

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report



The SRPG co-chairs crest the slope above the site of the lost medieval village of Witcombe © Fred Rumsey

Sunday 13th May 2025, Hamdon Hill & Witcombe Meeting, (VC5)

Leader: Fred Rumsey

Report: Fred Rumsey

Despite a late change in car park meeting venue, necessitated by the closure of the original for the ongoing construction of a visitor centre, eleven members successfully gathered and, astonishingly, were even ready to depart ten minutes early. Having met elsewhere on Ham Hill in 2022 (see the Meeting report), it was our intention to concentrate on the ST4816 monad for which we had fewer recent records. The area bears the obvious scars of nearly two millennia of quarrying and is an SSSI for its geological interest. The Ham stone, only quarried here, is a mellow-coloured limestone sought after for construction, the honey colour the result of oxidation of iron within a matrix derived from corals and clay. The hill, a glorious viewpoint with expansive vistas to

the west and north, is popular with those emptying dogs and the flora has also been impacted by the addition of various garden plants through fly-tipping and their escape from the few habitations. The scrubby woodland on the plateau of the hill is criss-crossed by a multitude of undulating trails and paths. Following a suggested geological trail we quickly picked our way round to the remains of a limekiln. While of obvious industrial archaeological interest it was disappointingly rather too clean of vegetation, but grassland at the woodland edges nearby gave us about 20 discrete clumps of Common Gromwell (*Lithospermum officinale*), which we were also to find again in smaller quantity later. We searched in vain for Common Cudweed (*Filago germanica*) which the group had recorded here in abundance on a visit in 2013. The open gravelly surface of the former car park where it had grown was now a construction site. A return later in the year, the 2013 visit was in August, might prove more successful. The timing of that

earlier visit might also explain why Moschatel (*Adoxa moschatellina*), which we found to be locally abundant in the woodland, had not previously been recorded.

Skirting the extensive active quarry, hidden from view by dense thickets, we soon reached the southern boundary of the monad close to the edge of the scarp. Approaching it an area of grassland offered hope of something new and crowning a bare patch we found Bugloss (*Lycopsis arvensis*) its forget-me-not blue flowers just opening.



Lycopsis arvensis an archaeophyte annual of light soils. © Helena Crouch

The decision was made to walk briskly through the adjacent monad to get to a commanding view of the Witcombe valley where lunch might be taken. Rumbling tummies and a dearth of botanical interest facilitated this. Replete the group made the descent to the site of the lost medieval village of Witcombe to admire a patch of Green Hellebore (*Helleborus viridis* subsp. *occidentalis*) by the trackside – surely a herbal survivor from past cultivation. Irritatingly this grew just a few metres outside our monad boundary. Working our way back into the square and up the steep valley sides we made for the stepped earthen

banks with occasional outcropping rocks high on the slopes. These bare areas were the richest and most interesting botanically, with small annuals like Early forget-me-not (*Myosotis ramosissima*) in quantity. Even the Dandelions (*Taraxacum* sect. *Erythrosperma*?) inspired admiration, with Helena taking a specimen to be submitted to the referee.



Early forget-me-not (*Myosotis ramosissima*) © Fred Rumsey

The uphill struggle was made worthwhile by the discovery of frequent patches of the highly aromatic Large Thyme (*Thymus pulegioides*) on the less vegetated vertical banks. Its rediscovery had been the motivation for the 2022 meeting but that had proven unsuccessful and so this was particularly gratifying. Excitingly, with it in several places were loose tufts of a sedge, identified when flowering last year, as *Carex divulsa* subsp. *leersii* – a plant with few Somerset records.

Gill Read had summited before the rest of the group and was able to demonstrate to us the most impressive (or disheartening if a gardener) stand of Field Horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*) any of us had ever seen. The fertile stems standing like a dense stubble over the width of the field. The slack-jawed group meanwhile were serenaded by the exultation of skylarks which have chosen to nest amongst this crop.

Crossing the road, we made our way through another of the extensive grassland areas, too early for the *Dactylorhizas* and Broomrapes known to be here, to get to the woodlands on the steep north-facing slope. These provided some of the hoped-for common ferns

and spring woodland flowers. A particular mission was to re-find Wild Tulip (*Tulipa sylvestris*) seen here in 2019. At its precise location, a junction of paths just into the woodland, there was sadly no sign of it, but it had been replaced by several plants of a garden *Allium*, possibly *A. nigrum*, whose exact identification was not possible. It later transpired that one of our group, Karen Turvey, had seen the Tulip close to our starting point some years before. Hopefully it still persists.



The fertile stems of Field Horsetail looking like stubble. © Fred Rumsey

Having circumnavigated the monad our weary but happy band managed to pick the appropriate route from a bewildering array of tracks to finally relocate the car park. Tragically (as all too often the case in my experience) the promised ice-cream van was not in evidence at its usual pitch, denying us the chance for an appropriate end of meeting celebration.

We recorded in total 202 taxa, adding many to the monad and making useful updates. A revisit later in the year would certainly add yet more.