

# SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



## Meeting Report

**Sunday 17th November 2024, Winter Trees  
Meeting, Vivary Park, Taunton (VC5)**

**Leaders: Steve Parker & Simon Leach**

**Report: Simon Leach**

An unlikely venue for a field meeting, but nevertheless as good a place as any, we thought, to get to grips with trees in winter. Except that we appeared to be in the thick of a particularly mild autumn – we were yet to have a ground frost, and Storm Bert was still some weeks away – meaning that many deciduous trees and shrubs were most easily identifiable by their still-attached leaves!

First a potted history: Vivary Park used to lie within the grounds of Wilton House (now a residential home), until 1894 when it was purchased in order to create a municipal park, complete with grand cast-iron gates, a network of paths, a centrepiece bandstand – and lots of trees. The name ‘Vivary’ is much more ancient though, alluding to the former existence here of a complex of fishponds (known as a *Vivarium*) when the land was owned by the Bishop of Winchester in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

With ‘Wilton Lands’, tennis courts and children’s playgrounds included, the park extends to almost 5 hectares, and our intended route around its perimeter could easily have been walked in about ten minutes – although today, at a more glacial pace, it would take us at least four hours!

Seven of us met by the main gates at the north end of the park, opposite Upper High Street. From here we would tread a zigzag but essentially anti-clockwise route around the park. Our hope was that we might see perhaps fifty different tree and shrub species or cultivars. We used a variety of identification aids, including John Poland’s *Field Key to Winter Twigs* and

*Vegetative Key*, plus FSC guides to *broad-leaved trees in winter*. Also worth its weight in gold was Ian’s ‘crib sheet’ – a copy of an out-of-print leaflet describing a ‘Vivary Park Tree Trail’, including helpful oblique 3-D plan showing the layout of the park and locations and names of 32 of the more significant trees.

As you’d expect, though, we quickly succumbed to the lure of AI on our smartphones, using several different apps to conjure up possible names for some of the things we were puzzling over. We knew that we should take care not to presume that ‘the phone is always right’, but it’s easy to be seduced by technology, and it was indeed surprising how often our phones all seemed to agree as to what something was; and, at the very least, they would help to point us to the right part of the field guide or Flora, from where we could then run through the keys: just like the old days, peering through hand lenses, arguing over degrees of hairiness, whether something might be patent rather than erect, and, for pity’s sake, can anyone remember the meaning of ‘retorse’?

Anyway, armed with field guides and smartphones we began our perambulation of the park. We were soon puzzling over conifers, sorting out the differences between Cedar-of-Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*) and Deodar (*C. deodara*), and how to tell one Cypress (*Cupressus*) from another. Is that a ‘Leyland’ or a ‘Lawson’s’? And could that really be a Japanese Red-cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*)?

After an early overdose on conifers, surely the rest would be straightforward in comparison. A fine Hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*) was followed by False-acacia or Locust Tree (*Robinia pseudoacacia*), two trees we all knew, and then a flurry of not-so-well-known shrubs and small trees such as Persian Ironwood (*Parrotia persica*), Mexican Orange

(*Choisya ternata*) and a rather lovely Wedding Cake Tree (*Cornus controversa*).



Wedding Cake Tree © Simon Leach

In the False-acacia we noted Mistletoe (*Viscum album*). Vivary Park, it has to be said, is renowned for its Mistletoe: the Limes (*Tilia x europaea*) in particular look weighed down by it, but during the day we also recorded bunches of Mistletoe on a range of other species, including Whitebeam (*Sorbus aria*), Rowan (*S. aucuparia*), Norway Maple (*Acer platanoides*), Red Horse-chestnut (*Aesculus carnea*), Weeping Willow (*Salix x sepulcralis*), Apple (*Malus* sp.), Hawthorn (*Crataegus* sp.), Large-leaved Lime (*Tilia platyphyllos*) and a Poplar (maybe a *Populus trichocarpa* hybrid of some sort, we thought).

Other arboreal highlights included more than one Ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*), various maples (*Acer* spp) such as Red (*A. rubrum*), Ashleaf (*A. negundo*), paperbark (*A. griseum*) and Cappadocian (*A. cappadocicum*), Honey-locust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*), Indian Bean-tree (*Catalpa bignonioides*), Foxglove-tree (*Paulownia tomentosa*), Tulip-tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) and American Sweet-gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*).

Also, in passing, we noted several commemorative trees, such as the two fine specimens of Pedunculate Oak (*Quercus robur*) near the bandstand – one commemorating the silver jubilee of King George V, the other the coronation of King George VI – as well as trees celebrating the coronation and various jubilees of Queen Elizabeth II. One of them was planted to mark her golden jubilee visit to Taunton in 2002, when she was driven through the town, and then through Vivary Park where she was greeted by hundreds of local school children (my own amongst them).

So yes, even the park's *Quercus robur* seem to have been planted. And indeed, few, if any, of the trees we saw could be said to be truly 'wild', although in Wilton Lands, around the ornamental lake, amongst the larger trees there were also thickets of mixed-aged suckers (and potentially self-sown?) Caucasian Wingnut (*Pterocarya fraxinifolia*). 'Well-established, maybe naturalized' we thought, after much debate.



Caucasian Wingnut © Simon Leach

We lunched in sunshine in the rose garden, still only a short stone's throw from the main gates, but it was getting chillier, and with rain forecast for later in the afternoon we were determined to increase our pace.

But even botanical 'fast' is 'slow', and the trees kept coming, and the list grew and grew.

Later in the afternoon we retreated to the Coffee Station, a warm and welcoming vegan café in what used to be the Park-keeper's office and store-room for the miniature railway. Suitably refreshed, we admired a line of large Siberian Elms (*Ulmus pumila*) (no. 19 on Ian's crib sheet!) and then headed back past the 'sensory garden', down the main path towards Upper High Street, where we noted an old Mulberry (*Morus nigra*) and a Strawberry-tree (*Arbutus unedo*).

By the end of the day, we'd notched up 104 tree and shrub taxa (spp./cultivars), a list that wouldn't have looked out of place for a small provincial botanic garden or Arboretum. Also, straying occasionally from the script, we'd spotted a few 'non-woody' things of some interest, such as a single plant of Navelwort (*Umbilicus rupestris*) (this is its only known locality within the town), and a large colony of always-nice-to-see Henbit Dead-nettle (*Lamium amplexicaule*) with its tiny easily-missed 'winter' flowers, quite unlike the showy blooms it would have produced earlier in the year.

These non-opening 'cleistogamous' flowers seemed entirely appropriate given how chilly the day had become. Within a couple of days there would be ground frosts and sleet showers. Maybe, after all, we were closer to winter than we'd imagined.