

John Bingham

Wyre Forest, due to its bio-geographical position between the upland and lowland zones of Britain, contains a flora that included elements representative from each zone. Wyre seems to be akin to a Welsh forest set in lowland England. Remember it is west of Welch Gate, Bewdley, so it was very nearly in Wales!

Many plants found more typically in the uplands come to the edge of their ranges in this area. Bilberry and heather, the classic ground flora plants of Wyre Forest, are also dominant over most of the natural Welsh Marches hillsides. They only become uncommon as you head further south into in Worcestershire and quite scattered and uncommon in lowland England.

There are quite a number of plants within this area that are either 'special' or are more frequent to the Wyre Forest. The following are a few of these plants.

Plant Species

Wood Crane's-bill

Wood Crane's-bill (*Geranium sylvaticum*) is a northern plant that is common in Scotland and northern England as far south as Cumbria. (Preston et al 2001) It is a feature of traditional species-rich



Wood Cranesbill

hay meadows in the Pennines, the upland version of our lowland hay meadows. To the south it only occurs in a few scattered locations in the Welsh Marches.

Wyre Forest is the stronghold for this plant locally but not as a hay meadow plant. In Worcestershire it is classed as a locally notable species and only occurs around the Wyre Forest area (excluding one garden escape), (Fraser et al 1998). Within

Shropshire the plant is listed as rare and found in roadside verges and woods near Pentre, Clee Hill and the Wyre Forest. (Lockton et al 2001). The first record for Wyre was 1834 made by Hastings, "in Bewdley forest near Dowles Brook, plentifully". (Amphlett and Rea 1909)

With distinctive geranium leaves and bright mauve flowers it stands out for easy identification. It is a rhizomatous perennial (possibly short-lived) of damp woodlands and ancient hedged lanes. It has attractive flowers and the distinctive geranium leaf, cultivated forms of the plant do occur in gardens. Its distribution within Wyre Forest seems rather restricted and tends to follow stream valleys, woodland edge, hedgerows and wet flushes within the core forest area. It occurs in a hedgerow and a hay meadow near Bliss Gate but this is atypical for this area. Most locations are within the forest woodland normally along small stream valleys with damp soil.

Dowles Brook, east of Knowles Mill and the smaller tributaries that feed into Dowles are the places to look. The plant occurs in scattered locations around Buttonoak spilling out onto the edges of hedgerows. A few sites occur in stream valleys towards Pound Green Common. It appears to be scarce to the west of the Wyre Forest woodland complex and I have not seen it in the lanes around Far Forest. Whilst this plant is not uncommon in the forest it would be interesting to map the distribution. Any records away from the core area would be of most interest, useful in filling in the gaps. The habitat would be interesting to record as the plateau soils appear to be too acidic and the plant is limited to wetter base rich soil.

Moonwort

Moonwort (*Botrychium lunaria*) is another plant that is quite common in the north and west of Britain. This unusual perennial fern is scattered across the upland areas of Shropshire, especially old spoil heaps. It becomes rare in Worcestershire, with only a few sites, and is recorded as very rare (Day 2001) and in the County Red Data Book list (Fraser et al 1998). Most records are for the Wyre Forest area. It occurs in short grassland pastures, commons or traditional hay meadows. Around Wyre Forest it prefers species-rich unimproved pastures. With only three locations known it is a rare plant and easily overlooked. Early spring at Cowslip time is best to look, but the plant rarely grows much more than 75mm high and becomes hidden in the grassy sward by June.

Anyone with access to interesting flowery pastures should have a close look for this small plant. For the really keen a search on hands and knees is required in likely spots.

It should occur more frequently given the number of unimproved grasslands in the Wyre Forest locality but historical records, especially those by George Jorden made in the 1870's, suggest it may be a genuinely rare species in this area. Any records for this plant would be very valuable. Identification is quite easy, as the fern is so distinctive; the only similar species is Adders-Tongue fern that is more common and has a single 'leaf' blade. (Adders-Tongue fern is also a very important indicator of quality grasslands and worth recording if you fail to discover the elusive Moonwort).



Moonwort

Chaffweed

If Moonwort seemed a challenge to find then Chaffweed (*Anagallis minima*) is a real test. It holds the distinction of having the smallest flower of any plant of Britain's native flora. Chaffweed is now more a coastal plant having declined on many of its former inland sites. (Preston et al 2001). It is an annual preferring damp, sandy, acidic soils free from competition with other plants. It can thrive and actually needs occasional disturbance and has a preference for areas where water stands during winter. Former inland sites feature heathland or common. In Shropshire it is now only found in Wyre Forest but recent records have been made from Castlemorton Common in Worcestershire by Worcestershire Flora Project recorders.

I have a personal liking for this plant as I rediscovered it in Wyre Forest after an absence of

over 100 years. Interestingly Bewdley botanist George Jorden did not record this plant on his travels through the forest, though he appears to have recorded nearly everything else! The first record for the plant was made in 1882 by two visiting botanists Beckwith and Serjeantson. They described it as being in "the Shropshire part of Wyre Forest ... growing in the damp parts of the drives on which probably water has stood in the winter". In July 1991 I chanced on the plant at Wimperhill Wood, in the Shropshire part of Wyre, growing in an old tractor rut where water had stood.

Growing to around 30mm this plant is not easy to locate but, once found, I managed to find further sites scattered along several track ways at Wimperhill. The population ran into thousands of plants running along the sides of the tracks. It flowers in high summer and best located by searching its habitat of bare or disturbed damp soil, typically along a forest track or rutted area. It has distinctive round fruits in late summer but a hand lens is recommended to see these. Recently, it has been discovered in a new location within Wyre, the second site for Worcestershire, at Skeys Wood - recorded by Harry Green and John Meiklejohn. Could it be elsewhere?

Heath Cudweed

Another northern species but also occurring in the east of Britain Heath Cudweed (*Gnaphalium sylvaticum*) is a species in decline. It is a short-lived perennial preferring dry, heathy woodland or scrub. Once not uncommon in Shropshire it now occurs only at Hopton Titterhill and Wyre Forest. In Worcestershire it is classed as locally notable and rare in the county. Apart from Wyre, it can be found on a few sandy areas around Kidderminster.

At most sites Heath Cudweed lasts for a few years before competition from other plants tend to exclude it. It grows along forest rides that are cut or scraped on a regular basis. It colonises new bare ground such as former timber stacking areas or other similar disturbed sites. First noted in 1864 by George Jorden, only half a dozen sites have been recorded in recent years and presently it occurs at only two of these. Both of these locations are mown and consist of heathy grassland bordering forest track ways.

Like most cudweeds it is not an obvious plant having small dull yellowish flowers in late summer to early autumn with slender flower spikes and silvery leaves. The common Marsh Cudweed looks similar but is more lax and does not have the thin upright flower spikes around 10cm long (often less). Heath Cudweed might be more common over the forest on rides, grassy or heathy areas. Its former sites included forestry roads at New Parks and Wimperhill Wood. A plant to look out for as it may disappear from both counties. Records would be useful to help try to conserve the plant in Wyre.



Heath Cudweed

Marsh Violet

This species is common in the north and west of Britain, Marsh Violet (*Viola palustris*) is threatened by drainage of its habitat but as yet it is far from being uncommon. In Shropshire it is common in the uplands but very rare in lowland Worcestershire and a locally notable species. First recorded in Wyre in 1855 by George Jorden it has a very



Marsh Violet

restricted distribution within Wyre. Although records show that it exists in the main woodland of Wyre, I have never seen it in this location. It does occur widely scattered on the western side of the forest, on the Shropshire side, found in wet areas often associated with *Sphagnum* moss. At times it can appear quite abundant but is limited to the wetland habitat. The habitat, pale flowers and glossy round leaves make identification fairly easy. Other Dog Violets can also have round leaves (or even appear in wet habitats) so take care!

The slight difference in the geology of the coal measures in Wyre seems to restrict the plants' distribution, quite why I don't understand. Possibly

References

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the soil or spring-line water pH is different. Whatever the reason I have no records east of Furnace Mill. Records of the plant found anywhere in Wyre are worth recording, a Worcestershire site would be nice, but searching the woods to the west of the forest should prove most successful.

Lost Species

Finally, a few species that we appear to have lost from Wyre Forest?

Juniper (*Juniperis communis*) was rare by the 1900's but is now extinct from Wyre. It was recorded from New Parks where it lost out to shade from exotic conifers (?) Furnace Mill, Malpass (more conifers) and Kingswood. (Rea 1910). Could a moribund bush turn up somewhere? It has been rediscovered at a site in Herefordshire where it was thought to be lost, so they may be a glimmer of hope.

Stone Bramble (*Rubus saxatilis*) recorded in 1855 by Gissing and last noted by Jorden in 1870. It had several locations ... "the old railway line at the Bewdley end of Wyre Forest, in Hitterhill Coppice near Stoneybatch Brook, Holy Well near Buttonoak and Dowles Brook near the first Mill". A distinctive bramble without prickles but being a bramble it could easily be overlooked.

Sundew (*Drosera rotundifolia*) recorded at Burnt Wood, or at least a boggy area adjacent to the woodland, possibly now part of the golf course? It was noted at the bottom of Wimpherhill Wood but most of the wet areas here appear to be base rich for such a plant. Easy to identify and specific in its boggy habitat so we may have to accept it has become extinct.

With Sundew occurred Bog Asphodel (*Narthecium ossifragum*), so common and abundant that Rea in 1910 recorded it 'was likely to maintain itself there for many years to come'. (Rea 1910). What happened to it?

Three Wintergreen (*Pyrola spp*) species have been recorded from Wyre but the record of Lesser Wintergreen appears to have been made in error by Jorden. That leaves Common and Intermediate, both of which have disappeared. It appears that Rock Coppice (or a woodland garden) was the last location for Intermediate Wintergreen and Lesser was recorded from near Park Brook, New Parks and Hitterhill. The small white flowers may be hard to spot but a wintergreen leaf should be more obvious. I am not aware of any recent records of any species.

With around 800 vascular plant species associated with the Wyre Forest this is just a sample of the interest for the botanist who takes the time and trouble to search the forest flora. New records are welcome.