

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report

Saturday 24th June 2023, Wellington Monument and Wellington Castle Fields (VC5)

Leaders and Report: Linda Everton and Karen Turvey

The meeting was prompted by a desire to re-find Moonwort (*Botrychium lunaria*) in the grassland just south of the Monument, its last recorded site on the Blackdown Hills. As reported in the Atlas Flora, just six specimens were found here in 1993, it otherwise having been unseen at the site since 1896.

Eleven of us met at the National Trust car park on what turned out to be a very hot day with local temperatures reaching 28°C. We were a good mix of old and young, experts, learners, and budding hat designers.



Sunhats essential. Photo © Anna Mullet

The Monument, which is a recently restored landmark on the edge of the Blackdown Hills, was built as a tribute to the Duke of Wellington for his victory at Waterloo in 1815. The original proposal was to create a triangular pillar supported on a plinth and surmounted by a massive cast iron statue of the Duke, but the statue was never commissioned, and the original plan was transformed into what is now the tallest 3-sided obelisk in the world.

Walking up through the relative cool of the tree-lined approach to the Monument we soon came into the open area in front of the Monument which was our key area of search for the elusive Moonwort. After stopping to admire the always popular Common Spotted-orchids (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*) which are abundant at the site, we formed a “police type” line to search for the tiny fern. Guided by a map produced by those who had seen it before we focussed on the area to the right (east) of the central grassy path leading to the Monument. Despite the efforts of 11 pairs of eyes criss-crossing the search area we were unsuccessful in finding the target species.



The search for Moonwort (*Botrychium lunaria*). Photo © Steve Parker

Another species of interest previously recorded from the Monument site is Common Dodder (*Cuscuta epithymum*), something of a rarity within the Somerset part of the Blackdowns and 'Vulnerable' on the GB and England Red Lists. The most recent record here was from 2004 (albeit at a slightly questionable grid reference) and was believed to be slightly west of the Moonwort site. The group split into two smaller groups so that some could search for the Dodder whilst others walked down the hill to start recording within the Somerset Wildlife Trust's Castle Fields reserve.

The group who remained at the top continued to record species within the grassland and then into the edge of the wooded area, making their way towards where the Dodder had previously been seen. It was noted that many of the areas between the scattered trees on the edge of the woodland which had previously been open had become dominated by Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) or areas of Bramble (*Rubus fruticosus agg.*). This was the case for the area where the Dodder had been recorded and, despite a further search, we could find no sign of it. We had been joined on the day by the National Trust ranger for the Blackdowns and discussions were had about how the management of the area could be changed to increase the species diversity amongst the trees.

Despite being unsuccessful with our target species the Monument site still supports some species-rich areas. Species from the England 'Near Threatened' list found within the mosaic of habitats included Quaking-grass (*Briza media*), Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), Bell Heather (*Erica cinerea*), Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*) and Devil's-bit Scabious (*Succisa pratensis*).

Meanwhile the second group moved down the steep and somewhat uneven steps into SWT's Castle Fields reserve. Castle Fields is approximately 11 hectares on the north-facing slope of the Blackdowns Hills. The site, which is managed mainly through grazing cattle, is predominantly unimproved grassland with areas of woodland, some bracken and scrub. Due to a spring line crossing the site some of the site can be very wet.

The Wellington Monument site along with the western part of the SWT reserve fall within the 1km square ST1317. It was decided to walk through the first part of the reserve and start recording in the adjacent 1km square, ST1417, just beyond the gateway between the two open grassland areas. Due to the wet nature of the site, areas of the grassland here are dominated by rushes, including Sharp-flowered Rush (*Juncus acutiflorus*).



Looking across the eastern field of SWT's Castle Fields Reserve.
Photo © Val Graham

The team who had initially remained up by the Monument caught up with the reserve team to find they had retreated to the cool of a shaded bank along the reserve's southern boundary for lunch. This was a chance to share findings and have a much-appreciated break from the heat of the day with an opportunity to admire the views out over Wellington to the Brendon Hills beyond.



Overheated botanists enjoying a shady lunch. Photo © Steve Parker

After lunch recording progressed within the grassland area, moving gradually towards the eastern end of the reserve. One of the highlights in this area was Narrow Buckler-fern (*Dryopteris carthusiana*), being new to the site, with just a few plants located in a small area. Another species of interest was a *Potentilla* that led to lively discussions eventually resulting in an agreement that the hybrid of Trailing Tormentil (*Potentilla anglica*) and Creeping Cinquefoil (*Potentilla reptans*), *P x mixta* was present at the site as well as both parent species.

After such an intense discussion some took the opportunity of an area of shorter sward to sit and admire the view



Admiring the view towards the Brendon Hills. Photo © Steve Parker

whilst others continued the close scrutiny of further species.



Two young botanist still hard at work. Photo © Steve Parker

The heat of the day got to some attendees who used the remainder of their energy to climb back to the shade of the Monument whilst others returned to the western part of the reserve to record within the ST1317 area they had passed through earlier. They were rewarded with a stunning display of Dyer's Greenweed (*Genista tinctoria*) ('Vulnerable' on the England Red List) which seemed to be more plentiful than in previous years of recording. Also of note in this area was Flea Sedge (*Carex pulicaris*), another England 'Near Threatened' species.



Dyer's Greenweed (*Genista Tinctoria*). Photo © Steve Parker

Further 'England Red-listed' species recorded in the SWT reserve included Marsh Ragwort (*Jacobaea aquatica*), Corn Mint (*Mentha arvensis*), Lesser Spearwort (*Ranunculus flammula*) and Ragged-Robin (*Silene flos-cuculi*). In addition to Narrow Buckler-fern, a second species of interest new to the site was Pale Sedge (*Carex pallescens*). Also noteworthy was a fine display of Betony (*Betonica officinalis*), just beginning to flower. Other 'first-flowerers' recorded included Sneezewort (*Achillea ptarmica*) and Square-stalked St. John's-wort (*Hypericum tetrapterum*).



Betony (*Betonica officinalis*). Photo © Simon Leach

In all we recorded 182 plant taxa and made 256 records. Butterflies noted during the day included Small Heath, plus 'first-of-the-year' Large Skippers and Silver-washed Fritillaries. Thanks very much to everyone who joined in the day. We hope it was enjoyed by all.