



Wyre Forest Study Group

Wyre Forest, Mopson's Cross, Park Brook, Dowles Brook to Bewdley ~ Wednesday, 24th August, 1853

This article was first published in The Transactions of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club, 1847-1896 and is reproduced here with permission from the Club *It has been transcribed by Mick Blythe*

The second reported meeting for the season 1853 was held on Wednesday, the 24th August, in the shady coverts of Wyre Forest, near Bewdley. Wyre Forest extends its dusky shades for several miles over undulating ground and watered ravines, where sandstone of the coal formation is in various spots exposed to view, and its wilderness of overhanging boughs and woods of mossy oaks extends into the neighbouring counties of Salop and Stafford. It was decided to enter the sylvan shade from "Mopson's Cross," a solitary hostel whose name, smacking of mediaeval times, incited the antiquaries to look out for traces of some holy structure, where doubtless ancient wayfarers had duly paused and asked protection from danger, ere they journeyed on through bleak wilds where perhaps "merrie men," as the freebooters of old were called, were waiting in ambush to pick up some stray waif, or "steal from the world" - not exactly in the mere poetical sense! In this secluded district change loiters "like snail," and won't be hurried: - the present bearers of the Cross on their sign boasted that it had been in the same family for upwards of two hundred years, and that their inn was the oldest licensed house in the county! Indeed, all the signs noted on the verge of the forest were of a grave, loyal, and steady character; - the "Rose and Crown", mounted up to "time-honoured Lancaster"; and "Duke William" was the latest hero known in forest chronicles! The Club began to think they were led by Rip-Van-Winkle, of "Sleepy-Hollow" memory, when they thus found themselves in the presence of Duke William of Cumberland and the Stuart strife of 1745.

From these recollections they progressed to the "brown horrors" of sylvan shades, where the dense underwood spread a cloak repulsive to observation; but here and there an opening space exhibited an old charcoal heap characterised by a peculiar vegetation which nature ever provides for strange spots appreciated only by the naturalist. Here was the curious *Marchantia polymorpha*, with its remarkable fructification held in little umbrella-like receptacles spreading out like stars

(both barren and fertile), with the gemmae on its fronds like miniature eggs in a nest; and the curious hygrometrical moss (*Funaria hygrometrica*) always following the track of fire along the charred ground.

A point of very interesting attraction in Wyre Forest is the Sorb, or "Whitty Pear Tree", as termed by the rustics around, the only one of the species known in a wild state throughout Britain, and this antiquated Dryad was now reached. It is a very old, decrepid tree, quite bare below, and extending its lank arms a considerable height in the air, but only verdant on these lofty branches. The origin and age of the tree are involved in mystery, and it is only certainly known that it must be of very great age, and has long been regarded with a kind of superstitious veneration, not yet quite worn out. It was, indeed, described as a curiosity in the Philosophical Transactions for 1678, the information of its existence being communicated by Alderman Pitts, of Worcester, who then represented the botanical ward in the faithful city. The foliage of the sorb-tree is similar in shape to that of the Mountain Ash, but the fruit is very different, more resembling a small jennet pear, and excessively hard and uneatable. It is the "True Service" or *Pyrus domestica* of botanists, and is said never to bear fruit until sixty years old. The charm that, especially in Scotland, has been ever attached to the Wood of the Mountain Ash, or Rowan-tree, is well known:-

*"Witches have no power
Where there is Rowan-tree wood;"*

and it would seem that our "Whitty Pear Tree" (the term whitty probably derived from Sax, witten to know), possessed the same efficacy in times when "witchery" was attached to old ladies rather than to young ones, and they were toasted accordingly! Certain it is that the hard fruit of the Sorb-tree had used formerly to be hung up in the foresters' houses as a security "from the witch;" and an honest wood-cutter, met with on the present occasion, who admitted a habit of carrying a piece of the common "Witchen" or Mountain-ash in his



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pocket, to be on the safe side even in these unromantic times, thought that the "Whitty-Pear Tree," and especially its fruit, might be rather stronger in the way of protection! The members of the Club all seemed desirous of embracing "protection" on this occasion, for strenuous efforts were made to obtain some fruit seen very high up on the tree, but all efforts to secure the talismanic power proved ineffectual, and the height was too far to ascend by any appliances near at hand.

An advance was next made through tufted mazes of gorse and bilberry thickets-on-on-

*"Through buried paths where
sleepy twilight dreams
The summer time away"-*

to the great bog, embowered and totally covered in by thick umbrage; and in searching for this "far in a wild unknown to public view," some most beautiful sylvan features were traversed down to the savagely wild banks of Dowles Brook, the descent to which is covered with a shaggy growth of flowering Ling, and bushes of the bright Heath (*Erica cinerea*) at this time exhibiting a profusion of purple bells. Nor was the ramble without adventure, for one party lost the other, the guide lost himself; and it was only after many a dash through brake, bush, and thicket, that a junction was at last effected at the bog. A pretty scene was here presented of undulating banks covered with soft yielding Sphagnum, with water gushing into every hollow, the whole profusely clothed with the tall Cotton-grass (*Eriophorum latifolium*) dangling its flossy tassels white as ermine, with here and there the purple-flowered very rare Marsh Helleborine (*Epipactis Palustris*), and the lilac fragrant *Gymnadenia conopsea*=*Habenaria conopsea*, - all shut out from the jarring world by a green curtain of waving foliage, and nothing to be seen all around but dense forest clothing hill and dale. The borders of this bog were adorned with the berried Alder (*Rhamnus frangula*), exhibiting a profusion of rose-coloured and, black berries; and in this vicinity the Silver-washed and Dark green Fritillaries (*Argynnis Paphia* and *Aglaia*) were seen on the wing. Leaving this interesting spot rather reluctantly, the party started in Indian trail through the bushes for Park Brook, which, wandering at its own free will down a deep ravine, exhibits many pretty though confined bits of rock, wood, and water-

fall, charming to the lover of nature, but in particular places more deeply interesting than agreeable to the stickler for dry feet, the purple Melic-grass (*Molinia caerulea*=*Molinia varia*) covering with deceptive verdure many very plashy spots. Here some crayfish were disturbed from under their stoney slabs in the water, and a capture made. This gloomy and damp part of the forest has many charms for the botanical wanderer, for in this vicinity the delicate white-flowered *Pyrola minor* and *Convallaria majalis* were gathered, as well as the Columbine, Wood Geranium, and the elegant, Wood Melic-grass (*Melicanutans*). The Bird's-nest Orchis (*Listera-Nidus Avis*=*Neottia Nidus-avis*) was also found in the deep shade of o'er arching boughs, and the rare Stone Bramble (*Rubus saxatilis*).

Zoology also contributed somewhat to the instruction if not charms of the day, for two vipers and a pretty blind-worm (*Anguis fragilis*), came forth for inspection, and a hedgehog was reported, but not bagged, a rare *Silpha* feeding upon his carcase. Many other traverses were made into the recesses of the green wood by botanists and entomologists, until the wearied powers of some of the members of the club began to cry "Hold, enough;" for it was found that the forest could not be carried off at once quite so easily as Birnam Wood came down to Dunsinane, unless indeed an army could have been called in to assist in the operation. A halt was now called at Dowles Brook, where the Entomologist-general produced his captures, as recorded below. Some of the party here took the direct road to Bewdley, and the others went to the mouth of Dowles Brook to see *Spiraea salicifolia*, where they roused the Dipper or Water Ouzel (*Cinclus aquaticus*), a rare bird in Worcestershire. Here the beautiful *Coronilla varia* was observed growing on the banks of the Severn in a naturalized state.

The party re-assembled about six p.m. at the George Inn, Bewdley, where dinner was served, when the Rev. Canon Cradock, as President of the club, took the chair, and on its termination, a quick drive was made to Kidderminster to catch the last train.

PLANTS.- The remarkable plants gathered, which are not mentioned in the preceding narrative, were *Sedum dassyphyllum*, *Hypericum dubium*, *Rhamnus catharticus*,



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Rosa tomentosa, and *Villosa*, *Rubus Guntheri*, *hirtus*, *pallidus*, and *rosaceus*, *Sanguisorba officinalis*=*Poterium officinale*, *Geranium sanguineum*, *Gnaphalium sylvaticum*, *Polygonum Bistorta*, *Anagallis tenella*, *Triglochin palustre*, *Hieracium umbellatum*, *murorum*, and *boreale*, *Carex fulva* and *pulicaris*, *Ceterach officinarum*, *Athyrium Filix-faemina*, *Asplenium Ruta-muraria*, *Lastraea spinulosa* and *Equisetum sylvaticum*. Mr. T. Baxter exhibited specimens of the American water plant *Anacharis alsinastrum*=*Elodea canadensis* which he discovered on the 19th August, 1853, in a small pool, the remains of a clay pit near Bevere Island, about three miles up the river Severn, and he made the following remarks concerning it:- "The plant grows submerged in the water, in large tangled masses, and is so specifically heavy that when a piece is broken off it sinks to the bottom. The stalks are long, slender, and stringy, with numbers of small leaves growing round the stem in threes, which at once distinguishes it from other water plants. It was first found in this island on the 3rd of August, 1842, by Dr. George Johnston, of Berwick-on-Tweed, in the lake of Dunse Castle, which is on a tributary of the Whiteadder. It was, however, not much noticed till the autumn of 1847, when it was again discovered by Miss Kirby in some reservoirs adjoining Foxton Locks, near Market Harborough, in Leicestershire. This re-discovery awakened attention, and Mr. Babington published a description of the plant in the Annals of Natural History for February, 1848; and Dr. Johnston, on reading the account, at once recognised the plant he had found in 1842. In the same season, but later, Mr. James Mitchel found it in great profusion in the Lene, near Nottingham, and in November of the same year it was found by Mr. Kirk at Watford Locks, in Northamptonshire. In August, 1849, it was discovered in Derbyshire and Staffordshire, growing abundantly in the Trent and the canal near Burton, by Mr. Edwin Brown. At Christmas, 1850, Mr. Kirk found it at Rugby, and in July, 1850, in the Oxford Canal, near Wyken Colliery. In 1851 Mr. W. Marshall noticed it in the Ouse at Ely, and last year it had made its way to Stratford-on-Avon, where it was discovered by Mr. W. Cheshire, junior, of that town, who also found it in June this year in the same river at Evesham, which was the first time it had been noticed in Worcestershire. Now all these midland counties stations are

connected, and are, in fact, part of the same water system, and the plant, therefore, once established at Rugby or Watford, might be expected to reach any of the other places, especially as it grows with such surprising rapidity; and indeed an account of this plant by Mr. W. Marshall, published in 1852 (to which we are indebted for many of the facts related here), says, while speaking of its probable extension, "a few detached sprigs 'travelling' would enter the Severn via Rugby and Warwick." But the mystery is how it got up the Severn to the pool where it was discovered on Friday last; for the same gentleman observes "that the plant is only now descending these rivers is evident." The way in which the Cam came to be infested by it is supposed to be this. In 1848 a piece was placed in the conduit stream in the Cambridge Botanic Gardens by the late Mr. Murray, the curator, and a portion doubtless escaped through the water-pipe and down the brook to the river. The plant under our notice is dioecious, i.e., it has its stamens on one plant and the pistils on another. The nature of plants of this order is that unless by some means the stigma of the one class is fertilised by the pollen of the other no seed can arrive at maturity. It is singular that all the specimens found in this country are female, that is, having pistils only, and we are led to believe from this that the plant is a foreigner that has by some chance been introduced, very likely with timber from Canada. The most remarkable circumstance connected with the *Anacharis* is the rapidity of its growth; for although, for the reason above stated, it cannot here propagate itself by seed, its powers of increase are prodigious, and every fragment is capable of becoming an independent plant, producing roots and stems, and extending itself indefinitely in all directions. "Most of our water-plants," says Mr. Marshall, "require, in order to their increase, to be rooted to the bottoms or sides of the river or drain in which they are found; but this is independent altogether of that condition, and actually grows as it travels slowly down the stream after being cut." As an instance of its wonderful increase we may take the manner in which it has spread in Cambridgeshire, where the small piece, supposed to have escaped from the Cambridge Botanical Garden, in four years only multiplied to such an extent as to impede both navigation and drainage. The plant is now found everywhere in the Cam



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from Cambridge downwards, choking up the mouths of docks, sluices, and watercourses. Universal complaints have been made by the water-men of the obstructed state of the Cam. Mr. Marshall says, "I am told that the river at the back of the Colleges has been so blocked, that extra horses had to be yoked on before barges could be got up to Foster's mills." The Railway Dock at Ely became so choked with the weed, that boats could not enter till several tons of it had been lifted out. Rowers and swimmers find that it much interferes with their recreations, and a correspondent of the Cambridge Chronicle remarks "That the weed will upset a 'funny' first, and then prevent the rower swimming to land." Fishermen complain that they cannot ply their nets as easily as they used, and that they have been obliged to discontinue setting their hook-lines, because the "new weed" either carries them away, or strips them of their baits and fish. The Rev. A. Bloxam also says that the increase of the weed in the Trent between Repton and Castle Donnington within the last few years has been such as entirely to prevent the use of nets. Mr. Human, sen., an experienced gentleman in the Cambridge district, says "that although

the waters this season (1852) have been run off at Denver sluice a foot lower than in previous years, the average height of the water below Cambridge has been a foot higher than in ordinary seasons," and he refers at least half of this difference to the obstruction occasioned by the Anacharis. As the weed has now reached us it is to be hoped that all persons will be very careful about making any attempts to propagate it, for if it once gets into any water, it will not easily, perhaps never, be eradicated, and all that can be done will be to try to keep it under by raking it out on the banks. But we trust it will long confine itself to its present locality, and not extend itself either into the river or the canals, where it would prove a very disagreeable intruder.

RETURN OF CAPTURED INSECTS.-
Leucophasia Sinapis, Wood White; *Pamphila-linea*= *Hesperia thaumas*, Small Skipper; *Vanessa C. Album*, the Comma butterfly; *Hipparchia Aegeria*=*Pararge Egeria*, Speckled wood butterfly; *Argynnis paphia*, Silver-washed Fritillary; *Argynnis aglaia*, Dark green Fritillary; *Pieris crataegi*=*Aporia crataegi*, Black veined white butterfly.



Veteran Oak, Birchen Park

Rosemary Winnall