

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report

Saturday 7th May 2022, Cross Quarry, Axbridge (VC6)

Leaders: Ellen McDouall & Andrew Robinson

Report: Andrew Robinson

There's just something about an old quarry. On a warm, dry May morning, 12 members gathered for a survey of Cross Quarry near Axbridge. Unfortunately, Liz McDonnell was unable to lead the group as advertised, but Ellen McDouall had kindly agreed to be a co-leader, much to my relief. After a slight delay in assembling (blame Ellen's alarm clock!), we set off up the path from Cross village.

This would be a first visit to this site for several of us. Although it lies within the Crook Peak to Shute Shelve Hill SSSI, and The Mendip Limestone Grasslands SAC, the small quarry is tucked away at the bottom of a steep slope, completely invisible to the many walkers who use the West Mendip Way along the ridgeline throughout the year. The hard limestone quarried here seems to have been used mainly for local housing and as roadstone, and extraction had finished by the early twentieth century, leaving a quiet oasis populated only by wary rabbits and the occasional goat.

Ellen quickly took charge of a small group of less experienced members, while the rest of us scattered and took up the 'botanical position' – on hands and knees, with noses to the ground and cursing the widespread Picnic Thistle (*Cirsium acaule*)! Ann Burman had bravely volunteered to fill in a recording card, and she was soon being bombarded from all directions, as both botanical and English species names echoed off the quarry walls. The very short turf and bare ground of the quarry floor provided habitat for an intricate mosaic of species, many of them extremely small, including such delights as Early Forget-me-not (*Myosotis ramosissima*), Spring Sedge (*Carex caryophylla*), Western Eyebright (*Euphrasia tetraquetra*), and Dropwort (*Filipendula vulgaris*). Some ash left by a small fire set by the local youth had been colonised by several patches of Sea Stork's-bill

(*Erodium maritimum*) with the leaves distinctly different in shape and colour to the Common Stork's-bill (*E. cicutarium*) flowering occasionally in the surrounding sward.



Sea Stork's-bill (*Erodium maritimum*) Photo © Georgina Shuckburgh

Such a small-scale habitat required close inspection, and often more species were found by staying in one spot than by moving around. Pam Millman and Ann Burman provided a perfect demonstration of this when they sat down to examine a rosette of a Pyramidal Orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*). A few centimetres away was a smaller rosette – Autumn Lady's-tresses (*Spiranthes spiralis*). As others walked across to check their finds, another rosette was found nearby, this time a rather chewed Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*). The site also provided the opportunity to compare very similar species in close proximity. The different sizes and colours of the flowers of Lesser Trefoil (*Trifolium dubium*), Slender Trefoil (*T. micranthum*), Hop Trefoil (*T. campestre*), and Black Medick (*Medicago lupulina*), were easy to appreciate when the species were all together in an area of a few square metres.

A recce trip a fortnight earlier had found large clumps of Spring Cinquefoil (*Potentilla verna*) beautifully in flower on the quarry face, but the continuing drought meant that we only saw a handful of remaining flowers on this visit. The yellow flowers now visible in the same location were mainly Common Rock-rose (*Helianthemum nummularium*). The dry conditions

had also ensured that many of the small annuals were well over, with species such as Little Mouse-ear (*Cerastium semidecandrum*) reduced to tiny bleached husks. Even so, we sat down to lunch well satisfied with the mornings haul, despite having moved less than seventy metres from the quarry entrance.



A well-earned lunch in the quarry. Photo © Georgina Shuckburgh

A couple of members had to leave early, and a couple more chose to explore the even smaller western quarry, so it was a reduced group that headed out after lunch up the steep slopes onto the Cross Plain ridge. The environment here was even more extreme, with very shallow stony soils and bare rock completely exposed to the sun and wind. The occasional patches of Common Cudweed (*Filago germanica*) were so grey and shrivelled that they looked more like a crispy *Cladonia* than vascular plants, but we climbed gamely on. The hardy few who reached the summit of the ridge were rewarded with some nice flowering clumps of Honewort (*Trinia glauca*), together with a pair of Wall Brown (*Lasiommata megra*) butterflies, and spectacular views to the south and west.



Honewort (*Trinia glauca*) on Cross Plain. Photo © Georgina Shuckburgh

Returning down the slope, the hunt was on for one of the main targets of the day - the West Mendip speciality Somerset Hair-grass (*Koeleria vallesiana*).

Ellen was ruthless in her dismissal of several potential candidates, but eventually she accepted some plants with the characteristic felted stem and root systems, on a rock outcrop almost exactly where Liz had said they would be. Back down in the quarry, we were reunited with the last remaining 'west quarryer', who was able to show us other interesting species including Common Gromwell (*Lithospermum officinale*) and Duke of Argyll's Teaplant (*Lycium barbarum*) in the scrubby margins, and Pale Flax (*Linum bienne*) in the adjacent field.

Perfect weather and the variety of species had made for a very satisfactory day, despite the almost unprecedented absence of a Vice-County Recorder! Thanks are due to Liz for organising the visit, and especially to Ellen for stepping up to lead it. Cross Quarry and the adjacent ridge are Open Access Land, and well worth a visit throughout the spring and summer, as the brief flowering seasons of many species ensure that there is always something different to see.