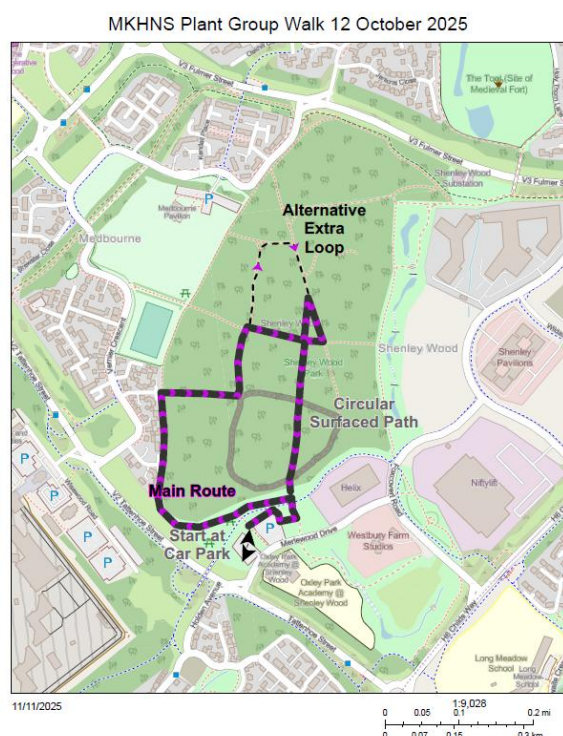


MKNHS Plant Group Shenley Wood Trip Report Sunday 12th October 2025

Introduction

Shenley Wood was the location of the Plant Group's first field event on 28th April 2024. That was a wet and cold day with most of the woodland too muddy for safe walking. In contrast 12th October was dullish but dry underfoot and this gave us the opportunity to explore more of the woodland rides than was possible in 2024. Our route included the planted areas outside the wood near the Parks Trust Merlewood Drive Car Park including the picnic area, then following the western boundary entering the wood itself to follow the selected grass rides, and eventually back up the hill to the south entrance (see map below). Fifteen participants took part in the event, led by Carla Boswell and Joe Clinch. After a brief welcome and introduction Carla told us more about the history and management of Shenley Wood. (See Part 2 of this report.)

Part 1 provides notes on plant species which the group observed, including some where identification proved challenging. Linked to the report is the [Consolidated Species List for 12th October](#), as well as an [Annex of Photos](#), many of which show key features for identification of particular species. We encourage you to look at these: they are an integral element in meeting the Group's aims. The Plant Group's main aim is 'to stimulate interest in plants and particularly to improve the level of plant identification skills within the Society by sharing knowledge, skills and resources.' Certainly, interest has been stimulated and the attendance and level of participation suggests that members are glad to take advantage of the opportunities offered.



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Shenley Wood, looking south along the Central Ride (Photo © Martin Ferns 5.10.25)

Part 1: The Plant Species and where they were seen

Shenley Wood has survived as an Ancient Wood for many hundreds of years and with it the biodiverse wildlife it supports. It is encouraging that The Parks Trust has a management plan to protect its species and status. This Report has mentioned some of the Ancient Woodland Indicators (AWI) and it is fitting to include the 15 that we were able to observe during our visit: Bluebell (dead stem and seeds), Black Byrny, Bush Vetch, Dog's Mercury, Enchanter's Nightshade, Hairy St. John's wort, Wood Avens, Pendulous Sedge, Wood Sedge, Hairy Brome (a grass), Ash, Field Maple, Guelder Rose, Midland Hawthorn and Wild Cherry (indicator status based on the Field Studies Council publication *Ancient woodland indicator plants*).

Some 70 plant species were listed at this location on 12 October. The cumulative list including those listed at the 28 April 2024 Plant Group event, now stands at 85 – about half the number of plant species recorded by the Parks Trust for this important location. So there are more to find in the future by visiting in the summer, other parts of the wood and the four drainage ponds on its eastern flank!

Landscaped Car Park and picnic area, and hard-core path outside the west side of the Wood

We started the route in the landscaped area around the car park knowing that shrubs in fruit would be abundant and that in favoured patches some grassland species would still be in flower. Along a dry ditch we listed Greater Bird's foot Trefoil, Bristly Ox-tongue, Common Knapweed, Red Clover and Smooth Tare all in flower. Common Dogwood, Blackthorn, Guelder Rose, Hawthorn, Wild Privet, and Rowan were colourful with early autumn leaves and fruits. We also observed a number of specimen trees mainly in the picnic area. These included two North American species of Oak (Northern Red Oak and Pin Oak) together with native Hornbeam. We then followed the hard-core path round the south west corner of the wood down the hill concentrating on the managed scrub edge. An early listing was of Elm suckers with the 'parent' dead mature tree just within the wood boundary. Another in this area was Water-pepper in flower at the path edge. Looking into the wood we were able to observe canopy trees: Ash, Oak, Aspen, a Poplar species (Grey or White Poplar), and an under-story of Field Maple, Blackthorn, Hawthorn, coppiced Hazel, and Dogwood. The managed scrub at the edge of the path included invasive Bramble species, Rose species. and Snowberry.

Woodland Rides and Ditches

The mainly grassland rides are an important feature of the Wood. A Figwort species was our first stop quickly identified as either Water Figwort or Common Figwort plant both of which are uncommon here. The plant was no longer in flower so identification had to be based mainly on vegetative features in particular the stem and the leaves. With the help of photos taken by both Bob Phillips and Janice Robertson. the conclusion is that it was probably Water Figwort based mainly on the two small leaflets at the base of the main leaves that are often found on this species but not on the Common Figwort. The Group had a similar difficulty when finding a dead specimen of Figwort on the visit in April 2024. Dewberry of the same Family as Bramble, was another less common species found in the same area.

Bush Vetch was widely distributed including a few examples still in flower. We had hoped from the recce that we might be able to find and identify another Vetch species relying on leaves and in a few cases seed pods. None was identified and like the Figwort would merit a visit to the wood during the flowering season. Two species of St. John's wort were listed both from their leaves - Perforate and Hairy the latter being an Ancient Wood indicator.

Ferns were one of the target species that we hoped to identify on this visit. One such was the Male Fern. This species was used by Plant Group Leader Charles Kessler to demonstrate the main features for identifying ferns backed up by the distribution of a laminated Field Studies Council 'Key to Common Ferns'. Two other species of fern have been recorded in Shenley Wood in the past but despite a careful search at the recce and prior to this neither had been found. There was no sign of the Bracken listed in April 2024 just at the unfurling stage so it is no surprise that we probably got the identification wrong on that occasion. Conveniently a well-timed follow up hands-on session on fern identification took place a few days later at the Society regular evening meeting led by Charles and Martin Kincaid who assembled several fern species from the local area for further examination and identification.

The 'Wet Woodland' characterisation confirms that it is an ideal habitat for plants that thrive under damp conditions. Pendulous Sedge and Meadowsweet are widespread along the managed edge of the rides as are Hogweed, and Greater Willowherb. Wood Sedge (just the base leaves seen on this visit) and Wood Small-reed (a grass) are more scattered. The Male Fern was also noticeably more common as we moved down the slope of the wood to the damper areas.

Autumn berries were another theme of the visit. Within the wood Black Bryony with its bright red berries and arrow-shaped leaves stood out. And although less profuse than in the car park area several berry bearing shrubs and trees were in fruit within the wood including Field Maple, Guelder Rose, Blackthorn, Hawthorn, and Wild Privet. Nut bearing species included Hazel, and Pedunculate (English) Oak. Fallen acorns of the latter were in profusion on the paths under the oaks. (We had also paused to note the shallow cup and rounded acorn of the Pin Oak). In the triangular clearing in the middle of the wood a semi-mature Beech tree gave good views of beech mast. It is an unusual tree to have planted on clay soil. Alder, Elm, Silver Birch, Wild Cherry, Midland Hawthorn, and another Poplar species (White or Grey) were also additions to the 2024 tree list all with a scattered distribution.

Part 2 History and Management of Shenley Wood

History

The history of this site goes back much, much further than Milton Keynes. As you walk, you're following in the footsteps of people who have been here for over 2,000 years.

- **Roman and Saxon connections:** The woodland and the wider Shenley area have been home to people since at least Roman and Saxon times, and there are traces of those early settlements in the area.

- **A Domesday Book entry:** Shenley Wood is one of the very few ancient woodlands in Milton Keynes mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086. The name "Shenley" comes from an Old English word meaning "bright clearing". This tells us that even a thousand years ago, this was a special place—a clearing in the forest that people settled in.
- **Medieval and Norman times:** Just north of here, you can find Shenley Toot, the earthwork remains of a medieval motte-and-bailey castle that was built around 1239 AD. The resident lords who once lived here would have relied on this wood for resources like timber, fuel and for hunting.

Managing a modern city's heritage

The woodland is now managed by The Parks Trust, working to protect and enhance this ancient woodland for everyone, carrying out traditional practices like coppicing and tree thinning, which helps more sunlight reach the forest floor. This management helps the woodland plants to thrive. All the ancient woodlands in Milton Keynes have a 10-year management plan approved by The Forestry Commission, which oversees the UK Forest Certification Group (UKFCG). The woodland is split into 18 blocks with 1-2 blocks on an annual thinning cycle. The Yearly Management per block:

- The upper canopy will be thinned to a maximum intensity of 20%.
- The middle canopy will be thinned to a maximum intensity of 50%.
- The understorey will be coppiced in sections creating small coups (the small areas designated for coppicing), while not exceeding 50 % of the compartmental area
- Non-intervention belts dictated by thicker scrub and woodland edge areas will be left, as will selected tree species to grow on and form the next canopy.
- Within the coups we will look to replant trees to diversify the woodland cover with the loss of trees from Ash dieback.

Replanting these blocks with native species includes Field Maple, Hazel, Blackthorn and Hawthorn.

Today the wood is 24.1ha (59.5 acres) whereas in 1690s it was almost twice the size at 43ha/105 acres, at a height of 92 metres above sea level at its high point.

The threat of Ash Dieback: Recently, the woodlands have faced a new challenge with Ash Dieback disease, which is killing many of the mature ash trees. To combat this, The Parks Trust is running initiatives to plant new oak trees; it is a reminder that this is a constantly changing, living landscape.

Geology and Soil

Shenley Wood is an ancient woodland with a distinctive geological and ecological character that shapes everything from the trees to the delicate wildflowers

- **A damp, clay base:** Much of the Milton Keynes area, including Shenley Wood, sits on glacial boulder clay. This means the soil is heavy, has poor drainage, and holds water easily. It's a key reason why much of this wood is characterized as a "wet woodland"
- **Water features:** The Parks Trust has established several ponds to collect rainwater and provide habitats, and the ancient woodland itself has several streams and

ditches carrying water down the hillside. The poor drainage results in seasonally wet conditions that influence the types of plants that can grow here.

- **Woodland type:** Following the National Vegetation Classification (NVC) system, Shenley Wood is described as 'W8: Ash–Field Maple–Dog's Mercury Woodland'. The presence of ash and field maple, along with indicator plants like Dog's Mercury, is typical of wet woodlands found on clay soils.
- **Dominant canopy tree species:** The woodland canopy is dominated by Pedunculate Oak, Ash, and Aspen, though the Ash population has been significantly impacted by Ash Dieback disease.
- **Understorey and ground flora:** Below the canopy, you'll find a lively understorey of Hazel, Field Maple, Hawthorn, Blackthorn, Goat Willow which is regularly managed by coppicing to allow light to reach the forest floor. In the spring, the ground is famous for a stunning display of Ancient Woodland Indicator (AWI) species like Bluebells, Wood Anemone, Black Bryony and Primrose.
- **Other features:** In addition to the main woodland, The Parks Trust manages surrounding habitats, such as the meadows at Shenley Toot which support wildflowers for pollinators, the area around the south entrance car park, and is now establishing itself along the SUDS ponds to the east.

In summary: All of this—the clay soil, the seasonal wetness, and the centuries of continuous tree cover—creates Shenley Wood's special, diverse, and slightly damp ancient woodland. The ground we stand on dictates the plant communities that thrive here and makes Shenley Wood a unique and irreplaceable natural treasure in Milton Keynes.

Publications:

Key to common ferns, Field Studies Council, 2005

Ancient woodland indicator plants, Field Studies Council, 2016

Thanks

Our thanks to Janice Robertson (herbaceous plant listing and photographs); Richard Schmidt (field listing trees and shrubs), Charles Kessler (introducing us to fern identification and adding to our knowledge of grasses and sedges), Bob Phillips (photographer) and Martin Ferns (field listing coordination and web editor).

Carla Boswell and Joe Clinch Co-leaders, November 2025