

# SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



## Meeting Report



The cabinets housing the main collection of the vascular plant herbarium. © Simon Leach

**Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> October 2025, Somerset County Herbarium, Somerset Heritage Centre, Norton Fitzwarren (VC5)**

**Co-leaders: Ian Salmon, Simon Leach, Ro FitzGerald & Pat Wolseley**

**Report: Simon Leach**

Eleven of us, including four herbarium volunteers, gathered for this half-day meeting to explore the Somerset County Herbarium (abbreviated to **TTN** on the world list of herbaria), housed in the natural

history store at the Somerset Heritage Centre in Norton Fitzwarren, on the western edge of Taunton.

Over morning tea and biscuits we had a brief introduction to the herbarium, which had its origins in about 1849, shortly after the foundation of the Somerset Archaeological & Natural History Society (SANHS). Until 1958 the collection was entirely owned and managed by SANHS, and housed in the museum stores in Taunton Castle. After that, responsibility for running the museum and caring for its collections

transferred to the local authority, since 2014 being managed by the South West Heritage Trust in partnership with, and on behalf of, Somerset Council and SANHS.

The Rare Plants Group has been involved in looking after the herbarium since 2015, the little team of volunteers (all SRPG members) being supervised and supported by the Heritage Trust's senior curator – first the geologist Dennis Parsons, then latterly the archaeologist Amal Khreisheh. The herbarium group was originally Liz McDonnell's idea. She was a great champion of herbaria; and she'd always stressed the importance of significant records, particularly of 'difficult' taxa, being backed up by well-pressed and mounted voucher specimens. These would be, in effect, the physical proof of such records, available for critical examination (and potentially re-determination) by later generations of Somerset botanists and national experts alike.

Over the last 10 years the work of the **TTN** herbarium team has been wide-ranging. Initially, the aim was to produce digital images of the vascular plant collection – *circa* 18-20,000 specimens in all – for eventual uploading to the BSBI Herbaria@Home website. But this soon led to a full-blown re-organisation to bring it in line with the [then current] 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of Clive Stace's *New Flora of the British Isles*. This means that families, genera and species now follow a taxonomic order (and nomenclature) that present-day botanists will be familiar with. A huge amount of work has been done on databasing the collection, as well as on the care and repair of old and often fragile herbarium sheets. Also, importantly, there has been much recent emphasis on adding new material.

There have been several sizeable donations in the last few years, including several hundred specimens from Taunton School, several personal collections such as those from John Ounsted (mainly from the 1940s) and John Keylock (1970s

and 80s), plus significant collections of voucher specimens from both past and current Somerset vice-county recorders, e.g. Captain R.G.B. Roe, Liz McDonnell and Helena Crouch.

Recent donations have also included some important collections of critical or 'difficult' taxa, many of these from SRPG members, e.g. rock sea-lavenders (*Limonium binervosum* agg.), knotgrasses (*Polygonum aviculare* agg.), willows (*Salix* spp.), hawkweeds (*Hieracium* spp.) and dandelions (*Taraxacum* spp.). For some in SRPG the dandelions have been a particular preoccupation, and the collection in **TTN** continues to grow, currently totalling nearly 1000 specimens and more than 180 species.



Looking at specimens of *Taraxacum atrocollinum*. © Steve Parker

We learnt that there is much in the herbarium apart from its vascular plant specimens. We were shown botanists' notebooks, papers and drawings, such as the diaries of the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century naturalist H. H. Slater, Walter Watson's early 20<sup>th</sup>-century books of colour drawings of



bryophytes, fungi and lichens, and the 19<sup>th</sup>-century algologist Isabella Gifford's extraordinary collection of pressed seaweeds, many of them gathered from the shores close to her home in Minehead. We also saw drawers of packets of Somerset lichens collected in the 1970s by the renowned botanist Francis Rose.

Back to the vascular plant collection, we examined a rather dismal (French) specimen of Lady's-slipper Orchid (*Cypripedium calceolus*) which would probably have been much better left in the ground! Of more local interest we looked at a randomly picked folder containing 16 specimens of Lesser Meadow-rue (*Thalictrum minus* agg.), eight of them from Cheddar, the earliest dating from 1824. The list of collectors reads like a roll call of 19<sup>th</sup> century Somerset botanists: Dr Anthony Gapper, T.F. Dymock, Charles Parish, H.F. Parsons, Mary Livett, H.H. Slater, E.J. Hamlin. Working in the herbarium you come across names such as these all the time, and so often the human stories behind the specimens can prove to be just as interesting as the specimens themselves!



Part of Isabella Gifford's mid-19<sup>th</sup> century collection of pressed seaweeds. © Tony Steele.

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We were then shown the only two sheets in **TTN** of one of our local endemics, Somerset Whitebeam (*Sorbus subcuneata*). It turns out that both specimens are of huge interest. The first, collected in 1832 by the aforementioned Dr Gapper, seems to be the oldest known example of the species, being 18 years older than C.C. Babington's 1850 sheet in Cambridge University Herbarium (**CGE**) that had previously been thought by Tim Rich to be the earliest in existence. The second, though, is potentially even more interesting, being collected on the same day (10 June 1914) and by the same person (E.S. Marshall) – but was it from the same tree? – as the specimen in the Natural History Museum (**BM**) that was later, in 1934, selected as the holotype (i.e. the 'type specimen') by A.J. Wilmott when *S. subcuneata* was being named and described.

At the end of our 'show and tell' session we admired a box of A4-size specimens that had been put together by Liz McDonnell as a teaching aid when she was running grassland plant-identification workshops for agricultural and conservation advisors in the Rural Development Service and English Nature/Natural England. The specimens themselves have little value as vouchers – there is no information on where or when they were collected – but they demonstrate so well Liz's artistic and design skills, and her extraordinary attention to detail; these were all aspects of her character that she put to such good use in her work in **TTN**.

What we had seen so far had been brought out to the research room for us. But now, with less than an hour to go, we embarked on a whistle-stop tour of the natural history storeroom. Here we were amazed by the many shelves of stuffed birds, and great ranks of Victorian and Edwardian mahogany display cabinets filled with birds' eggs and nests, moths, butterflies, dragonflies and beetles, fossils, rocks and minerals. There were ichthyosaurs and ammonites, archaeological

artifacts, old manuscripts and journals, and rows and rows of drawers and cupboards and boxes everywhere! And in the midst of all this there was the vascular plant herbarium, for the most part housed in a single row of rather plain wooden double-fronted cabinets inherited some years ago from the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff (**NMW**).



Exploring the nether regions of the natural history store, Steve Parker chatting with Amal Khreisheh. © Tony Steele

We pulled out some folders and sheets for closer inspection. Steve Parker was keen to see specimens of Peony (*Paeonia mascula*) from Steep Holm – of which there were quite a few – while we also couldn't resist looking at some dandelions (*Taraxacum*) sheets, including *T. amicorum* and *T. atrocollinum*, two species described as new species in 2019 of which **TTN** holds numerous vouchers. At which point, sadly, our time was up.

Thanks to everyone for their contributions to an enjoyable meeting, and to Amal and the rest of

the herbarium team for being there on the day and helping to throw a spotlight on some of **TTN**'s hidden treasures. We hope to hold another 'open morning' in the New Year for those who had wanted to come along but for one reason or another had been unable to join us.