

Cambridgeshire Flora Group

NEWSLETTER 2009

Progress with the Flora

Accounts for a new Flora of Cambridgeshire are accumulating at a slow but steady pace. Together with all the ferns and conifers, significant families now covered include Ranunculaceae, Berberidaceae, Papaveraceae, Fumariaceae and Ulmaceae. In all nearly 200 taxa. Drawing together and attempting to interpret the records of at least the last 370 years is at times a daunting task, especially where significant variation is known in a species or where there are problems with varying taxonomic treatments. Uncertainty about identity and status (native, casual, naturalised etc – and it may often be a mixture of these for any one species) all adds to the task so that an individual account can take many hours to prepare and involve quite a bit of reading round the subject, asking advice and checking out the specimens in the University herbarium. The result is that there rarely if ever seems to be a dull species to deal with and it is often the more common plants that turn out to have interesting stories to tell – elms and nettles for example. There are some surprises too, including a species of *Fumaria* not in the standard floras, opium poppies apparently persistent in an area where they were first noted in 1722, the extensive (legal) cultivation of *Cannabis* in the past and the tell-tale evidence of past Hop cultivation and how this might affect our view of where it is native. Every species has a story to tell, the task is to try and find it and put it into words!

As noted last year lots of queries are raised and not all can be answered: some just need a bit more field work, some need years of research. If you want to try and follow up some of the more tractable problems and queries please get in touch. There is nothing more satisfying than ‘filling that gap’ in a distribution or relocating even a common species in an old locality. Studying one species in depth is perhaps most rewarding of all but takes time and a degree of persistence. Quite a number of woody plants for example, such as beech, the birches and holly, are very widely recorded, but the status of many records is not given. Just how widely are these self/bird sown throughout the county and are there other taxa masquerading under the familiar names? Even plants at some of our prime botanical sites lack recent assessments of how they are faring – Wicken and Chippenham Fens in particular. In such cases it is not only information on presence/absence one is after but a sense of where and how much and perhaps why plants are where they are.

Threatened Plant Project

Some of you will be aware of this BSBI national project whose aim is “to gain a greater understanding of the distribution and ecology of ‘threatened’ species that have declined markedly over recent decades.” In the pilot project in 2008 we were given a total of eleven old records, randomly selected, to re-find and to record not only the presence or absence of the target species but also a number of other factors about the population size, habitat, associated species, management regime etc. The species involved were *Astragalus danicus*, *Blysmus compressus*, *Monotropa hypopitys*, *Ophrys insectifera*, *Scleranthus annuus* and *Stellaria palustris*. In 2009 the national list of species will be *Carex ericetorum*, *Gnaphalium sylvaticum*, *Cephalanthera longifolia*, *Groenlandia densa*, *Coeloglossum viride*, *Melampyrum cristatum*, *Dianthus deltoides*, *Oenanthe fistulosa*, *Fallopia dumetorum*, *Vicia orobus*. We do not yet know which species and which sites for them will be on our vc list. If this is a project that you would like to become involved with please contact Nick Millar.

Report on excursions in 2008

Over Wood and other nearby small woods - April

On a fine, bright, spring day a small party enjoyed a morning in this SSSI woodland that, with the adjoining Lawn Wood, straddles the county boundary with Suffolk. A good ride and path network gave access to much of the wood. *Allium ursinum* was locally abundant especially in the northern part of the wood. *Myosotis sylvatica* seemed suitably light-blue and perfectly at home along the rides in the southwestern part of the wood, although the Flora Catalogue lists this species only in Part 2 (Aliens). In Suffolk, Francis Simpson seemed to accept it as native in some old woods, generally on Boulder Clay; the flower colour usually lighter than the garden version. Indeed, for comparison we had the more intensely blue flowers of the plants in a grassy area in West Wickham village where we had parked. David Barden located his *Galium odoratum* along one of the main rides and nearby at the ride edge was a sizable patch of robustly growing *Paris quadrifolia*. A discursion by some of the party into one of the woodland blocks produced a record for a small population of *Polystichum setiferum* by a stream. Is this species on the increase in our area, as the Local Change survey suggests is happening country-wide, or are we just better at recording it?

In an ambitious programme we also planned to visit nearby Cadge's Wood and a group of small woods a little to the north. Cadge's Wood had a very typical ancient woodland flora though quite varied for a small wood and with *Veronica montana* in a number of places along one track. On a concrete track on the southern side, and unfortunately over the vice-county boundary, Alan found a decent-sized population of *Poa infirma*. In later afternoon we reached College Grove, Whiting's Grove and an unnamed small triangular wood nearby. In this group we were hopeful of re-finding a possible 1932 record for *Galium odoratum* but we were unsuccessful in this. College Grove was much affected by WWII activities associated with the nearby airfield and was notable for an abundance of *Melica uniflora*, which is also well known in the other woods here. As the light declined a few stalwarts stayed on to tackle Whiting's Grove; we later learned that they had made it home safely.

Newmarket Heath and Beacon Course - May

This excursion proved popular and the ten people who joined Alan and me on the day were rewarded with fine but not oppressively hot weather. In the morning we walked southeast along the Newmarket Road-Dullingham railway section of the Devil's Ditch. Alan had set the challenge to see if anyone could add to the total of 44 species, including brambles, already recorded along this section; with a small prize for the successful person. We had returned nearly to our starting point, and Alan must have thought his prize safe, when Jonathan Shanklin spotted a new species, and a bramble at that, *Rubus armeniacus*. However, the main draw for several of the party was to set eyes on the elusive *Carex ericetorum* and we made obeisance to the tiny patch/single plant that we have known for several years close to the railway. Although many pairs of eyes were searching we failed to find any more at nearby locations described in relatively recent records. Rabbit grazing here not only seems to maintain the low, fine sward which this diminutive species favours but also meant that the many small sedges seen had their tops nibbled off and were thus unidentifiable. During this part of the walk sharp eyes did manage to spot a small rather nibbled plant of *Tephroseris integrifolia* on the path, this species apparently not seen recently along this section of the Ditch. We had lunch sitting on what looked like rather species-poor, regularly mown grassland southeast of the July Course grandstand TL617614, and even this proved to have *Tephroseris*; about a dozen plants were spotted during a brief wander.

Down to business in the afternoon we searched diligently in the known areas on the Heath for *Potentilla neumanniana* but no plants were found. Nevertheless, we were rewarded with a couple of very small patches of *Viola canina*. Also seen, amongst others, were *Veronica spicata*, *Astragalus danicus* and much *Thalictrum minus*. We then walked a considerable distance towards and then down southwest along the Beacon Course to search the known locations for *P. neumanniana* there but again without success, though in some places it had been recorded as recently as 1997. The sward here and on the Round Course seemed lush, overly grassy and species-poor. We did find a little *Veronica*

officinalis and on our return we walked along the July Course side of the Ditch and were very pleased to see numerous plants (102 were counted) of the *Tephrosia*, not only on the very edge of the course but on the apparently rather rank grass on the north-east face of the Ditch.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the quality of the turf on the Heath and on the Beacon Course has declined very much in the last 20 years and is continuing to do so despite designation as a SSSI in 1993; NVC surveys carried out for English Nature in recent years clearly support this view. A similar deterioration is apparent in other areas close to the racecourse and more widely around Newmarket. These were classified as species-rich calcareous grassland by NCC surveys in the 1980s etc and, although not designated as SSSIs at the time the Heath was, were later selected as County Wildlife Sites. The area of good quality calcareous grassland in Cambridgeshire must be very much less than the statistics would have us believe. All the effort that goes into creating new calcareous grassland, if you believe that such a thing can be done, seems distinctly pointless when we are unable to conserve the small remnants of the high quality grassland that has existed on the chalk heaths of Cambridgeshire for many centuries.

Dernford Fen, Sawston - June

Before we started on the fen a small area of waste ground beside the railway yielded a colourful array of garden escapes and casuals, including lots of *Polypogon monspeliensis*, *Leonurus cardiacus*, *Campanula medium*, *Barbarea verna* and several alien spurge.

Almost as soon as we walked into the fen we found areas of fine, sedge-rich fen-meadow diverse in species: typical or notable species included *Carex panicea*, *C. viridula* ssp. *brachyrryncha*, *C. distans*, *C. elata*, *Valeriana dioica*, *Juncus subnodulosus*, *Galium uliginosum*, *Potentilla erecta*, *Cirsium palustre*, *Silaum silaus*, *Thalictrum flavum*, *Trifolium medium* and *Molinia caerulea*. Recent scrub clearance had provided some small areas of bare, wet, rather peaty ground and on these we found *Anagallis tenella*, *Isolepis setacea* and *Samolus valerandi*; these were the species found during a survey in 1978 on freshly bared ground, they can no doubt survive as seeds until suitable habitat comes along. The small patch of *Cladium mariscus* was found where earlier records indicated but it was deeply shaded and non-flowering; this location was also the site of the orchids (*Epipactis palustris*, *Gymnadenia densiflora*) when last seen but its condition is clearly not suitable for them now.

Members of the group who visited the area to the southwest of the railway at the end of the day found more *Cladium* in a number of places there.

Newborough/ Eye/Thorney - July

For this excursion we were joined by Gill Gent and Rob Wilson, the BSBI recorders for Northamptonshire vc32, with a good number of their botanical colleagues. We spent the morning looking mainly in drains and along verges in the fenland parish of Newborough in vc32. Although *Groenlandia densa* was frequent in many drains and water quality was generally good, as described by survey in the 1990s, other species of interest proved elusive. The roadside hedges here produced two brambles familiar to Cambridgeshire batologists: *Rubus radula* and *R. echinatus*. In the afternoon we moved to the Cat's Water Drain, which marks the vc32/29 boundary, so both parties were able to claim records here. A reasonable selection of aquatic and emergent species was compiled. Towards the end of the afternoon, having been left by those who had made a start on their long journey home, those remaining spent a little time in Thorney village. Having seen the *Asplenium ruta-muraria* previously recorded in the churchyard we walked north towards the bypass and David Barden proved his fern-hunting prowess by spotting a leaky gutter downpipe on an old school building which yielded five species including *Asplenium trichomanes*, *Pteridium aquilinum* and *Phyllitis scolopendrium*. Despite the rather sparse pickings all present agreed that it had been a very agreeable day in good company.

Fordham Woods & Snailwell Meadows - August

Fordham Woods is a small SSSI and Wildlife Trust nature reserve close to Chippenham Fen; the northern part mainly alder woodland with ash and sycamore predominating further south. We recorded a typical wet woodland flora and were able to add a number of ferns to the list: *Dryopteris carthusiana*, *D. affinis* and a *Polypodium* species (yet to be determined). This last species was found on a horizontal willow trunk, a rather unusual situation for vc29. Despite seeing many individuals of *Salix myrsinifolia* we were unable to convince ourselves that we had located the hybrid with *S. caprea* that has been recorded here, still less the *triandra* x *fragilis* hybrid that has also been reported. An arable field margin outside the wood provided a change of scenery and a record for *Agrostis gigantea*, not a common species in vc29.

Snailwell Meadows SSSI is a group of moderate/small-sized, damp and rushy fields beside the River Snail. This site has been well botanised in recent decades so it was pleasing to be able to add a significant record to the site list; *Danthonia decumbens* was found in small quantity on a ridge of slightly higher and drier ground in company with species such as *Ononis spinosa*, *Succisa pratensis*, *Campanula rotundifolia*, *Polygala vulgaris*, *Leontodon hispidus*, *Briza media* etc. Close by we were able to see *Molinia caerulea* ssp. *arundinacea* and consider how it differs from ssp. *caerulea* as seen on heathy/moorland sites. Other species of note included *Triglochin palustris* which was new to several of the party, *Carex distans* and *Juncus* x *surrejanus* (*acutiflorus* x *articulatus*), these last two apparently new to the site list.

Two of the fields have populations of the very rare umbellifer *Selinum carvifolia*. The number of plants has reached over 1500 during counts in the 1990s but we had to be satisfied with about 27 plants in both fields combined. Records show that the number of plants has fluctuated quite widely in recent years but this low count may be of some concern, especially when the population at Sawston Moor is also so low.

Chrishall Grange Plantation - September

The more interesting species recorded in past times from this site and its vicinity proved elusive although we did see quite a number of plants of *Atropa belladonna*. At the northern tip of the CG Plantation site an arable margin produced a good variety of arable weeds typical of the Cambridgeshire chalk: *Fumaria densiflora*, *F. vaillantii*, *F. parviflora*, both *Kickxias*, *Papaver hybridum* etc and some rather less expected species such as *Chenopodium giganteum*, at only its second vice-county site.

Perhaps one of the more curious habitats in Cambridgeshire is to be found as a small block on the southeastern side of the CG Plantation. This is a woodland entirely dominated by Laburnum (*Laburnum anagyroides*); Charles Babington records a visit to the site in 1852 so we know that it is of some age, though he mentions that “the turf under the trees seems rich in chalk plants” so it was presumably quite young at that time. The Laburnum trees seem able to ‘self-coppice’, ie. to reach reasonable maturity, collapse and then grow new stems from the stool to create a new tree and hence reach the low canopy again. The body of the wood yielded no other species of interest; a grassy arable margin along the southwestern side produced a few typical species such as *Cerastium arvense*, *Chaenorhinum minus* and *Echium vulgare*.

Excursion programme for 2009

Please note that excursions will start in the morning at 10.00 am (unless otherwise stated) and continue until the end of the afternoon or until participants have had enough. All excursions are on a Saturday.

In late April we will visit **Elsworth Wood**, an ancient woodland with rather few recent records; records include *Epipactis helleborine*, *Campanula trachelium*, *Potentilla sterilis*. The hybrid between *Salix fragilis* and *pentandra* was recorded close to the wood in 1979. If it is not in use we will also explore the adjoining motocross circuit with its disturbed ground, grassland, and ponds.

In May we will visit the group of small plantation woodlands to the east of Chippenham Park, including **Stannel Wood** and **Long Slip**. The hybrid between *Dryopteris filix-mas* and *affinis* was recorded from one or more of these woods in the 1970s. Arable margins and tracks in the neighbourhood may be of interest, some of which is within the Breckland Natural Area. There should also be time to visit Isleham Plantation and its vicinity; the Plantation has some interesting fern records whilst the adjacent field is sandy and has plenty of rabbits; in the past a sandpit here, since infilled, yielded species such as *Silene conica*.

Great and Little Wilbraham parishes have generally received rather little attention in recent times, other than visits to the well-known SSSI sites. In June we will start with the park at **Wilbraham Temple**, which has a 1948 record for *Asplenium trichomanes* which we would like to check is still present, and then explore more widely in the park grounds and beyond. Hopefully arable weeds should be a feature here on the chalk.

In early July we will visit **Chippenham Fen**, not only to see some of the well-known highlights such as the dactylorchids, but hopefully also to explore some of the more out of the way parts of the site to look for *Danthonia decumbens* found in 1951 by Max Walters, *Salix myrsinifolia* in the western woods, and various ferns that have been recorded here before.

In August the venue is **Madingley Park** and environs. We should see the species-rich meadow with *Ophioglossum vulgatum* and elsewhere there is a fine population of *Inula helenium*. Other records of interest from this area include *Dipsacus strigosus*, *Festuca heterophylla* (1955), *Ceratophyllum submersum*, *Viscum album* on *Acer campestre* (an unusual host in vc29) and *Ranunculus auricomus*.

And finally in September we will make the long trip north to **Foul Anchor** to see the well-known salt marsh flora, which is seemingly always changing, and the grassland on the Main Drain embankments. The North Level IDB are intending to start major de-silting of the Main Drain here, for the first time in about 70 years, and the arisings will need to be spread somewhere on the nearby banks. So it will be useful to have a clear idea of the best places for *Spiranthes spiralis*, here at its only site in vc29, and any other species of interest.

Date	Locality	Meeting point – 10.00am unless otherwise stated
25th April	Elsworth Wood	Lawn Farm fishery northern carpark, TL314611. Exit the dualled A428 at Cambourne, take the road from Cambourne to Elsworth (old A428) and drive north up access road to Lawn Farm. The carpark is north of the cluster of buildings.
9th May	Stannel Wood etc, Chippenham	St Margaret's Church, Chippenham, TL663698
6th June	Wilbraham Temple & the Wilbrahams	Park by the track, Wilbraham Temple, c. TL 552578. Drive northeast from the centre of Great Wilbraham up Temple End and carry on along access track into the park. Park to the side of the track on the opposite side to where the cattle are; please take care not to obstruct the track.
4th July	Chippenham Fen	Park by the NE building, TL651691. From the Snailwell to Chippenham Road turn off at Park Farm (TL656687) and drive northwest up the track to the Fen. In order to allow him to provide approx. vehicle numbers to Natural England please let NM know if you intend to attend at least two weeks before the day.
1st August	Madingley Park	Madingley Hall, TL393604
12th September	Foul Anchor	Meet at 11.00am. Pumping Station bridge entrance, TF462179. This is an area of hardstanding on the south side of Station Road east of Tydd Gote; it gives access to the bridge just by the eastern side of the Pumping Station itself. NB If it is not possible to meet/park here we will meet by the access gate to the River Nene embankment at TF468181 (just over the bridge to Foul Anchor) and you will have to park where you can. Parking in Foul Anchor settlement itself is difficult and you will probably have to park somewhere on the northern side of the North Level Main Drain.

NO DOGS PLEASE

Please note that there is no guarantee that you will be able to park directly at the meeting point listed and should leave time to find a parking place and walk to the meeting point if necessary.

ALL ENQUIRIES REGARDING CFG EXCURSIONS TO NM, PLEASE:

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Nick Millar and Alan Leslie
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