

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report



View across Ashton Court Estate towards Bristol, from the Old Deer Park © Helena Crouch

Monday 14th July 2025, Ashton Court Estate (VC6)

Leaders: Helena Crouch & Aisa Irvine

Report: Helena Crouch

On a fine sunny evening, nine members met to explore more of the Ashton Court Estate, following a successful meeting there in 2024. The original intention had been to head straight uphill to the species-rich meadows, however recent drought had left these scorched; instead, we set off towards Clarken Combe.

Ashton Court Estate is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified particularly for its ancient trees and associated saproxylic beetles. The trees are majestic. We passed a fallen trunk of massive proportions, home to an array of ferns and bryophytes. On a bank at the east end of Clarken Combe Wood, Tony showed us a huge swathe of Green Hellebore (*Helleborus viridis* subsp. *occidentalis*) known here for over a century, described by White in his 1912 Flora of Bristol as abundant.

The large stone-lined cattle pond in Clarken Combe was almost dry, allowing a good study of its flora. It is

dominated by Bulrush (*Typha latifolia*), with large patches of Common Spike-rush (*Eleocharis palustris*). We found three species of rush: Soft-rush (*Juncus effusus*), Sharp-flowered Rush (*J. acutiflorus*) and Toad Rush (*J. bufonius*). Water-plantain (*Alisma plantago-aquatica*) was flowering and Water-mint (*Mentha aquatica*) was detected by its smell before it was seen. Marsh-marigold (*Caltha palustris*), Yellow Iris (*Iris pseudacorus*), Water forget-me-not (*Myosotis scorpioides*) and Square-stalked St John's-wort (*Hypericum tetrapterum*) were seen and we spent a while keying out a spectacularly large plant of Marsh Yellow-cress (*Rorippa palustris*).



Studious botanists by the Cattle Pond © Nicky Hodges

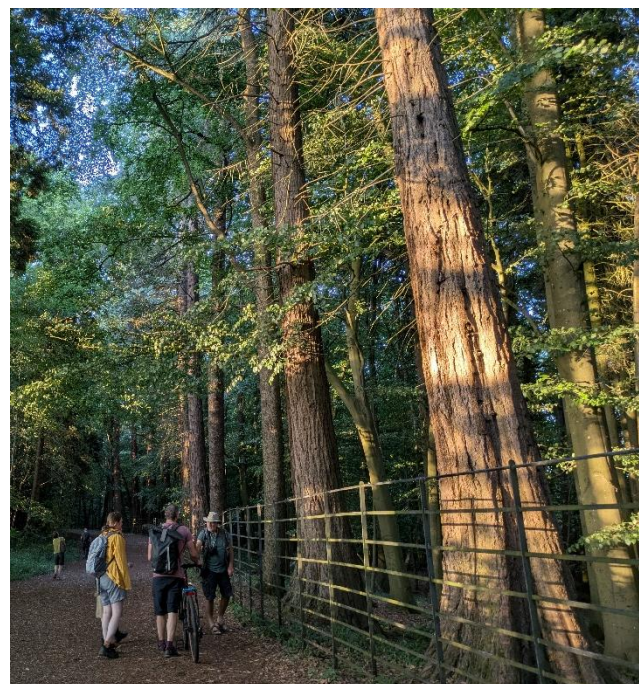
Retracing our steps, we entered the Old Deer Park, finding Common Gromwell (*Lithospermum officinale*) by the gate. Swathes of Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) and scattered Silver Birch (*Betula pendula*) indicate acidic soils. We found Wood Sage (*Teucrium scorodonia*), Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*) and a single plant of Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*). Further up the slope, around rocky limestone outcrops, we recorded Lady's Bedstraw (*Galium verum*), Agrimony (*Agrimonia eupatoria*) and Ploughman's Spikenard (*Inula conyzae*). The rosettes of this species resemble those of Foxglove, but the umbel-like inflorescence is distinctive, with many heads of small yellow florets, often tinged with purple. The name derives from the past use of this plant: the aromatic roots were hung in cottages to freshen the air, spikenard being an expensive perfume.



Inflorescence of Ploughman's Spikenard © Nicky Hodges

Leaving the deer park, we emerged onto a broad track. Naturalised shrubs, evidence of the former ornamental planting, included Cherry-laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*), Portuguese Laurel (*P. lusitanica*) and Holm Oak (*Quercus ilex*). We followed a small path through scrub to reach the meadows.

As expected, the meadows were brown and crisped. We found Yellow-rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*), Quaking-grass (*Briza media*), Sweet Vernal-grass (*Anthoxanthum odoratum*) and Small Cat's-tail (*Phleum bertolonii*). A few remaining Ox-eye Daisies (*Leucanthemum vulgare*) and Knapweed (*Centaurea nigra*) were still flowering. The dead grass shimmered gold in the setting sun and we began to worry about getting back before the car park was locked!



SRPG members returning along Redwood Avenue © Helena Crouch

Abandoning the meadows for another year, we headed back to the track, admiring the row of stately Giant Redwoods, or Wellingtonias (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*), the cones of which are surprisingly small. By now we had left our target square and the route back was downhill all the way: our pace quickened and nobody got locked in!

Ashton Court is a large estate spanning six monads. There are hundreds of veteran trees to admire, including Sweet Chestnuts believed to be over 600 years old and an oak (the Domesday Oak) which was selected as one of the nation's fifty greatest trees.



Members admire a majestic Sweet Chestnut © Aisa Irvine

There is definitely scope for further visits, perhaps earlier in the year when the meadows are floriferous.