

### **BSBI Field trip to Loughabarra, Co. Laois (VC H14) 21<sup>st</sup> June 2014.**

A bright fine June morning saw a group of 10 botanists visiting Loughabarra on our first hosting of a BSBI fieldtrip in Co. Laois. This site is part of a farm owned by the Talbot family of Ballacolla, who kindly hosted us for the day. The site is in a basin containing diverse wet grassland that frequently floods in winter. The site is split into a wet meadow which adjoins improved grassland and is lightly grazed by cattle in spring and summer and a much wetter rich fen/*Molinia* meadow area which was fenced off many years ago after the father of the present farmer watched on helplessly as one of his bullocks got stuck in the mud literally and was never seen again! This area has never been grazed since (at least 40 years).

The wet meadow was the first habitat to be tackled. This area has never been re-seeded and together with the light grazing regime was therefore in great condition with plenty of species of interest to us botanists. Interestingly Loughabarra is marked as 'bog' on the Bog Commissioners map drawn in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. However, there were none of the more typical signs of old turf-cuttings such as face-banks. The Talbots had no memory of turf being cut from the site although there was some re-collection in Ballacolla village of the last turf being drawn from Loughabarra bog around the time of the First World War.

The meadow was zoned with typical meadow-grasses above a zone of wetter species. Plenty of time was spent separating *Festuca arundinacea* from *Festuca pratensis* and examining other grasses. The wetter area contained species such as *Eleocharis palustris* and a range of species including *Carex panicea*, *C. hirta*, *C. ovalis*, *C. disticha*, *C. hostiana* and *C. nigra* and lots of pretty *Cirsium dissectum*. The boggy (or fenny) nature of the site was indicated by the appearance of *Eriophorum angustifolium* and *Schoenus nigricans*. It seemed like only 300-400m was covered before it was time for lunch, which was some indication of the relatively diverse grassland with plenty for botanists to see.

Lunch was taken in the hot, bright sunshine of a glorious midsummer day with the occasional visits of Brimstone Butterfly. The adjacent meadow of dense *Molinia caerulea* featured frequent, scattered *Rhamnus cathartica* bushes and small trees (this infrequent species seems to have a localised distribution in Laois - while we have only recorded Buckthorn from two sites so far, Brimstone butterfly has appeared at more sites some distance from here, suggesting that more Buckthorn awaits to be recorded). Access was along some recently cleaned drainage ditches and the recent disturbance provided several interesting and unusual species that were colonising both the newly cleaned drain and the spoil on the access track. *Ranunculus sceleratus* and *R. trichophyllus* were both recorded from this zone as was *Rubus caesius*. The drainage ditches contained species such as *Carex rostrata*, *Baldellia ranunculoides*, *Schoenoplectus lacustris* and *Alisma plantago-aquatica*. The *Molinia* meadow was relatively species poor in contrast with the grazed meadow. There were several patches of *Cladium mariscus* and some other indicators of rich fen such as *Carex elata*, although historical drainage had obviously had an impact on the extent of the fen. Interestingly no orchids were recorded on the day or during a previous visit. Was

this because of the lack of grazing and the rank grassland? The find of the day was *Scutellaria galericulata*. This small plant (Marsh Skullcap) had been recorded during a previous visit when it had been excitingly thought to be our first new county record, although further research with the database showed it had been recorded before, but was quite scarce. Deep, wide, newly-cleared ditches separated us from adjacent similar fen habitat that possibly promised a few more species or even some orchids. Ladders had been kindly provided but it was felt that discretion was better than getting stuck in the middle of the ditch. So this territory was left to explore for another day!

A small annex group, not yet exhausted by the hot sun, then had a quick visit to the nearby Granstown Lake Nature Reserve. A previous DNFC visit earlier in the year had, excitingly to us, yielded a species we had not seen before. It had tentatively, but wrongly, been named *Adoxa moschatellina* (Town Hall Clock, Five-sided Bishop) based on its leaves, and further reports came of this rare and unusual plant being found at the site by a group from a university some years before. However, the plant which was now in flower turned out to be Meadow-rue (*Thalictrum flavum*), while not as unusual as *Adoxa*, still a new record for us. Thanks to Eamon Gaughan for identifying this species.