

Local groups and their contribution to BSBI

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I write from the perspective of one local group, that of the Central Chilterns of Buckinghamshire (v.c. 24 in part). The group was started in 2021 and it has a programme of fortnightly field meetings through the green summer period and others less frequently in the brown time of year. The original group were all resident in the area west from Great Missenden to Speen, north of High Wycombe. The meetings were led by one or, almost always, two members who could pretend to some knowledge of botany, one as a qualified botanist who teaches introductory courses in the subject (Karen van Oostrum), and the other with long experience (40 years) of surveying plants and their occurrence in the core area (Tony Marshall). Other members have keen interests in botany but with different levels of knowledge. The principal aims of the group are to share knowledge, impart skills, and introduce members to the varied plant life and habitats of the Chilterns, but there were always other aims. While we were there for the enjoyment of exploring with like-minded individuals and sharing discoveries, we also wanted to make a scientific contribution to botanical knowledge, both of the Chilterns and more generally, about which more below. In our second year we were generously allowed space on the BSBI website to publicise our programme for the coming year and to provide reports on the achievements of each field meeting. This has resulted in a doubling of our membership and a widening of our geographical base, although our core area still provides most of the venues for our meetings.

As far as our social aims go, the group provides easily accessible events that minimise the effects of travel on the environment. The marvellous programme of field meetings provided by BSBI nationally is largely inaccessible to members, as very few are in Bucks or anywhere near. Personally I can only make one or two a year. The local group fills

this gap and also allows more in-depth learning of the botany of a particular area and climate. Some events are mainly for enjoyment. Each year, for instance, we now have one event in which members are challenged to find, in a limited area, as many as possible of plants mentioned in a particular poem, starting in 2023 with the famous lines from Oberon's poem in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* beginning 'I know a bank whereon the wild thyme blows'. (Not only did members find all the flowers mentioned, but they also used their imaginations to find various of the fairies featured in the tale!)

Even in the case of the more general walks (let's go here and see what there is), we always keep a record, either of the more notable plants found, or more usually a general list of all those that could be identified. In some cases we have set out to record all plants at a particular site. These records are entered in a database that covers the plants and all other orders in the roughly 100 square kilometres of our core area. This database was started in the 1980s by the author and now has over 21,000 plant records generated locally, plus a similar number, mostly of older surveys, from the county environmental records centre, covering 1,379 species. This, coupled with targeted surveys and special studies, has helped me to write 'The Ecological Flora of the Central Chilterns'¹.

The database also provides the basis for organising many of the meetings – sites under-recorded or with no records since the last century, old records of rare plants that should be followed up. In this way we are continually updating the records and establishing the current status of all species locally.

Other events are organised around improving our knowledge of particular plants. Our very first event,

1 (available at: dropbox.com/sh/5kkazz7vjhgimpw/AAB0h_3pMFAIHL_8PBb82U1ta?dl=0)

in fact, jumping in the deep end on April Fool's Day 2021, was a search for long homostyles of *Primula vulgaris* (Primrose) at a site where they had last been recorded in 1947 by the botanist J.L. Crosby. While this seemed likely to be indeed a fool's errand, we did locate the original colony and established its survival, and we were able to examine the frequency of occurrence of different combinations of short and long styles and stamens. We followed this up with visits to other sites with Primrose colonies, but very rarely found any long homostyles. We also discovered that the plants with more frequent short homostyles were almost entirely garden escapes.

We have also searched for all extant colonies of *Helleborus viridis* (Green Hellebore), trying to elucidate why they had such a limited distribution in our area while being abundant at the sites where they did occur. It soon became evident that the primary needs of the plant were shade (hence it is a woodland species) and high levels of calcium in the soil. The latter provided the key to understanding the strange distribution. Most woodlands in the area are on the clays, their lower margins occurring along the narrow line of the geological strata known as 'chalk rock', below which the land had usually been cleared for agriculture. All our local colonies occurred, without exception, where ancient woodland extended unusually below the chalk rock layer, where the pH was very high, but trees provided the necessary shade. As this seldom happened it explained the small number of hellebore colonies and their apparently random distribution. (It has also been noted that *Helianthemum nummularium* (Common Rock-rose) in our area only occurs along the line of the chalk rock or just below, wherever a grass margin has always been left at the top of the field.) The importance of observing the position of the chalk rock stratum as it winds around the Chiltern Hills has seldom been noted heretofore.

We have also been concerned to improve our abilities as a group to distinguish some critical species. A study of wild apples *Malus domestica* (Apple) and *M. sylvestris* (Crab Apple) determined that very few specimens were the latter and that earlier records have often over-recorded it. We have also



A group meeting at Cock Marsh, Buckinghamshire.
Clare Padmore

conducted surveys of wild roses *Rosa* spp. using the latest key (one hedgerow containing 8 different taxa); examined colonies of *Hypericum* spp. (St John's-worts) with particular reference to the hybrid *H. × desetangsii* and concluded that all previous local records for *Polygala calcarea* (Chalk Milkwort) were probably erroneous, having searched all relevant sites and finding only *P. vulgaris* (Common Milkwort), even though the habitats had not deteriorated. We sadly found that all previous colonies of native *Alchemilla* (Lady's-mantles), of which at least *A. xanthochlora* (Intermediate Lady's-mantle) had survived until very recently, were sadly now extinct due to a combination of habitat desiccation and destruction, a double whammy.

This mix of enjoyable browsing and scientific work will continue in the 2024 programme and new members are welcome, even if they can only join us for one or two events (e-mail below). Members receive regular updates on the programme and reports on events. Registration for field meetings is necessary to keep numbers to a reasonable number, but has not yet meant anyone has been turned away.

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