

Rectory Woods and Marston Thrift Wood, Cranfield **Notes for a self-guided walk by Mike LeRoy**

MK Natural History Society had planned a walk from Cranfield around new and old woodlands for the evening of Tuesday 19th May 2020, in time to see the spring woodland flora. It was cancelled because of Covid-19. These notes are for you to make your own visit there at any time of year.

Where to start: Church of St Peter & St Paul, Court Road off High Street, Cranfield, Bedfordshire, MK43 0DR

Grid Reference: SP 95568 42022.

How to get there by bus: The C1 bus (Unō) runs from MK Coachway and from several stops within MK. <https://www.unobus.info/services/cranfield/c1c10c11/c1/> Travel to the War Memorial bus-stop in Cranfield, then cross the road to Court Street and along that to the church, where the walking route starts.

Travelling by car: There is now no public parking by Rectory Farm, and only limited roadside parking in Cranfield near St Peter & St Paul church (no parking alongside the triangular green opposite).

The walk: walk through the contrasting young woodlands of Forest of Marston Vale (Tartletts Close, Legacy Thrift, Strawberry Hill and Brickfields plantations) and the ancient woodland of Marston Thrift (SSSI) ash/field maple woodland with oak and hazel, butterflies and woodland flowers. Enjoy fine views from the high points over Marston Vale, towards Holcot Wood and beyond that to the Brickhill woodlands.

Distance of the circular walk: 3.1 miles.

Risks and safety: Marston Thrift is on clay: some of the paths slope quite steeply and can be slippery. In places the ditches alongside paths are deep with partially concealed steep sides. Gateways tend to be muddy with uneven ground. There are the usual risks of injury from thorns and brambles, uneven ground or tripping on fallen branches

Route: The approach to Marston Thrift woodland is on paths through young plantations of Rectory Wood (part of the Forest of Marston Vale). Our walk takes us through Legacy Thrift north-eastwards up the hill, to the foot of Strawberry Hill plantation which we enter and leave through kissing gates. From here we enter the semi-ancient woodland of Marston Thrift. A straight path takes us downhill south-eastwards between conifers and deciduous trees; at points this is quite steep and can be slippery. The path levels out where a stand of conifers was cleared in 2012. The path then bears right and heads south-westward on the level. Continue to the end of the Wood, then turn right onto a path to the edge of the Wood, which leads back through Legacy Thrift for return to Rectory Farm and Cranfield.

Route itinerary: The route is shown on this MapOmeter map and in the sequence listed below: https://gb.mapometer.com/walking/route_5112433

Start at St Peter & St Paul church, Court Road Cranfield

- Walk down Rectory Lane
- Through gate on right opposite entrance to Cemetery
- Down the hill on woodland path between Tartlett's Close and Ridsdale Copse
- St foot of hill turn left through gate by houses at Rectory Farm, then right
- Follow path through Legacy Thrift young woodland
- Turn left to walk up the hill alongside a hedge past young woodland
- Where the path levels out, turn right (look back at the distant view)
- Follow track eastwards past a triangle of older woodland to a kissing gate
- Through gate to walk up through Strawberry Hill new woodlands
- At the top of the hill you have reached the edge of Marston Thrift Wood
- Briefly follow bridleway to sign by gate to Marston Thrift Wood

- Through gate into Marston Thrift Wood
- Follow the straight woodland path downhill quite steeply
- At the foot of the hill bear right along the main ride through the Wood
- Pass over a crossroad of rides
- Continue to the end of this path at the western end of the Wood
- Turn right onto meandering path which reaches the outer edge of Marston Thrift

- You have three choices from here, all of which get you back to Rectory Farm:
 - straight on following the bridleway
 - bear slightly right through Legacy Thrift
 - bear sharply left through Brickfields plantation
- From Rectory Farm return uphill past Tartlett's Close plantation
- Through the gate onto Rectory Lane
- Turn left up Rectory Lane into Court Road back to your starting point.

Rectory Wood plantations

The area between Marston Thrift and Cranfield is former arable farmland on the slopes of the clay ridge. These 70 ha were acquired by the Marston Vale Trust to plant new woodland, part of which is called Rectory Wood. This is one of many new woodlands created as part of the Forest of Marston Vale, which was formed in 1991 to become a new 'community forest'. There are five main sections to Rectory Wood. To the north of Rectory Farm is Plunders Hill, to its south Tartletts Close (planted 2004), Ridsdale Copse and Heathfield Coppice, and to the east of that, Brickfields plantations. Between Rectory Farm and Marston Thrift are Legacy Thrift (planted 1997) and Strawberry Hill (8.5 ha planted 2005). Strawberry Hill has four core areas planted with trees, surrounded by smaller areas which have been seeded and with the outer edges left to be colonised naturally. Initially these new woodlands attracted bird species such as skylark and goldfinch, but they are now maturing and attracting more species. The new plantations have managed grass paths through them with plenty of ground flora alongside them including plants such as: Lady's bedstraw *Galium verum* and Knapweeds *Centaurea* spp. which attract butterflies and bees.

Marston Thrift woodland

The woodland: Marston Thrift is mostly semi-natural ancient woodland, previously managed as coppice-with-standards. 37ha of the 57ha wood was notified as an SSSI in 1951 as an example of ash/maple woodland characteristic of the heavy

Oxford and Boulder Clays. The north-east segment is outside the SSSI and was planted with conifers which have been partly cleared.

Site ownership and management: Marston Thrift: owned by Central Beds Council (CBC) and designated as a Local Nature Reserve in 1995. Previously leased to the Forestry Commission, now managed by CBC.

Trees & shrubs: Coniferous areas include: Scots pine *Pinus sylvestris*, Corsican pine *Pinus nigra* ssp *laricio* and Norway spruce *Picea abies*. The tree canopy: mainly overgrown ash *Fraxinus excelsior* coppice with pedunculate oak *Quercus robur* over a shrub layer dominated by coppiced hazel *Corylus avellana*. Other species: field maple *Acer campestre*, blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*, privet *Ligustrum vulgare*, crab apple *Malus sylvestris*, hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, and midland hawthorn *Crataegus laevigata*, spindle *Euonymus europaeus* and honeysuckle *Lonicera periclymenum*.

Ground flora: The ground flora includes bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* and other species associated with ancient woodland such as: dog's mercury *Mercurialis perennis*, yellow archangel *Lamiastrum galeobdolon*, wood anemone *Anemone nemorosa*, wood spurge *Euphorbia amygdaloides*, wood millet *Milium effusum*, and wood melick *Melica uniflora*. There is also a population of Forster's (or Southern) woodrush *Luzula forsteri*. 16 species of fern have been recorded here. In the early spring colt's-foot *Tussilago farfara* is abundant in some areas. Other ground flora, some of which is in flower in early Spring includes: spurge laurel *Daphne laureola*, primrose *Primula vulgaris*, figwort *Scrophularia* sp., St John's wort *Hypericum* sp., bugle *Ajuga reptans*, lords & ladies *Arum maculatum*, wood avens *Geum urbanum*, lesser celandine *Ranunculus ficaria* and burdock *Arctium* sp.

Mosses: A few of the mosses present are: *Brachythecium rutabulum*, *Hypnum cupressiforme*, *Cirriphyllum piliferum*, *Calliergonella cuspidata*, *Rhytidiadelphus squarrosus*, *Funaria hygrometrica* (on the ashes of fires), *Ulota* spp. (on branches) and *Orthotrichum* spp.

Flora of rides and open areas: Open areas, such as the rides, have damp grassland plants such as: pendulous sedge *Carex pendula*, tufted hair-grass *Deschampsia cespitosa*, false brome *Brachypodium sylvaticum*, meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria*, greater bird's-foot trefoil *Lotus pedunculatus*, and common centaury *Centaureum erythraea*.

Invertebrates: Marston Thrift is an important site for butterflies: 37 species have been recorded here, including relatively recent records of the black hairstreak, which is characteristic of a narrow swathe of clay woodlands from Oxfordshire across Buckinghamshire to Northamptonshire, including a few areas of Bedfordshire. There are many records of moths, ground beetles and Hymenoptera (bees, wasps & ants). 17 species of Odonata (damselflies and dragonflies) have been recorded here and 9 species of Harvestmen. The early spring is a good time to watch Bee-flies and Hoverflies of which there are plenty in this wood. The Dark-edged Bee-fly *Bombylius major* usually emerges in March and April and tails off in May. With its long tongue, it specialises in flowers such as: primrose *Primula vulgaris*, lesser celandine *Ranunculus ficaria*, violets *Viola* spp., and shrubs such as willows *Salix* spp. *Bombylius major* is a parasite of solitary bees such as the burrowing bees of the genus *Andrena* among whom it lays its eggs.

Birds and mammals: The more common warblers are present including chiffchaff, willow warbler, garden warbler and blackcap and many other woodland birds. Seven species of bat were found here in 2012 by Beds Bat Group.

