

# Writing a 'site flora' with broad appeal: An experience from Glamorgan

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From 2011 to 2020, I intensively recorded the flora of a 'rhôs pasture' SSSI close to where I live in South Wales.

I was keen to document what I'd found in the form of a 'site flora' – but could I write something that was interesting to a wide audience while still being botanically thorough?

Here's my experience!



## How did it all start?

When I moved to South Wales in 2011, I immediately started recording plants on Llantrisant Common, a botanically-rich site next to where I lived.

Over the years, the dataset grew in breadth and detail, and I decided that I should 'do something' with it, beyond simply uploading the records to the BSBI database.

So I started to put together a 'site flora' that summarised what I'd found. But I set myself a big challenge, because I was keen for the book to appeal to all of the following:

- Botanists
- Wildlife enthusiasts in the region
- Local residents.

Such broad audience appeal is difficult to achieve in publishing, but I had a plan! My aim was to:

- Comprehensively cover the taxa, i.e. not just the rarities.
- Provide detailed information about locations and populations that would be of use to current site managers and future botanists.
- Incorporate aspects of the site's interesting history.
- Make the book visually appealing and readable by a non-specialist audience, while not 'dumbing-down' the botany.
- Keep the price down.
- Convey enthusiasm for the plants!

## About the site

Llantrisant Common and Pastures SSSI covers about 120 hectares immediately north of Llantrisant, about 8 miles north-west of Cardiff, in v.c. 41 (Glamorgan).

The flora of the Common is remarkably rich, thanks to its undulating landscape, long history of horse/cattle grazing, and mixture of 'rhôs pasture' habitats, including:

- Molinia caerulea* marshes and flushes
- Acid-neutral drier grassland
- Wet heath
- Streams and ditches
- Scrub and woodland
- Man-made features – roads, old railways and mine workings.



The location of Llantrisant Common in South Wales. Y Gweira is under different ownership but part of the SSSI, so I included it in the survey.



An area typical of the more species-rich habitats on Llantrisant Common, with drier grassland grading down through to *Molinia* marsh.

Although some habitat surveys had been carried out as part of the SSSI notification in the late 1990s, and botanists had made occasional visits, there was no detailed investigation of the flora... so there was plenty of work to do!



Aerial view, looking east across the central part of Llantrisant Common.

## How I did the surveying

For the first few years, my records were informal and untargeted, but once I got the idea of 'doing something' with them (in about 2017), I started to be more systematic.

This entailed:

- Making an effort to cover every 100 m x 100 m square (134 in total) across the site.
- Recording less common species at ≤10 m resolution (GPS).
- Drawing up lists of target taxa and actively looking for them.
- Close studies of particular groups, e.g. *Epilobium*, *Carex*.



Mostly I used notebooks, which are my preferred method of recording, because the original records can be checked, and notes are easily added. But to ensure I achieved good coverage of some common species, I did use record cards (one per species) marked with a GR grid.

I also broadened my research to include:

- Studying archive material
- Talking to local residents
- Finding old photos and maps.

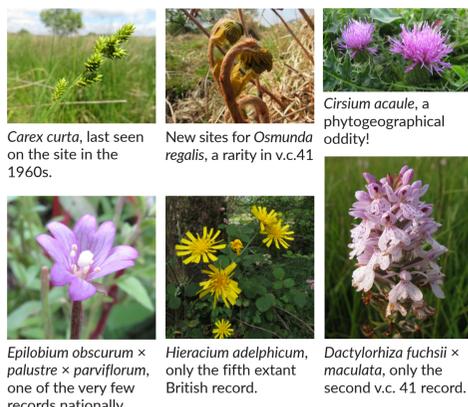


Old photos provided fascinating insights into the site's history.

## What I found

The result of this effort has been:

- I've made nearly 11,800 records, 69% at ≤10 m resolution
- I've recorded 408 taxa, including 206 that hadn't been previously recorded on the site
- I've mapped the distributions of 'special' plants known to be present, and found many new populations of them.
- I've sampled over 40 quadrats.
- I found some unexpected rarities too:

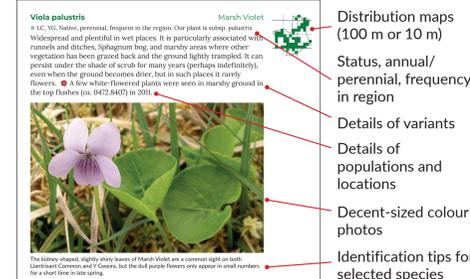


*Carex curta*, last seen on the site in the 1960s. New sites for *Osmunda regalis*, a rarity in v.c.41. *Epilobium obscurum* x *palustre* x *parviflorum*, one of the very few records nationally. *Hieracium adelphicum*, only the fifth extant British record. *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* x *maculata*, only the second v.c. 41 record.

## My approach to writing...

My day job is as a writer/editor, and I have access to typesetting software, so I decided to self-publish the book. This also gave me scope to incorporate the best aspects of other floras I'd seen, so I included:

- Background information on landscape, habitats, climate, etc.
- Individual habitat studies
- Aerial photos, detailed site maps and historical notes.
- Detailed plant accounts, including:



I aimed to keep the writing approachable, with a minimum of botanical jargon, and explanations of unfamiliar terms. I was slightly more conversational in the captions, as I reckoned those would be more likely to get read on a 'flick-through' by non-botanists.

## ...and page design

I felt that making the book look nice would help with sales outside the usual botanical community, so I went to some trouble to refine the page layout.

Pages were laid out in InDesign, which enabled fine control of colours, fonts, images, footers, page numbering, as well as semi-automated indexing (a new experience for me!).

I decided on a consistent colour scheme and fonts, with use of white space to avoid overcrowding...

Distribution maps were generated in Excel (!) direct from the data, and overlaid on a customised grid. This wasn't easy... but I could do it exactly how I wanted!

...but the large number of pictures meant that the layout required page-by-page optimisation from beginning to end, which was tedious!



I plotted selected species with 10 m resolution, giving useful insights (here *Sibthorpia europaea*).

I included photos of a range of taxa, not just those commonly thought of as 'photogenic' – this *Juncus squarrosus* was a good example.

## Printing, pricing, promotion

I'd originally wanted to keep the book to 160 pages, but as I laid out the text, I realised I was running out of space!

So to fit as much in as possible, I raised it to 192 pages, liaised with a print broker on the optimum page size, and fine-tuned the font size, line spacing, margins, paper quality and binding. I definitely wanted colour throughout, which these days is moderately affordable. But there was a choice:

- Litho printing** gives crisp, bright pictures... but there's a minimum quantity (usually 200, more than I wanted)
- Digital printing** often results in duller colours... but you can print as few as you need, saving money on shorter print runs.

I went for litho, and a print run of 200... making for a cost of £10.48 per copy.

I wasn't overly bothered about making a profit, so I set the price at £12.50 to make it value-for-money for readers with a passing interest in plants; but in retrospect I could probably have gone £1–2 higher without affecting sales too much.

I launched the book in November 2020, with promotion through facebook, the local BSBI group and other wildlife groups, plus magazine articles, invited book reviews, conference/meeting talks, and word-of-mouth.



## Sales and feedback

In two years, I've shifted 147 copies:

- 124 have been sold (73% direct, 27% through shops)
- 23 have been gifted, donated or otherwise given away.

Takeup across different audiences has been good:

- 65 to local residents (via local museum, gift shop, facebook)
- 32 to BSBI members (mostly the local group)
- 24 through regional wildlife groups
- 17 to personal contacts and family members
- 9 to schools, libraries and government agencies.

I've recouped about 70% of my expenditure so far, which I don't think is too bad for a book on such a niche topic!

Overall, the feedback has been very positive.

- I had some nice reviews:
  - "Bridges the gap between those with no experience to expert botanists"
  - "A welcome and fresh approach [...] a first-class example of a detailed but readable site flora"
- And it's been good for raising the profile of plants locally:
  - Someone saw me in the street and said: "Excuse me, but are you the botany person?"
  - A local resident yelled out the window of their car as they passed by: "Loved the book, David!"
  - I've since run three plant walks, attended by 10–15 people.

## Supporting BSBI objectives?

In the late stages of writing the book, I saw Lynne Farrell's summary of the three BSBI objectives (*BSBI News*, September 2020, p.4).

Although I didn't write my book with these objectives in mind, it strikes me that, if carefully constructed, site floras could help to achieve objectives 1 and 3, and perhaps also objective 2.

BSBI objective	Can site floras help by...
1. Building a more diverse community of botanists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Appealing to those interested in the plants that can be found <u>near them?</u></li> <li>Being relatively affordable, because of their inherently limited scope?</li> </ul>
2. Providing high-quality, impartial data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Providing comprehensive species coverage, and detail on abundance and distribution at a fine scale?</li> </ul>
3. Disseminating information to drive a passion for plants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Providing identification tips while avoiding too many botanical terms?</li> <li>Demonstrating enthusiasm for the plants, and using plenty of colourful photos?</li> </ul>

What do you think? What site/regional floras are there in your area that fulfill these roles? Do we need more of them?

## What I learnt

For anyone thinking of writing a site flora, here are a few things I've learnt from the process:

- Decide on a cut-off date for recording and stick to it, because the flora of a site is constantly changing – in the 2 years since I finished surveying in August 2020, I've found 6 additional taxa, both newly arrived and overlooked!
- Maps are a nuisance for small sites – OS maps may not show the detail you want, and you'll need to pay a licence fee even if you redraw them with more details, as I did. But Google's aerial images are free!
- Be prepared to have your knowledge tested to its limits – in the final proof, a colleague pointed out that my photo of *Lemna minor* was in fact the 'flat' form of *Lemna gibba*, which I'd never heard of – cue last-minute panic!
- Promotion is hard work with uncertain rewards – you need to pull out all the stops...
  - ...but a tip is to focus promotion ahead of Christmas, Mother's Day etc. – a fair proportion of my sales were bought as presents!
- Don't underestimate the work involved in handling direct sales, payments and postage, if you decide to self-publish.
- Put your photo on the back cover so that local residents will recognise you (if you want a degree of local fame, that is!).



## Judge for yourself!

So how do I feel about the project in retrospect?

- Because the book included such a lot of detail and I did it to somewhat exacting standards, it's taken a frankly ridiculous amount of time to research, write and typeset.
- But... self-publishing was great, because I was in complete control, and I could do it exactly as I liked.
- And... it's been great promotion for plants/wildlife in the local area, has helped the commoners attract funding for management, and has become a point of reference for future studies.
- Finally, it's helped me get better at my plants too – except (ahem) *Rubus* and *Taraxacum*!



Have a flick through and see what you think – could botany in your area benefit from a site flora with general appeal?