

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report



Monday 1st July 2024, Ashton Court (VC6)

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Report: Helena Crouch

It was dry, but remarkably chilly, as seven members and two guests assembled for an evening meeting exploring the grounds of Ashton Court. The estate covers 850 acres, including parkland laid out by Humphrey Repton, golf courses, woodlands and deer parks: much of the site is an SSSI, designated for its saproxylic invertebrate fauna.

Setting off, we focused on some common species of grass, comparing the spikelet arrangement of Perennial Rye-grass (*Lolium perenne*) and Common Couch (*Elymus repens*), some of which had long awns (*E. repens* f. *aristatus*). Meadow Foxtail (*Alopecurus pratensis*) with its soft cylindrical spikes was compared with the more rigid spikes of Timothy (*Phleum pratense*), but we struggled to distinguish small Timothy from Small Timothy (*P. bertolonii*). The best difference is the size of glumes: 2-3.6mm in *P. bertolonii* and (3.5)4-5.5mm in *P. pratense* (both including awns), but even that has a slight overlap and is not an easily measurable field character.

The vegetation near the mansion was unremarkable, but we studied vetches, finding Bush Vetch (*Vicia sepium*) and Common Vetch (*V. sativa* subsp. *segetalis*), Hairy Tare (*Ervilia hirsuta*) and Meadow Vetchling (*Lathyrus pratensis*). There are some splendid old trees, for example a huge Plane (*Platanus x hispanica*), and also some interesting recently planted specimens: we admired a young Bhutan Pine (*Pinus wallichiana*), with long (up to 20cm) soft drooping needles in clusters of five.

Beside a junction of tracks, we found a large patch of an unfamiliar yellow crucifer.



The distinctive fruits and small flowers of Austrian Yellow-cress (*Rorippa austriaca*). © Helena Crouch

The mystery crucifer wouldn't key out in the Wild Flower Key, but that was because it is not included! A handy app suggested it was of Austrian Yellow-cress (*Rorippa austriaca*) which immediately made sense – this species has been found at several sites around Bristol and indeed David Hawkins had found it at Ashton Court in 2020, but in a different monad.

Heading back towards the mansion, we explored a small, fenced pond, recording Yellow Iris (*Iris pseudacorus*), Common Duckweed (*Lemna minor*), Greater Duckweed (*Spirodela polyrhiza*), Marsh-marigold (*Caltha palustris*) and abundant Curly Waterweed (*Lagarosiphon major*), at least some of which were clearly planted.



SRPG members collectively confirming our identification of Jointed Rush (*Juncus articulatus*) by the pond. © Libby Houston

Reviewing my photos later, I was about to delete a poor image of Marsh-marigold in the middle of the pond, when I noticed some clover-like leaves in the photo! They are clearly a species of Water-clover (*Marsilea* sp.), an aquatic fern, but a return visit is needed as it could be one of two species which are only distinguishable by examination of their sporocarps! It was almost certainly planted originally.

Our next stop presented a dilemma: garden waste was clearly being dumped under some trees near the ice-house. Here we found Turkish Sage (*Phlomis russeliana*), Red Bistort (*Bistorta amplexicaulis*) and Aunt Eliza (probably *Crocsmia paniculata* x *pottsii*), all of which had probably grown from discarded garden waste. The origin of a plant of Robin's-plantain (*Erigeron philadelphicus*) was less clear as this is not commonly grown. There are records for other sites in Bristol, including Leigh Woods, nearby.



Turkish Sage (*Phlomis russeliana*) growing by dumped garden waste, presenting a recording dilemma. © Helena Crouch

Returning through the formal rose garden, it was much easier to decide what to record. We added numerous weeds of cultivation, confident that nobody would have planted Groundsel (*Senecio vulgaris*), Chickweed (*Stellaria media*), Shepherd's-purse (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*) or Procumbent Pearlwort (*Sagina procumbens*). Sadly, we had little time to admire the roses as the car park would soon be closing.

Views across Bristol were spectacular as we returned past the mansion, admiring stately ancient trees. At the edge of the gravel path, against the mansion walls, we were delighted to see many plants of Small Toadflax (*Chaenorhinum minus*), which was perhaps our star find. This dainty archaeophyte grows at the edges of arable fields, or more commonly on gravelly tracks, roadsides and disused railways. This was the first record for the hectad since we recorded it on our SRPG meeting at Tyntesfield in 2019. During the evening, we made 164 records and took the total for the monad to 216 species (since 2000). Ashton Court is a large estate, so a return visit is planned.