

Milton Keynes Natural History Society

MKNHS Plant Group – Howe Park Wood 23rd February 2025 TRIP REPORT

What's that Plant – and Why?

Introduction

A cool, dry and very windy day greeted 20 participants for the first Event of the Plant Group's 2025 Programme, 6 for the first time. A major theme of the Event was Winter Tree identification. Howe Park Wood was selected as the venue mainly to reflect its importance as an Ancient Semi Natural Woodland – one of only three in Milton Keynes – and as a designated SSSI. The facilities of the Visitor Centre were an added bonus for a winter visit. The Wood and the post 1980 landscaped areas that surround it are owned and managed by the Parks Trust.

After the usual safety guidance, Carla Boswell gave a brief introduction to the Parks Trust's active management of the Wood to maintain and enhance its habitats and biodiversity. The Group was then given an introduction to winter tree identification by Society member Alan Birkett and author of a ***Field Guide to the Trees of Britain and Europe***, one of the resources that had been highlighted for Group members in advance of the field trip. The Field Studies Council ***Winter Trees: a photographic guide to common trees and shrubs*** was another resource that had been highlighted in advance together with two handouts on the day kindly provided by the Parks Trust's ***Tree ID Guide*** booklet and an A4 sheet, ***Winter Tree ID***.



All photos in this report courtesy of Julian Lambley

For the field work, participants were divided into two groups each covering the same circular route but in different directions. The route covered the two main habitats: the Wood itself and the mixed landscaped area developed since the 1980s that surrounds the Wood.



Plants of the Ancient Semi Natural Woodland habitat

The route took us along three boundaries of the Wood (roughly east, west and north), and along the central 'ride' through the Wood itself– the widened main ride with drainage ditches on either side for much of the way. The ride and ditches supported a diverse group of herbaceous plants, some not normally associated with woodland, doubtless influenced by the higher light level. These included Herb Robert (*Geranium robertianum*), Cleavers (*Galium aparine*), Hogweed (*Heracleum spondylium*) and Creeping Buttercup (*Ranunculus repens*). There were also expected woodland species: Bugle (*Ajuga reptans*), Primrose (*Primula vulgaris*), Lords and Ladies (*Arum maculatum*), Vetch sp. (*Vicia* sp.), Violet species (*Viola* sp.) and Goldilocks Buttercup (*Ranunculus auricomus*) an uncommon plant in Milton Keynes. As seen from the ride, ground cover was a mix of Bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) and on wetter ground Pendulous Sedge (*Carex pendula*) both Ancient Woodland indicators. A single Fern species, Male-Fern (*Dryopteris filix-mas*), was listed. Brambles (*Rubus fruticosus* agg), and Rose sp. (*Rosa* sp.) thrive as a scrub layer. Coppiced Hazel (*Corylus avellana*), Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) (a vital food source for the uncommon Black Hairstreak butterfly caterpillars) and Honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymenum*) made up the understorey. Towering above them were mature canopy trees: Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), Hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*), Pedunculate Oak (*Quercus robur*), and Field Maple (*Acer campestre*). Crab Apple (*Malus sylvestra*) is also an infrequent canopy tree in particular the ancient broad trunk of the named tree 'Edna'! (one group taking the muddy route into the wood, the other group peering into the wood from the outside path). Aspen (*Populus tremula*) was identified in the woodland infrequently but one planted outside the wood provided an excellent hands-on experience in winter tree identification from its easily accessible buds, distinctive bark, and dead leaves.



Field Maple (Acer campestre) is identified by the reddish-brown buds with white hairy tips, as well as opposite pairs of lateral buds.

Plants of the Mixed Landscaped Areas of meadow, mown grass, hedges, shrubs, trees and ponds surrounding the Woodland

All of this area has been the subject of landscaping and planting since the early 1980s with just a few mature trees retained including two fine Pedunculate Oaks near the meadow area and a surprising mature Elm (*Ulmus* spp.) probably Common Elm. The more recently planted trees mirror many of the species found in the woodland: for example, plantings of Ash, Hornbeam, Aspen, and Pedunculate Oak. The parkland area includes specimen trees: we listed Common Walnut (*Juglans regia*), Apple sp. (*Malus* sp.), and an Oak probably the non-native Pin Oak (*Quercus palustris*). Trees and shrubs listed in the hedges include: Spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*), a Dogwood species (*Cornus* sp.), Elder (*Sambucus nigra*), Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) in flower, Cherry Plum (*Prunus cerasifera*) in flower, and Cherry Laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*).



Cherry Plum is one of the first to flower in early spring. The green twigs are another indicator.

There are also native trees not observed by us in the Woodland including Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*), Silver Birch (*Betula pendula*), Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), Scots Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), and three species of Willow near the ponds: Crack (*Salix fragilis*), Goat (*Salix caprea*), and Grey (*Salix cinerea*). In the pond area we also listed Reed Canary-grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*) and Reedmace (*Typha latifolia*) using the dead seed heads in each case for identification.



The seedhead of Reed Canary Grass

For completeness we should also mention four species other than vascular plants two fungi and two moss species observed during the field trip: the fungi being King Alfred's Cakes (*Daldinia concentrica*) and usually hosted by Ash trees, and Scarlet Elf Cap (*Sarcospha austriaca*); and the mosses being Common Smoothcap (*Atricum undulatum*) and Common Tamarisk (*Thuidium tamariscinum*).

What did we learn from this Event?

Winter tree and herbaceous plant identification was new for many of us taking part including the two Co-Leaders: it requires a different set of knowledge and skills from the usual growing period of flowers, foliage and fruit.

Deciduous winter tree identification relies on careful examination of such characteristics as bud size, shape, colour, and position on the twig some being alternate and some opposite, and some being flat against the twig (adpressed) and some more erect. Twigs themselves also vary in their colour and their overall appearance (for example the upturned twigs on mature Ash trees and the weeping twigs of the mature Silver Birch). Bark is another useful indicator in terms of its colour, its texture, and its changes with growth. Dead leaves can also be valuable where there is certainty that the dead leaf comes from the tree being examined. This is particularly useful for those trees, such as Hornbeam and Oak, which hold on to some of their dead leaves through winter (marcescence). For herbaceous plants, the emerging fresh leaves are the main identification feature but for a few of the mainly larger plants dead stems and sometimes seedheads are available.

To find out more about the Howe Park field trip there is a Consolidated List of Plants Observed and Photo Album on the Plant Group website page, or [link here](#).

Thanks

Our thanks to Alan Birkett; Field Listers Anne Champion and Janice Robertson; photographers Jagoda Zajac and Julian Lambley; The Parks Trust for the handouts; and to all the other participants for making this an enjoyable and we hope instructive experience.

Joe Clinch and Richard Schmidt Co-leaders

March 2025