



Dear Member,

It was good to see so many of you at Whixall Moss on 14 May and we have to thank Peter for laying on such good weather and showing us the interesting features. I am anxiously waiting to read later in this Newsletter, whether he has managed to identify the bush that had not flushed into leaf on the day and which he was going to grow on at home.

I have a confession to make! Being in such a damp location I have always assumed that the adventitious birch growing along the old railway line and ditches in Whixall Moss was downy and not silver birch. Few of these trees appear to be older than 20 years of age and I did not see a single tree with the typical dark vertical black diamond bark plates of silver birch. All seemed to have the greyish-pinkish-white bark with horizontal pink bands (actually the lenticels allowing breathing) which I have always used as a means of telling downy birch from silver birch. This visit was the first visit I have made there for some years after the leaves had flushed when it was possible to study them. These along with the raised white warts on the twigs confirmed that the trees were all *Betula pendula*. I did not see one tree I thought was *Betula pubescens*. Lesson learned!

I learned another lesson, today, during a walk from The Bog on the Stiperstones to Shelve and back. A couple of years ago I spent an afternoon vainly looking for a veteran Laburnum tree which had been recorded there on the Ancient Tree Inventory but had not been verified. Today I again failed to find the tree but this prompted me to look up the reference to Laburnum in Andrew Allott's book *The Marches* and to Google Laburnum, Marches. It seems that in West Wales, despite the very poisonous characteristic of all leafy parts of the tree, it was widely planted as a hedge and it appears also in West Shropshire. Today the trees were in full flower as can be seen in the accompanying picture. Laburnum (*Laburnum anagyroides*) is native to



Figure 1: Laburnum hedge (photo Andy Gordon)

Central and Southern Europe and was first introduced into the UK in 1560. Even Scotch Laburnum (*Laburnum alpinum*) introduced to the UK in 1596 is native to Southern Europe but does tend to have been planted in Scotland rather than the *L. anagyroides*.

Despite its poisonous nature, Laburnum does have some uses. The heart-wood of the Laburnum was often used as an Ebony substitute as it is very hard and coloured a dark chocolate brown. The sapwood surrounding the heart-wood is in contrast a bright yellow. The wood has been used for making the handles of tools and for use in various crafts and it is suggested that this is why it was being grown 150 years ago on the Stiperstones. Of course Laburnum has been widely planted for its decorative value, with the cultivar *Laburnum x wateri*, which is a hybrid between the above two species and known as Voss's Laburnum the most commonly planted. Its fruits scarcely develop producing only 1-3 per catkin which is a great advantage when planting near schools. Andrew suggests that the wood was used for minor's pick handles and for a cottage industry of turnery and box making.

I hope to see many of you at our next visit to the Dorothy Clive Gardens near Market Drayton on Saturday 11 June. *Andy Gordon*

Report on the Visit to Whixall Moss

On a very pleasant mid-May afternoon we began with a long walk along the Llangollen canal with more than a little gongoozling (! *sic. ed.*) at passing and tethered barges. At this stage we are on an embankment and well above the level of the Mosses so there are excellent views in all directions. The predominantly hawthorn hedge alongside is interrupted at regular intervals with oaks planted during canal construction for use on the waterway. The engineers of two centuries and more ago really thought long term. As the ground alongside became far too wet for oaks and hawthorns, this gave way to alder and willow carr woodland. Along this stretch is situated the recently erected Mammoth Tower, up which we all ventured though not all at once I hasten to add for Health and Safety reasons- we didn't want to cause a structural collapse and lose STT members in such a fashion. The view from atop over the thousand hectares is remarkable and illustrates so well the idea of pioneer tree species- one could almost imagine what a landscape would look like at the end of an Ice Age, everywhere there were small bright green mounds of bonsai'd birch amongst the cotton sedges.



Figure 2: View over Whixall Moss (photo Roger Hughes)

Amidst mutterings of discontent that STT was fast becoming a canal appreciation society, we finally turned onto the Moss itself and followed the main north drain but the effects of the very dry spring were evident. I used to walk here with the children in the eighties when there was still large-scale commercial peat cutting and it was a pretty miserable and derelict area. This industry ended about 1990, the Moss was more or less abandoned for a while but especially in more recent years there has been much work to re-wet the area: blocking drains, incorporating sluices, installing large diameter water levelling pipes etc. We took a slight detour to see the Old Works where the peat was treated before sale, as we approached a lizard fell to earth from its basking perch on a leaflet post (many on site, always useful). Now that its corrugated roof has long since rusted away, it is a strange site, anywhere else it would have been preserved for posterity. Adjacent to the old Oswestry, Ellesmere and Whitchurch (later Cambrian) Railway one can imagine peat going to bed cavalry horses and as fuel in the trenches in the Great War.

Just beyond the line is Maelor Forest Nursery, one of the largest in the country and which STT has never visited to my knowledge. And three or so miles beyond that is Gredington, the home of Lord and Lady Kenyon, which STT is due to visit in October. Having only ever seen this rather special place in spring, it will surely be a highlight of the year. But the highlight of the day was above our heads; someone



Figure 3: Visit to Whixall Moss and the Shropshire Union Canal (photo Roger Hughes)

shouted to look at the swift on a thermal, 'twas rather larger and more exciting, indeed a Hobby. Have never seen members so worryingly excitable, for a second or two it looked as though a defibrillator might have been handy.

We walked across the middle of the Moss, the vegetation on the disturbed peat and soil of the tracks so different than on the wetter ground where because of the very high acidity the trees that there are, birches, alder buckthorn, the odd oak and pines, can only grow to a few feet tall. Alongside the tracks some trees can reach a reasonable size, though they are constantly being removed otherwise they

would begin to dry out the mosses again. We did come across a tree which we could not identify, or rather a clump of them in one small area where alder buckthorn were also thriving. The latter were just at leaf emergence but the mystery ones were even later leafing. Will check out again before too long. There was one last highlight however. In the distance a pair of Hen Harriers (someone with better optics said more) were displaying spectacularly. Whether the afternoon was a canal walk or a tree walk or a bird walk or simply an amalgam of all three, everyone seemed to have had a worthwhile time. And for those who began the day with a picnic beforehand and a drink at the local hostelry afterwards, rather a long one....

Peter Aspin.

Visit to Dorothy Clive Gardens at Market Drayton on Saturday 11 June -

Meet in the car park @ 2pm. Address-The Dorothy Clive Garden, Willoughbridge, Market Drayton, Shropshire, TF9 4EU

There is a downloadable tree trail on the website.

<https://dorothyclivegarden.co.uk/>

We haven't booked in as a group as they needed an agreed number, payment in advance and a list of names...so people are just going to turn up.

The tea room can cope with people just turning up so other than them already knowing a small group is coming, that is all they need to know.

The tearoom will be open from 10am until 4.30pm and they will be serving a full menu.**PLEASE NOTE THE TEAROOM IS WITHIN THE GROUNDS OF THE GARDEN AND AN ENTRY FEE IS REQUIRED TO GAIN ACCESS TO THE TEAROOM.**

The Dorothy Clive Garden is situated on the A51, two miles from the village of Woore, mid way between Nantwich and Stone, and just 7 miles from the local medieval town of Market Drayton. Junction 15 on the M6 is only 7.5 miles away and the garden is also just 20 miles from the Welsh border. The Dorothy Clive Garden is just 4 miles south of Bridgemere Garden World. **Tel: 01630 647237**