MILTON KEYNES NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Magpie Digest Winter 2025

Hello to all our readers and a warm welcome to the December edition of Magpie Digest. If, like me, you are mourning the loss of mild weather and the opportunity for regular wildlife walks, Magpie Digest is the perfect remedy. Reading through field reports summons up all the excitement of exploring both new and familiar territory, whilst marvelling at nature's resilience in the face of an ever more variable climate. Of particular note in these reports is the variety of soils encountered and the consequent difference in vegetation and wildlife. The history of areas such as Pilch Field, Newton Leys and Shenley Wood is also intriguing and I look forward to future visits to monitor developments.

Our Newsletter begins with a summary of a packed evening meeting in December, dedicated to the memory of our late President Roy Maycock, who died last year. As we were all reminded, Roy's contribution to the Society and to natural history in general was truly astounding.

Wishing all our members a Happy New Year.

Joan Hughes

REMEMBERING ROY MAYCOCK – Members' Meeting 2nd December 2025

Member's paid tribute to the memory of Roy Maycock who died in November, 2024 aged 91 years. Not only was Roy a founder member of MKNHS, he was also President for many years and acted as a great ambassador for the Society.

Members heard how Roy's involvement with MKNHS began when he answered an advert placed in the Bletchley Gazette in 1968. That early correspondence reflected doubt on whether sufficient interest existed for such a group, however the Milton Keynes Natural History Society went on to celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2018 and currently has a membership of over 100.

Reflecting on Roy's career, members learnt that after graduating from Durham University and a stint of National Service, Roy took up teaching Biology at the Royal Latin School in Buckingham. He remained in post for the next 30 years, including time spent as Head of Science.

Julia Carey from Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Environmental Record Centre (BMERC) remembered being taught by Roy in the 1980's and spoke of his committed and

methodological approach and the breadth of his contribution to botanical recording. Roy joined the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI) whilst at university and spent 34 years as the Bucks County Recorder as well as being County Recorder for BMERC. Pictures of some of the many plant specimens Roy collected for BMERC were on display for members to see. Beginning in 1955, Roy took part in all three national atlas plant surveys in Bucks with every one recorded by hand. He contributed to the 2013 threatened plant project and was also responsible for surveying 231 churchyards, each visited twice as a minimum. Not least, Roy was instrumental in the designation of Pilch Field as an SSSI.

On a more personal note, Julie Lane former Chair of the Society, spoke of Roy's infectious laugh, his generosity with his knowledge and his love of Gilbert and Sullivan operas. Our Assistant Programme Secretary, Linda Murphy remembered Roy's passion for botany, the gifted nature of his teaching and his unfailing patience. Ever mindful of the Society's aims, Roy dedicated his skills to encouraging and broadening knowledge of the natural world and to working closely with other local organisations.

Richard Schmidt, Treasurer, concluded the evening by expressing the Society's obligation to continue Roy's work recording the natural world and developing a pool of knowledge on which to draw. He advised members of a sum of money left to the Society by Roy with a preference that it should be used for the support and encouragement of young people. Thoughts on utilisation of the legacy can be submitted to the special panel set up to administer the funds.

The Roy Maycock Library

Richard went on to announce the new MKNHS library facility consisting of a collection of 64 books left to the Society by Roy in his will. The library catalogue and borrowing guidelines can be accessed by Society members on application to the Librarian by emailing **librarian@mknhs.org.uk** or alternatively by telephoning Linda Murphy on 01865 331643

Stonepit Field – Tuesday, 1 July 2025 – Visit Report

Co-leaders: Joe Clinch and Jenny Mercer

Introduction

Stonepit Field is a regular venue for the Society with visits taking place in 2019, 2022, and 2023 plus a Plant Group visit in 2024. All these were in late May or early June when the meadow flowers are at their best, so this 1st July visit was planned in order to observe the mid-summer wildlife, particularly the flowering plants. Alas, the unusually hot and dry weather conditions this Spring meant that some of the flowering plant species we hoped to see had already flowered. The evening itself was at the end of a hot day with a maximum temperature of 28C.

The visit started with the good news from Mike LeRoy (in the absence of Carla Boswell) that Stonepit Field has just been designated as a Local Wildlife Site (LWS). As Mike put it: "Recognition of Stonepit Field as a Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Local Wildlife Site is significant and founded on good evidence. It is rather special because this is a planned habitat rather than a natural feature of the countryside." Turning these former barley fields into parkland was planned by MK Development Corporation through its privatised landscape architects Landscape Town & Country, who recognised the scope to plant suitable plant species on limestone as well as new trees and shrubs. Since its formation in 1992 The Parks Trust has managed and enhanced the site, and enabled the developer of nearby Oakridge Park housing to create two SuDS (Sustainable Drainage Systems) ponds to manage surface

water from their development. Stonepit Field was then enhanced by the 'scrape' which created valuable new habitat. Surveying the site as a potential LWS has been led by staff from BMERC (Bucks & MK Environmental Records Centre) for the Bucks & MK LWS Panel.

The visit was well-attended and members were provided with a Briefing Note that summarised the history of the development of the site and a list of species that might be seen or heard based on records of previous Society visits. Participants were asked to join one of two groups: one led by Jenny Mercer with its main focus on meadow plant species plus those of the two ponds, and the other led by Joe Clinch with a focus on trees and shrubs; both groups visited the limestone scrape and its environs. In parallel with this, some members kept a record of invertebrates and birds. A listing of all the species seen or heard is available on request and what follows is a summary of some of the more important new species which can now be added to the cumulative list of species at this location. Overall, more than 120 species were seen (or heard) during the evening, some 24 of which had not been previously listed.

Herbaceous Plants Meadow and Scrape areas

Included in the handout was a list of eight perennial flowering plant species which formed part of the original seeding of the site in 1993/94; all were seen. Harebell, Common Centaury, and Musk Mallow were new to those listed in the late May/early June period, plus Deptford Pink listed on a recce two days before the visit.

Common Centaury with Bird's-foot trefoil (Photos © Bob Phillips)

Harebells (top) and Musk Mallow (below)

A feature of the plants on the scrape is their stunted growth on the free-draining limestone which was enhanced this year by the prolonged hot dry weather. Common Centaury is a good example with its height typically being 10 to 40cm but this year mostly less than 10cm. Field Scabious and Bladder Campion are also similarly stunted. Bee Orchids were no more than shrivelled stems and even the Pyramidal Orchids were past their best.

Herbaceous Plants and Grasses rough ground, tree and shrub margins, and pond areas

Wild Basil was new to the list as were a number of species at or in the ponds. The latter included Lesser Reedmace, Common Spike Rush, Water plantain, and Reed Sweet Grass. One new meadow grass was also added to the list: Yellow Oat-grass. Also of interest was the

Wild Liquorice which is spreading in a gap in one of the shrub hedges between the meadows. No evidence was found for the Nettle-leaved Bellflower. It is a late-flowering summer plant, but given the early summer weather it seems doubtful if it is still present in this location.

Hairy leaves of Mouse-ear Hawkweed (Photo © Bob Phillips)

Trees and Shrubs

Four species of tree were identified not previously listed: Crab Apple; Grey Poplar; Swedish Whitebeam; and (Purging) Buckthorn (now called just Buckthorn). Alder Buckthorn has been listed regularly in the past and this identification was confirmed but surprisingly the calcareous soil loving Buckthorn has not previously been listed. There was also some clarification of the Dogwood species, with the inclusion of two new species of a common hedge-row plant: Red Barked Dogwood and Red Osier Dogwood.

Swedish Whitebeam leaves and berries (Photo © Bob Phillips)

Insects

The warm dry evening produced a number of insect species not previously listed in the past. These are listed by Order.

Lepidoptera

Four species of Butterfly and four of Moth were listed. There have been no records of Butterflies before for an evening visit so Comma, Marbled White, Ringlet and Small Skipper are added to the cumulative list. The four moths listed had been previously identified.

Orthoptera

Slender Groundhopper and Common Green Grasshopper were additions to the list.

6-spot Burnet moth on Scabious (Photo © Julian Lambley)

Red Soldier Beetle. (Photo © Bob Phillips)

Birds

Society visits to Stonepit Field have resulted in a surprising number of bird species being seen (including those flying over) or heard. This year was no exception with 20 such species. The only addition to the list was Feral Pigeon. The total number of species now stands at 37. Perhaps a surprise was that Mallard and Moorhen had managed to survive in the near dried-up ponds in the presence of so many predators both on land and from the air.

Thanks

My thanks to Mike LeRoy for sharing his knowledge of the location with me and the background to the LWS designation; to Jenny Mercer for acting as co-leader (and assisting with plant identification); and to those agreeing to help with species identification and/or field listing: Martine Harvey and visitor Hasan Al Farhan (birds), Simon Bunker and Paul Lund (insects), Julian Lambley (butterflies, moths and photographs), Charles Kessler (grasses, and rushes), Richard Schmidt (trees and shrubs), Janice Robertson and Martin Ferns (plants), Linda Murphy (moths) and Bob Phillips (photographs)

Joe Clinch
July 2025

Plant Group: Pilch Fields SSSI – Sunday, 13 July 2025 – Visit Report

Co-leaders: Jenny Mercer and Charles Kessler

Introduction

Pilch Fields came to the notice of botanists and conservationists when a local school pupil showed some unusual plants to their biology teacher, Roy Maycock, MKNHS late president. At that time the fields formed part of a Bucks County Council smallholding based at Coombs Farm. The site was designated SSSI in 1976 and acquired by BBOWT in 1984. It is best known for displays of Cowslip and Green-winged Orchid in late April. This visit was timed to see the flora characteristic later in the year.

The entrance field

The small field at the entrance to the reserve has recently had some ponds created to develop the biodiversity of the site. Located on a clay substrate, one of them, remarkably, was still holding water despite the dry spring and summer. In this field we were able to examine close-up Hard Rush and Tufted Hair-grass, which are also present in the other fields.

Greater Pilch Field

Immediately on entering Greater Pilch one is struck by its lined, ridge and furrow pattern of the ground, with Hard Rush dominating the furrows and a grassy turf on the ridges, where the Cowslip and Green-winged Orchids are found flowering in spring.

The presence of the ridge and furrow pattern indicates that the land was previously used for arable cropping, with up-and-down ploughing, by oxen or horses, creating the ridges. A glance at the OS map shows field boundaries in the vicinity to follow straight and parallel lines. This is typical of the boundaries created by Enclosure Acts. Pilch Fields lie in the parish of Thornborough, whose Enclosure Act was passed by Parliament in 1797. In this part of England, after enclosure, arable land was often converted to pasture for grazing livestock such as sheep and cattle. It is possible therefore that Pilch Fields are an early example of "rewilding" of arable land and that their biodiversity has been building up naturally for some 225 years.

Another feature of Greater Pilch is that, at least in parts, it overlies a limestone outcrop. Limestone is also evident in the nearby Coombs Quarry, source of stone for the picturesque Thornborough Bridge over the Padbury Brook. This has led to the development in the field of a calcareous grassland evidenced by species such as Dwarf Thistle and Quaking Grass. The field also contains areas of wet soil resulting from the presence of one or more springs and possibly an impermeable subsoil layer in certain places. These flushed meadow or fen areas were still wet at the time of our visit despite the unseasonable dry year, and contain typical species such as Fen Bedstraw, Ragged Robin and Marsh Valerian.

Fen Bedstraw, note lax habit, leaves in whorls and rough stem (Photos © Bob Phillips)

Little Pilch Field

Little Pilch Field also contains some ridge and furrow and calcareous grassland, and a larger fen area, dominated by Blunt-flowered Rush.

Blunt-flowered Rush (left) and Meadow Grasshopper on Hard Rush (right) (Photos © Bob Phillips)

Site Management

As at Rammamere Heath, where ecological succession of vegetation types is held in check by sheep grazing and management, the grassland and fen of Pilch Fields is also man-made and held stable by grazing, now facilitated by periodic controlled entry of cattle from a neighbouring farm. The grazing, coupled with soil conditions, has led to development of a highly diverse and specialised flora which probably used to be quite widespread in this part of the country but which has now been practically eliminated by modern agriculture. The site is therefore a remnant, unique in the Milton Keynes/Aylesbury Vale area, and of high conservation value. However, the small size (11 hectares; 27 acres) of the site makes it vulnerable to pressures and in particular we observed the site to be threatened by encroaching scrub, particularly Hawthorn, Bramble and Creeping Thistle. It would be wonderful if the site could be enlarged – there are some examples in the Chilterns where orchid-rich sites have been extended onto neighbouring land used for arable farming until recently. BBOWT is working hard to manage Pilch Fields and needs our support to maintain this fragile site with its iconic species and attractive landscape.

Further work for the Group

A list of species observed by the group is available on request, accompanied by a collection of photos of selected plants. It is a partial list reflecting the time of year of the visit, the time available for study and our identification skills (or lack of). Certainly, more grasses, sedges and rushes were present than are listed. Perhaps in the future, with repeat visits, we could aim to produce a more complete list. Regular quantitative survey of certain species, such as orchids, could also be undertaken.

Thanks

To Janice Robertson and Martin Ferns for making the list of plants, and to Bob Phillips for the photographs.

Charles Kessler, July 2025

Bow Brickhill Woods – Tuesday, 15 July 2025 – Visit Report

On a damp evening following rain during the day, about twenty members met in the car park close to All Saints Church, above the village of Bow Brickhill. This was the Society's first evening visit to Bow Brickhill Woods since 2015 so it was a new venue for many participants. The plan was to explore two areas: the churchyard of the 15th century church and nearby woodland and woodland clearings.

Background

The Bow Brickhill Woods are a significant visual feature to the south-east of Milton Keynes. The woods are a part of the Greensand Ridge which stretches across three counties from Leighton Buzzard to Gamlingay in Cambridgeshire. It is primarily composed of greensand, a type of sandstone. Habitats throughout the Ridge are much influenced by acid soils and include: lowland heathland; ancient woodlands; wetlands such as marshy meadows; lowland meadows and species-rich pre-18th century hedges.

While the general image of the Brickhill Woods is that of evergreen conifers, the area we visited was mainly a variety of deciduous trees. Throughout the year woodland birds such as the green woodpecker, great spotted woodpecker, nuthatch, jay and common crossbill can be seen/heard. However, there was very little evidence of bird song/calls on this visit. Our route covered three main habitats: the churchyard; the more open areas mainly along paths at the edge of woodland, and woodland itself.

The Churchyard

The Churchyard is well maintained as a wildlife mini-meadow of grasses and herbaceous plants. Common Knapweed, Smooth Hawksbeard, Common Bird's-foot trefoil, Ribwort Plantain, Lady's Bedstraw, Harebell, Germander Speedwell, Sheep's Sorrel, Common Ragwort and Yarrow were all in flower but sparsely distributed. Sweet Vernal Grass, Yorkshire Fog, Soft Rush and Bracken were also listed at this location. Field Grasshopper was found in the meadow area and was the only insect identified during our evening visit.

Woodland edges and clearings

Heather, a classic species of acid sandy soil habitats, was found in a number of places (including one small patch in the Churchyard); flowering was already over. Broom and Gorse – again species of acid heath habitats with flowering over – were also found in this habitat. Cocksfoot (a grass), Common Nettle, Creeping Thistle, Cleavers, Ground Ivy, and a Yellow Archangel cultivar were all thriving on the path edges as were Brambles. But the most interesting find was Climbing Corydalis which again is found on acid soils including woodland edges.

Woodland Trees, Shrubs and Fungi

Mature canopy trees included Beech, Sweet Chestnut, Hornbeam, English Oak, Lime, Ash, with the occasional Sycamore, Silver Birch, and Scots Pine. Hawthorn, Blackthorn, Hazel, Elder, Holly, and Ivy made up the understorey such as it was. Beech is unusual in that it thrives on both well-drained sandy soil and calcareous soils. Our one fungus of the evening, Dryad's Saddle, was found on a fallen dead beech tree in the woodland.

Brown-lipped Snail Cepaea nemoralis (left) and Dryad's Saddle Polyporus squamosus (right)

(photos © Jagoda Zajac)

Climbing Corydalis Ceratocapnos claviculate (left) and Evernia prunastri, a Lichen (right) (photos © Jagoda Zajac)

Mosses, Lichens and Gall

With the aid of close-up photographs, identification of a number of lichens, and mosses were made and are included in the species list, together with snails and a beech gall midge. These wildlife Orders are not listed very often at our outdoor evening meetings and this species list (available on request) therefore includes photos of all such species observed.

Thanks

Our thanks to all those participants who have contributed to the listings and in particular Jagoda for her remarkable photographs.

Joe Clinch and Mervyn Dobbin (co-leaders)

How Hill, Norfolk- Weekend of 25-28 July 2025 – Visit Report

How Hill – MKNHS Moth-ers July 2025 (Photo © Martin Kincaid)

In late July, members of MKNHS visited the How Hill study centre in the Norfolk Broads for the fourth time. A smaller group had visited in May 2024 and previously groups had stayed in 2007 and 2008, on the recommendation of Paul Lund who had first visited with the Wildlife Sound Recordists. The How Hill Trust owns the Edwardian house and its extensive gardens and provides environmental education to local schools and youth groups as well as themed courses for adults.

This year eighteen of us visited and the weather was, for the most part, very good. High on our list of target species was that Broadland speciality, the Swallowtail butterfly. 2025 has been a fabulous season for this species but would we be lucky enough to see any so late in the season? We need not have worried with the first one being seen feeding on Buddleia within half an hour of our arrival! The HHT director, Simon Partridge, gave us a warm welcome and explained that he had seen more of the butterflies this summer than for perhaps forty years. As members arrived in the late afternoon, many of them were treated to the site of a swallowtail in the car park as they unpacked their cars. Over the weekend we saw a good variety of butterflies with other highlights including Wall Brown, White Admiral (in the woods), Painted Lady and Purple Hairstreaks in the oaks just outside the house. One of the latter gave us close views on the Sunday. Small Tortoiseshells, now so rare in our region, were also seen.

We had the use of the Trust's moth trap over the weekend. This was set up each evening and inspected early in the mornings by Linda Murphy and Janice Robertson, together with any others who managed to emerge. The moths did not disappoint. We were all thrilled to see several Garden Tiger. This glorious moth has all but vanished from Bucks and much of central England but is still quite common in East Anglia. Wainscot moths kept us on our toes and among the more common species, Southern Wainscot was new to many of us. Looked at face-on, this moth appears to be wearing a distinctive 'head band' absent in the other wainscots.

Garden TIger (Photo © Martin Kincaid)

Memorably, our mothing session on Sunday morning was interrupted by a loud trumpeting sound coming from across the River Ant. Linda and I looked at each other and both mouthed the word 'Cranes'. They took a little while to find, but soon Linda had her telescope trained on a pair of Common Cranes down in the marsh below us and most of the group were able to enjoy them. We soon got back to the moths, however. A list of all 88 species noted during the weekend is available on request.

We did not have a group boat trip as in other years but most members arranged their own boat trips on the river. A short walk from the house is the How Hill Staithe, and from here the 'Electric Eel' takes small groups of up to six. A few people were lucky enough to see and photograph Swallowtail larvae from the boat with others seeing a variety of birds and plant life. Given the very hot and dry summer conditions, it was unsurprising that most of the flowering plants were past their best but we still found some nice aquatic and marginal species. We were particularly pleased to find Bladderwort *Utricularia spp.* which was abundant in places. However, we couldn't definitely say which of the two species this was without close examination.

Arrowhead *Sagittaria sagittifolia* is not often seen in flower in MK but there was a fine display of white flowers at the Staithe together with Yellow Water-lily *Nuphar lutea.* We

were unable to find Milk Parsley *Peucedanum plustre* around the nature reserve but this impressive plant was found – together with feeding Swallowtail caterpillars – at other fenland sites nearby.

Although we didn't concentrate as much on birds as we had last year, our group managed to see Barn Owl, Tawny Owl, Marsh Harrier, Hobby and other birds of prey. Tawny Owls could be heard throughout the night! Mammals were also a little disappointing although the display of Pipistrelle and Noctule bats on the first evening was memorable. Otherwise, Rabbits and Roe Deer were the main species seen.

Bladderwort spp.
(Photos © Martin Kincaid)1

Swallowtail larva feeding on Milk Parsley

On the Friday evening, three of us took a short torchlit stroll down to the river to look for glow-worms. None were found (we had seen glow-worm larvae here in 2024) but we heard a loud rustling from the path and pointing the torch saw the largest Common Toad any of us had seen! This was a huge male toad and about the size of my fist. Over the next few days, we would find many newly emerged froglets and toadlets in boggy areas of the nature reserve but we didn't see Jumbo again.

On Sunday we were joined by former Society member Ella Cooke who now lives in Norwich and works for Norfolk Wildlife Trust. Ella confirmed that Swallowtails had been common since early May. She managed to spot one of the most impressive insects seen over the weekend – a large parasitoid wasp which was trying to escape from the sun lounge of How Hill. This was captured and we were eventually able to identify it as *Rhyssa persuasoria* sometimes known as the Sabre-wasp, one of the largest ichneumon species found in the UK. A great find and a something new to most of us. Ella also managed to spot a Norfolk Hawker dragonfly down by the marshman's cottage.

Sabre-wasp Rhyssia persuasoria (Photo © Ella Cooke)

The staff at How Hill were all incredible friendly and helpful and the food, as usual, was superb. How Hill and its nature reserve are well worth a visit if you find yourself in the Broads.

Martin Kincaid
August 2025

Newton Leys – Tuesday, 12 August 2025 – Visit Report

Willow Lake from Little Callow Mound (Photo © Jagoda Zajac)

Newton Leys is a newly developed and still expanding residential sector of the city, largely built on the site of disused claypits and brickworks. The natural history interest derives from flooded claypits and re-vegetation of ground disturbed by the clay workings. It was the first time the Society had visited the site and despite evening temperatures in the 30's Celsius a party of about 15 of us set off from the car park of the local centre.

Willow Lake

Our first halt was on Little Callow Mound, overlooking Willow Lake. Formerly named Jubilee Lake, this was the claypit of the Jubilee or Skew Bridge brickworks. It is very deep because of digging down to the Oxford Clay, which has particular qualities for brick-making. Notably, its high organic matter content makes the clay self-combust; known as the Fletton process, after the site in Cambridgeshire where it was developed. This requires less fuel to heat the kilns and produces a higher quality brick. Brick-making commenced here in the early 1930's, probably accounting for the name, since 1935 was the Silver Jubilee of King George V. The works were later taken over by the London Brick Company. The Jubilee Works were one of three brickworks in the locality, the others being the Bletchley Works, whose pits have been incorporated into the Blue Lagoon Nature Reserve, and a third on the outskirts of Newton Longville, on its boundary with Bletchley.

Since there was no housebuilding at the time, brickmaking here was paused during WW2 and the kilns were used to store munitions. After WW2 brickmaking really took off, especially with the building of Council Houses. Brickmaking at this site ceased in 1978. The other brickworks in the area closed in the early 1990's and their site is used for landfill. Here on the south side of the area we have brownfield housing, complemented by an adjoining greenfield site, actually in Bucks and belonging to the Parish of Stoke Hammond. Initially the claypit here was a dry pit. The Jubilee Brook, which flows through the site from a source between Drayton Parslow and Newton Longville and which leads to the Ouzel at Water Eaton, overflowed during the floods of 1947 and flooded the pit. Latterly clay was brought to the site by road from Coldharbour on the old A5. The brick-built artwork on the Mound,

named Alphonso, is a reminder of the brickmaking on this site and of the many Italians who worked here after WW2. For many years brickmaking was the second largest employer in Bletchley after the railways.

The lake is fringed with a fine stand of Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*) with Purple Loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) and Cat-mint (*Nepeta cataria*) in places. Birds on the water included Tufted Duck and a family of Great Crested Grebe, and flying above the lake were Swallow, House Martin and Sand Martin. Skirting the lake on its west side took us through a planting of various types of Willow, and Alder Buckthorn (*Frangula alnus*); the Crack Willow (*Salix x fragilis*) having been stripped bare by the Red Poplar Leaf Beetle (*Chrysomela populi*) much in evidence.

Red Poplar Leaf Beetle – Chrysomela populi on Crack Willow
(Photo © Frank Goates)

Sawfly larvae: probably of one of the 14 British species of the Arge genus of Fusehorn and Twinhorn Sawfly
(Photo © Jagoda Zajac)

We then left the lakeside, crossed the Jubilee Brook, now dry owing to the unusually low rainfall this year, and examined an attractive small wetland. Surrounded by Willow and shrubs, the central part held a notable stand of Common Fleabane (*Pulicaria dysenterica*), along with Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*), Hard Rush (*Juncus inflexus*), Wood Small-reed (*Calamagrostis epigejos*) and an unidentified sedge. Wild Angelica (*Angelica sylvestris*) and Tufted Vetch (*Vicia cracca*) were found on the margins. Silver-Y (*Autographa gamma*) and Mother of Pearl (*Pleuroptya ruralis*) moths were observed foraging in the area.

Foot of Callow Mound

Callow Mound, to the north-west of Jubilee Lake, was formed by the overburden removed from the upper layers of the clay pit. It initially was colonized by a grassy flora classed as Lowland Dry Acid Grassland, a Notable Habitat recognized by Natural England. However, its significance is now reduced since the mound seems to be entirely covered by well-established Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) creating a closed canopy and a ground layer of False Brome Grass (*Brachypodium sylvaticum*).

Dragonflies were observed as we walked along the foot of the mound: Migrant Hawker (*Aeshna mixta*), Southern Hawker (*Aeshna cyanea*) and Willow Emerald damselfly (*Chalcolestes viridis*).

Little Willow Lake

Little Willow Lake is a shallow landscaped feature lying to the north of the local centre. It is fringed by Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*), Reedmace (*Typha latifolia*), Hard Rush (*Juncus inflexus*) and Wood Small-reed (*Calamagrostis epigejos*). Birds included Coot and

Little Grebe. Reed Warbler was heard during a previous visit. Along the path on the east side the plentiful Common Bird's-foot Trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) attracts many bees.

Calamagrostis epigejos fringing Little Willow Lake (Photo © Jagoda Zajac)

At this point of the visit dusk was approaching. A flock of fifty or so Swallows and Martins were over the lake, probably already on passage.

North of Little Willow Lake and across Galapagos Grove lies a third, wilder lake; while the recce showed this to have natural history interest in the form of waterside vegetation and water birds, fading light precluded a visit on this occasion.

Final Comments

On the southern perimeter of Milton Keynes, this site provides some balance to the more frequently visited natural history sites in the northern and central parts of the city.

Although a built residential area, the lakes and green spaces clearly hold natural history interest, as mentioned in this report. Visits in winter might reveal more wildfowl on the lakes. The landfill site might also merit a visit if that could be arranged; this might include the woodland named New Covert on the OS map and which appears to hold some mature Oak.

Amphibian fencing (Photo © Jagoda Zajac)

A notable feature of the site is the extensive amphibian fencing, made of wood and including path barriers. While attractively made, these will soon need maintenance. Work will also be needed on some of the wetland areas and lake margins to prevent scrub ingress and loss of open habitat; perhaps also Callow Mound could be opened up to recreate grassland there.

Charles Kessler and Mike LeRoy (Co-leaders)

From the Brickhills: The Emerald on the Oak – September 2025 – Julie Cuthbert

The season has changed so quickly. The severe drought which started in early spring and lasted through the summer has now been followed by an onslaught of torrential rain and thunderstorms. The rain did not come soon enough to save our lawn though which is now a soggy mud pit with grass seeds sprinkled on top in an attempt to revive it.

New species have arrived along with the rising summer temperatures. The Hummingbird Hawk-moth (*Macroglossum stellatarumis)* is now a very common visitor in our garden. The first time I saw one was over 20 years ago in Somerset. I'd never seen or heard of one before and believed I was looking at a real Hummingbird. How embarrassing.

The best sighting this month was our first Willow Emerald Damselfly (*Chalcolestes viridis)* resting on an Oak in Rushmere Park. This Mediterranean species of Damselfly was first recorded in the UK around East Anglia in 2007 and is now quickly spreading through the country. They lay their eggs on Willow or Elder near water so there is a very good chance that they could be breeding in our wood.

There have been a good number of Crossbills (*Loxia curvirostra)* locally too. They are a large finch with, as their name suggests, a crossed-over bill which has evolved to extract seeds from conifer cones. We have regularly seen a flock of 17 feeding in the Scots Pine behind our garden and in Rushmere too.

Crossbill (Loxia curvirosta) (photo © Julie Cuthbert)

It has also been a good summer for seeing Hobbies (*Falco Subbuteo)* over our garden. Hobbies are a large Swift-shaped falcon which feed on Dragonflies and Swallows. We always know when we hear the Swallows alarming that there is a good chance that a Hobby is about. Hobbies are summer visitors so will soon be following the Swallows and Martins on passage back to Africa for the winter.

Julie Cuthbert

Plant Group: Shenley Wood – Sunday 12 October 2025 – Visit Report

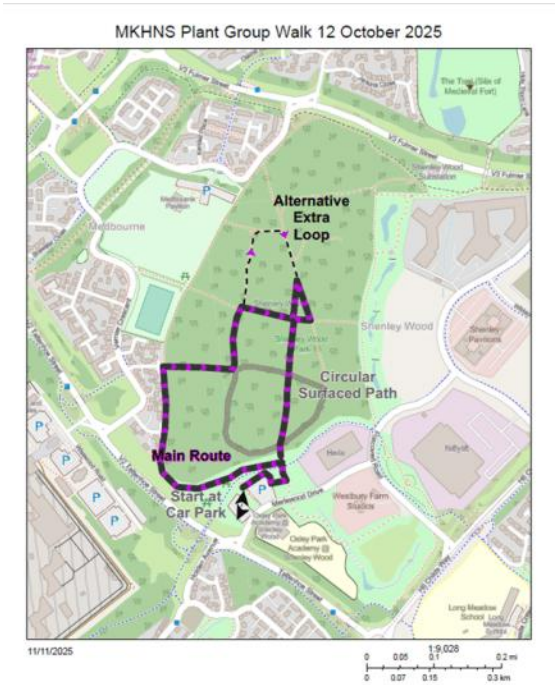
Co-leaders: Carla Boswell and Joe Clinch

(Photos © Bob Phillips except where otherwise stated)

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. The consolidated species list is available on request 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



Map data © OpenStreetMap contributors, Microsoft Facebook, Google, Esri, Community Maps contributors., Map layer by Esri. (prepared by Carla Boswell, The Parks Trust)

Black Bryony (Tamis communis) (Photo © Janice Robertson)

Plant Group's aim '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.

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 Byrony, 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 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 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.

Smooth Tare – flower and leaves

Snowberry – white berries and leaves

Bristly Oxtongue flower and bristly stem and leaves

Male Fern showing fronds

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. 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. 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. 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.

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)
October 2025