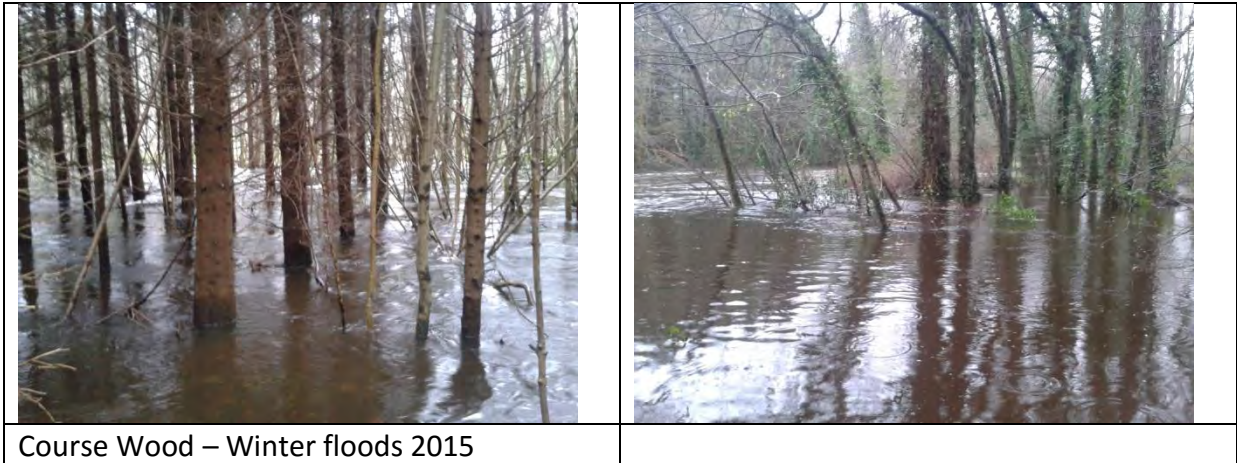


### Botanising in Laois in 2015.

One of the nicest walks in Laois is the river-side walk along the Nore in Course Wood, north of Durrow. This is part of the longer 'Durrow Leafy Loop', which extends around Durrow for about 13 miles. The majority of the wood is conifer plantation but there is a lovely strip of old broad-leaved alluvial woodland along the river. We walked this path several times during the year, each visit finding new species in this diverse strip. There are some great specimens of White Willow (*Salix alba*), Crack Willow (*Salix fragilis*) as well as Osier (*Salix vilimalis*) and the more ubiquitous Rusty/Grey Willow (*Salix cinerea* subsp. *oleifolia*). Bird Cherry (*Prunus padus*) is present along the wood (and is also found in several of the woods around Abbeyleix and along the River Nore). Some indicators of the rich diversity of this woodland included Hard Shield Fern (my first record of this species in Laois) and Dog's Mercury (*Mercurialis perennis*) (although there is probably some doubt over the native status of this latter species). The only previous recent record of this species was by Paul Greene and Megan Morris in Abbeyleix Demesne. Betsy Hickey also recorded this species in the same wood back in 2009 during fieldwork for the Laois Habitat Survey. No doubt there are more species to find – I still have to explore the flora of the river channel, with the large patches of Water Crowfoot and other species, at some stage when the water is low enough. It may be some time as I had a look at the site over Christmas and it is impossible to travel along the path due to winter flooding. This really is an alluvial woodland and there is great potential to extend the broad-leaved woodland cover by taking out some of the lower conifers.





We also spent a lovely summer's evening in July with our friends the Leonards, who run Castlewood Organic Farm along the Nore (on the other side of the river to Course Wood). We wanted to explore and record in an old quarry that we had visited previously. On the way into the quarry we passed through some broad-leaved woodland and the first thing the kids found was some Ivy Broomrape (*Orobanche hederæ*). Much of the quarry was overgrown but sure enough there was some calcareous grassland around the margins with typical indicator species such as Pyramidal Orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*). There is also some alluvial woodland along the margin of Castlewood Farm on the other bank of the Nore that hopefully we will have a chance to explore in the future.

One species of interest for us during the year was Toothwort (*Lathraea squamaria*) as it was part of the Irish Species Project. This species had not been recorded in Laois before so we resolved to visit some of our usual woodland haunts early in the year to see if we could come up with any records. While we did not find any Toothwort ourselves we were serendipitously sent a photo of some plants by Conor McGrath, a student working with the Abbeyleix Bog Project. His family also run an organic farm near Ballinakill and he had found some Toothwort in some Hazel scrub that forms part of the farm. Many thanks to Conor for sending us the record.


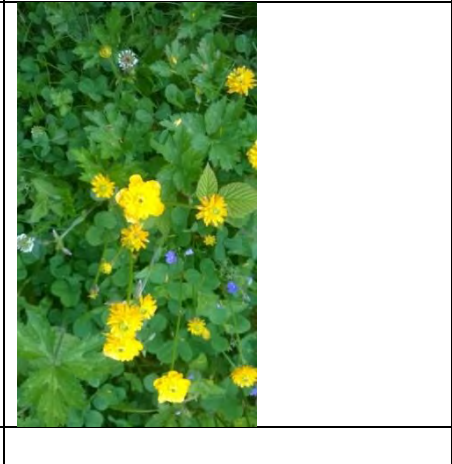
I have only recently started to use the BSBI DDB database to query Laois plant distributions and records. One plant I queried was Alder Buckthorn (*Frangula alnus*) as I had recently found a small population along the edge of Coolnacarten Bord na Mona production bog south of Portlaoise. (One of the advantages of my job as ecologist with Bord na Mona is getting to explore sites like these.) I discovered that the only previous record for Alder Buckthorn was back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a 10 km<sup>2</sup> grid square NE of Mountmellick, which overlaps with Offaly. I figured out that the only bog in this square was at Garryhinch BnM bog. So one evening when I had an extra hour I went for a walk along a track into the bog and sure enough there was Alder Buckthorn still present and growing along a drainage channel/channelized stream called Cottener's Bank flowing from the site. A quick survey produced over 20 plants growing on both banks of the channel and in the adjacent cutover

bog margin of the track. As Cottener's Bank is part of the county boundary this means there are records for this plant in both Laois and Offaly for this square! This example shows how the BSBI DDb database can be used to find some species, along with some educated guesswork, even when records are only recorded at 10 km<sup>2</sup> resolution over 100 years ago.

One of the more unusual plants we found during the year was when we led a guided walk along Collin's Bog way-marked trail as part of family fun day in Abbeyleix South School at the end of the school year. This is a local walk that passes close to the school, crosses some recently felled conifer plantation and also takes in Abbeyleix Bog. We came across a funny looking Buttercup again, (see below) with a double row of petals. Fiona had seen this the previous year and had highlighted it in her BSBI talk. Was it a new growth form or phenotype of Creeping Buttercup (*Ranunculus repens*)? A bit of googling found out that several ornamental buttercup species have double or numerous petals, including *Ranunculus repens* 'Pleniflorus', which looks remarkably like our specimen. So unfortunately I will have to wait a bit longer to name something 'Abbeyleixii'.

Something else I did for the first time this year was use a BSBI referee. I had a look at a small area of Black bog rush-dominated fen habitat near Ballybrittas during the summer. I had looked at it the previous year but later in the year during August, and had come across some *Dactylorhiza* orchids that had gone over. So I had hoped to come across these orchids in better condition. I found them, figured out they were Marsh Orchids and took some pictures, which I sent to Ian Denholm for identification. He identified the pics as Narrow-leaved Marsh Orchid *Dactylorhiza traunsteinerioides*. This is only the second record for this rare orchid species in Laois and surprisingly there are not that many other Marsh Orchid records in Laois. However, I have definitely come across Marsh Orchids in Laois before but have struggled to identify them to sub-species. Now I will be paying more attention, trying to figure out what sub-species they are and taking lots more pictures!

Fiona organised an event for Heritage Week at Abbeyleix Bog in August. This was themed as beginner's wildflower identification led by the local BSBI recorder. We were unsure what level of interest there would be as it was timetabled for a mid-week morning. Unfortunately the weather didn't help and it bucketed down all morning – 'the worst day of the whole summer'. It was even too wet to take photos. However, 25 brave souls faced the wet conditions and came down for the event, some from as far away as Dublin. Fiona was able to point out some of the wildflowers and other plants around the site and compared several habitats, showing how you can use various different plants as indicators of different habitats.

			
<p>Narrow-leaved Marsh Orchid <i>Dactylorhiza traunsteinerioides</i> from a fen near Ballybrittas</p>		<p>Toothwort from Hazel wood Ballinakill</p>	
			
<p>Unusual form of Creeping Buttercup from Colins Bog</p>			

Fernando Fernandez reported an interesting find to me from Abbeyleix Bog. Jim Ryan, John Cross and Fernando were down looking at some of the great wet woodland that has developed around the high bog, much of it in old cutover bog formerly planted as conifer woodland in the past but now dominated by Grey Willow. Some of this woodland is now considered to be one of the best examples of raised bog lagg zone woodland in Ireland. Much of the ground cover is dominated by tussocks of Greater Tussock Sedge *Carex paniculata* and Lesser Pond Sedge *Carex acutiformis* along with a suite of typical fen carr species. While examining the woodland they came across some *Pyrola* plants scattered over a small area and were subsequently identified as Common Wintergreen *Pyrola minor* by Fred Rumsey of BSBI. John Cross had previously recorded *Pyrola* at Abbeyleix Bog but it

had not been seen for several years, so this was a welcome find. There are no other records of any *Pyrola* species in Laois from the BSBI database.

Abbeyleix Bog has always got plenty of attention from us due to its proximity and great access for walking. I thought I knew the site fairly well. However, Jim Ryan, Fernando Fernandez, Maurice Eakin and I explored some wet grassland along the eastern margin of the site during the summer. The wet grassland turned into a fascinating seepage zone located between the eastern glacial moraine and the bog. This was vegetated with a diverse range of typical fen species including Blunt-flowered Rush *Juncus subnolulosus*, Common Butterwort *Pinguicula vulgaris* and several *Carex* species. (I looked at this area again in June as I thought it was a typical site for Marsh Fritillary but none turned up.)

So 2015 has been a good year for botanising in Co. Laois with a relative 'plenty' of records collected and sites visited. Hopefully 2016 will be just as good and will bring more interesting sites and species.