

BRANCH REPORT FOR SEVERN VALLEY, MID AND SOUTH WALES

Every year members are encouraged to share their plant finds for the previous year. Some members submit these in the form of a Diary or Record Book, others just give a taste of their exploits. These are submitted to their Branch Secretary who compiles a report of the groups' findings for the Summer issue of the magazine. This is one such example.

This was a peculiar and sometimes difficult year for many (most ?) of us. Another Covid year with ever-changing restrictions meant that we had to establish our own rules of behaviour. Many had vulnerable friends or family to consider, as well as their own health, and I believe we are all giving more consideration to environmental issues and thinking about our own 'delivery miles' as well as keeping a beady look for 'country of origin' on supermarket labels. So botanical outings were often still restricted and one of the elements of the pre-pandemic world which I most grieve for is the ability to make impulse plans to visit favourite plants or sites.

I have been delighted that so many members have managed to keep quite local botany as a pleasure (and possible sanity-saver). I've been sent quite a variety of emails, letters, Record Books, lists and pictures and have been able to welcome keen new members. I hope some of us will be able to meet during 2022.

Richard Brooks wrote to me in June describing a climb up Honister Crag in the Lake District where he saw some good mountain plants such as Roseroot *Rhodiola rosea* and it seems that botany is adding an enjoyable dimension to his professional life as a geologist. I can imagine his practised sharp eyes quickly spotting what is growing on rocks as well as the stones themselves. At home in Glamorgan he has been trialling 'responsibly sourced' native species in his garden and having a concentrated look at his local flora – a popular activity when members are affected by local lockdowns and always rewarding!

Monica Davis reported a 'much better year', sending a list with more than 60 species which were special sightings for her. She had seen some quite elusive plants like Rough Hawk's-beard *Crepis biennis* and her personal highlights included Stone Parsley *Sison amomum* because she was pleased to learn its distinctive 'petrol smell' and Shaggy-soldier *Galinsoga quadriradiata* because of its appealing name. She couldn't help enjoying introduced Yellow Pitcherplant *Sarracenia flava* at a site in the Somerset Levels 'even though it should not be there' and I felt quite in awe of her record of a special orchid hybrid *Epipactis x schulzei* (parents are the reasonably common Broad-leaved Helleborine and the rarer Violet Helleborine). Monica visited a known site for Violet Helleborine *E. purpurata* where they happened to meet a member of the Hardy Orchid Society who was able to demonstrate the characters of the hybrid. This was a marvellously lucky chance with a glamorous wild plant, but she also sent a warning - beware of a rampant garden escape, the climbing composite German-ivy *Delairea odorata*. Don't let it into your garden if you find it naturalised – it's fiercely invasive!



Epipactis x schulzei

Ruth Dawes has done my reporting job for me this time! She writes 'The botanical highs for me were with WFS' as she went to 'Scilly, Somerset and Gower and saw a wonderful array of ferns, lime-loving plants and coastal species'. She contributed to all these reports (see magazines Autumn 2021 and Winter 2022), so as she says 'there is no point in repeating myself other than to thank all the leaders and organisers for putting in such excellent work'. Thank you Ruth – and for your good accounts of some wonderful days.

Judy and Richard Gosnell reported unusual weather patterns in North Wiltshire – their local meadows are on clay which only warms up slowly and the cold spring, with a particularly dry spell following a very wet one, seemed to delay the usual lavish flowerings which they usually enjoy as coarser grasses made use of the advantage. Their account is interesting though, as we are likely to see more and more unpredictable weather effects. They kept carefully to pandemic good behaviour, never wandering far, but were rewarded at times with special displays of orchids (Bee and Pyramidal), and finding the less common Round-leaved Fluellen *Kickxia spuria* which can be so much more difficult to locate than *K. elatine*.

Some members make me want to establish an annual award for the corresponding member who makes life easiest for their Branch Secretary and Ruth Harding would always be in the running! Her Record Books are a model of good presentation and, as she works in conservation, I know the care she takes with identifications and habitat notes. Covid restrictions limited her botany somewhat in 2021, but she became a volunteer recorder for the Ceredigion Rare Plant Register – an undertaking which included visiting a rich-sounding SSSI with excellent marshy habitats. She added a good number of sedges and horsetails to her former list and saw quite elusive species such as Fen Bedstraw *Galium uliginosum*, a dainty plant which actually feels really prickly to touch! Her total for the year was 125.

Anne Hercock put her considerable energies into recording a 1Km Square for that Study. Her usual home ground is in the Wye Valley, but the monad near Lydney offered rather different habitats. She chose a churchyard with good 'old' grassland (inspired by volunteering with the Carmarthenshire Meadows Group Big Meadow Search) establishing a good relationship with the churchwardens which could keep them managing things well in the future.

Stephen Law had a very active first year in the society and sent me his Beginner's Diary with 105 entries which I could confirm. He had filled them in with useful 'crib' notes on characters of the genus or species which I thought was an excellent way of helping the plants to become fixed in memory. He recorded Few-flowered Garlic *Allium paradoxum* in Cirencester where I had seen it for the first time in

my life in 1963! I'm glad to know that it is still there. He is clearly a keen spotter as, in the autumn, he sent me a 'what's this?' photo of a curious little twig-like toadstool, which was eventually identified by an expert from the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust as the Candlesnuff Fungus, so I learned something too!

Steve Little always dedicates plenty of energy to his botany – he and his good friend David Albon often attend Somerset WFS meetings and we are always delighted to have their company. In 2021 Steve exceeded all previous efforts and found a plant new to the entire West Country! This find (at the Exmoor meeting in June) was reported in the Autumn magazine, but Graham Lavender and I are still glowing, so I must say again how alert he was to notice the *very* inconspicuous hybrid *Sagina subulata* x *S.procumbens*, adding a remarkable achievement on a meeting which proved the importance and fascination of really tiny plants. Steve also reports some dizzy adventures with Ian Green in the Cairngorms 'risking life and limb' to see rarities such as Issler's Clubmoss *Diphasiastrum x issleri* and a visit to the Lleyn Peninsula in North Wales where he found the enchanting alien Slender Borage *Borago pygmaea* on the same damp cliff path where I first saw it (already long-established) in 1982!

Georgina Milway sent a Beginner's Diary with lots of excellent additions, adding up to a total of 251. Most of her botany was near home in the Tewkesbury area, but she too attended meetings and botanised further away. A visit to Bossington and Lynmouth added some Somerset records and a Wiltshire Wildlife Trust reserve where she went with Pauline Wilson had the now so-threatened Green-winged Orchid *Anacamptis morio*. She saw plenty of nice calcicole plants such as Meadow Saxifrage *Saxifraga granulata* and several uncommon beauties such as Pasqueflower *Pulsatilla vulgaris* and Fritillary *Fritillaria meleagris* – the latter in one of its old heartlands at Iffley, near Oxford.

Andrew Phillips, based near Port Talbot in South Wales, submitted a most accurately filled in Diary recording 468 plants. This impressive total came mostly from places near home where he visits both coastal and inland areas with varied damp and dry habitats. He made the best of local nature reserves and found both the Wildfowl and Wetlands Centre at Llanelli and the lake at the National Botanic Garden at Lyn Mawr rich sources of wild and naturalised species. He also had an exciting trip to Hampshire, visiting the New Forest and some good chalk grasslands such as Danebury Hill. His own highlights included Greater Butterfly-orchid *Platanthera chlorantha* in the hay meadow at the Botanic Gardens, Marsh St John's-wort *Hypericum elodes* in the New Forest and the delightful peas, Grass Vetchling *Lathyrus nissolia* and Narrow-leaved Everlasting-pea *L.sylvestris* at a local reserve at Parc Slip. I can't resist picking out another highlight the rare and beautiful Sea Stock *Matthiola sinuata*, which was long believed extinct in Glamorgan until its rediscovery in 1964.

Eliza Sackett explained that her botany year was restricted by both being careful in the Covid world and by family commitments but she remains aware of plants whatever happens. I could feel her enthusiasm from a brief highlight list she sent me, mentioning Musk Thistle *Carduus nutans* at Dunster Beach looking 'spectacular and I love the smell', and Pink-headed Persicaria *Persicaria capitata*. This has long been established as a pavement weed just outside her front door and she reports that it 'keeps reappearing despite people getting rid of it' and 'was in flower every month of 2021 - it deserves a medal for persistence!'

Sally and Alec Thomson live in Wiltshire and had a most active first year as members. Sally contacted me regularly about new (and sometimes unfamiliar) finds from a whole range of habitats. We worked on sorting out various garden weeds and she sent me more unusual records from precious outside trips to Goodrich Castle on the Welsh borders and to lovely local chalk grassland sites. I especially enjoyed photographs from Kook Hill of the downland view and that sweet plant Squinancywort *Asperula cynanchia*. Sally also cheered me in the middle of winter by sending a list of plants in flower on the first of December, January and February in their garden and village – I can see that she will become a dedicated Winter Months Hunter!

In spite of the difficult world Janet Vernon reports her 'most prolific year' in numbers of finds. Their annual trip to Northumberland was possible, seeing 'hundreds of Common Spotted-orchids *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*' and, to my delight, she described a display of Hoary Plantain *Plantago media* flowers as 'looking like delicate pale pink orchids and just as enchanting'. We share this liking – I sometimes try to persuade garden clients to introduce this to their lawns! Another favourite proved to be Hound's-tongue *Cynoglossum officinale* with 'deep red flowers and fabulous nutlets' which



Hound's-tongue

'captured her heart'. Most dramatic was Henbane *Hyoscyamus niger*. She notes that some books call this 'evil-looking' because of its highly poisonous properties, but Janet scorns this attitude and says it could only come from someone who 'does not recognise exotic beauty'. She certainly recorded this in a fine photograph. Other highlights included time by the Montgomery canal with water plants looking 'reminiscent of a Monet painting' and a day trip to a quarry near Wrexham with her 'former botany teacher Ruth Dawes' who is so well known to us all!

Pauline Wilson and her husband Richard are dynamic botanists and involved with many activities concerned with recording and conservation, leading U3A meetings, encouraging a local Chipping Sodbury church to achieve Eco Church status by increasing Cowslips and Yellow Rattle in the churchyard. Pauline had a horrid event in June, breaking a small bone in her leg, but she must have been indomitable as Richard took her to sites where she could 'hobble around'. His projects included organising planting of native trees and orchard species on former Network Rail land now owned by their parish. Pauline keeps a cumulative list and her total is now 1099 as she added three new species - Gallant-soldier *Galinsoga parviflora* which she used to see when they ran a tree nursery in London (where it has long been a common weed), but had never entered; Common Amaranth *Amaranthus retroflexus* (our member Clive Lovatt, BSBI Recorder for S. Gloucestershire, helped confirm this find from a difficult genus); and yet another member, Monica Davis showed Pauline Sweet-briar *Rosa rubiginosa* in a forest park in outer Bristol.

Aaron Woods always concentrates on botanising in or near his own part of Worcestershire and manages to add new common species to his cumulative list every year as well as making good records of more uncommon plants. His total is now 968. He reports one 'away' trip in 2021, to visit a friend in Oxfordshire, and was pleased that this outing added that most enchanting of crane's-bills Long-stalked Crane's-bill *Geranium columbinum* (also a great favourite of mine) and Dark Mullein *Verbascum nigrum* which sometimes makes striking displays on road verges of the Oxfordshire/Gloucestershire Cotswold borders. His 16 completely new plants this year included one of my favourite 'escapes' – the tall, lovely Milky Bellflower *Campanula lactiflora* which makes such a good back-of-border garden plant but can thoroughly establish itself in wilder habitats. I first saw it on a disused railway line by the River Spey in Scotland and can appreciate how thrilled Aaron must have been with his Herefordshire find.

This Branch, large as it is (88 members at latest count!) to my delight went on adding new people in 2021. Among them Shirley Payne who moved from Essex to Bromyard having spent some years in the East Anglian Branch. I look forward very much to being in touch with her, and other new members, during the year. Let's hope the weather is kind even if our new world remains tricky and I look forward to news, views and questions as often as possible.

RO FITZGERALD