, it hasn't been seen there since the original record in 1985. So we kept an eye out, just in case. We didn't see it, sadly, but we *did* come across one or two other nice things that we could put a name to, including lots of Nordstedt's Dandelion (*T. nordstedtii*) with its puce-coloured ligule stripes, and in the top meadow a good population of (the only recently described) *T. amicomum*, our very own 'Dandelion of Friends'. The leaf-shape of *T. amicomum* is particularly distinctive, with a lovely elongate terminal lobe.

The other main botanical highlight was probably a little patch of Marsh Valerian (*Valeriana dioica*) beside the (rather wet) footpath through Buckland Wood.

This turned out to be a new monad record and the first record for the tetrad since before 2000. Marsh Valerian is a declining species in England and listed as 'Near Threatened' on the England Red List. We saw a range of other widespread but declining 'Near Threatened' species, including Wild Strawberry (*Fragaria vesca*), Common Rockrose (*Helianthemum nummularium*) - originally introduced onto the

Butterfly Conservation reserve, Wood Sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*) - one of our spring targets this year, Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*), Sanicle (*Sanicula europaea*), Ragged-Robin (*Silene flos-cuculi*) and Devil's-bit Scabious (*Succisa pratensis*). It is always a surprise to discover that we have to consider these as 'important species', and that they're on our Rare Plant Register too! But not as surprising, perhaps, as the Lesser Spearwort (*Ranunculus flammula*) we saw, which is listed as 'Vulnerable' in England, having suffered an estimated >30% decline since the middle of the last century. We are lucky to still have lots of it in Somerset.



Marsh Valerian (*Valeriana dioica*). Photo: GEL

Just as we were about to finish, we spotted a lovely colony of Early Purple-orchids (*Orchis mascula*), growing in full sunshine by the hedge near the entrance to the reserve. For some of us, these were our first-flowering 'Early Purples' of 2021. In all, we managed to record about 160 species in our main square, ST1817, out of a monad total that stands in the region of 350. Not bad for so early in the season, and we were pleased to note that our list did contain at least half a dozen taxa not previously recorded in the area, e.g., Graham's *Rumex x dufftii* and Marsh Valerian. Also new to ST1817, we later discovered, was Moschatel (*Adoxa moschatellina*), which—like Wood Sorrel and Wood Anemone (*Anemone nemorosa*), which we also saw — is another of our springtime target species. Less desirably, the 'newbies' included a patch of Winter Heliotrope (*Petasites fragrans*), growing vigorously beside the path through Buckland Wood not a million miles away from the Marsh Valerian. One to keep an eye on, perhaps.



Socially-distanced presentation of Dandelion Cup to Graham Lavender. Photo: CM

At the start of the day, Graham was presented with the 'Dandelion Cup' for 2020. He would normally have received this award at one of our winter indoor meetings, but this time it had to be on a lane verge in the Blackdowns! The Cup, instituted in 2017, is awarded each year to the SRPG member making the greatest contribution to our knowledge of the Somerset *Taraxacum* flora. Graham had collected several species new to Somerset in the spring of 2020, including the first record **in Britain** of *T. inclinorum*, a recently described taxon previously considered to be an Irish endemic. He has now won this award twice in four years. It makes you wonder why the rest of us even bother!