



Special Covid Edition No. 6

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The Hidden Depths of the Botanical Society Website.

Whilst I would hope that most members have dipped into the WBS website and admired its outlay and lovely pictures of the flora of the county, it is clear from some comments that not everyone realises what a wealth of material lies behind some of the options.

From the homepage

Plant of the Month

March

Sweet Violet *Viola odorata*

This little violet often attracts attention in early spring when it flowers in shades of purple and white on banks and hedgerows where little else is blooming or in leaf after winter.

It often forms quite extensive patches, formed as its stolons creep outwards. This growth form - and of course the delicate but obvious scent of the flowers - make it straightforward to distinguish from Common Dog-violet *V. riviniana* and Early Dog-violet *V. reichenbachiana*. *V. odorata* also has appressed-hairy leaf-stalks which sometimes leads to confusion with Hairy Violet *V. hirta* whose hairs are long and patent.



‘**News**’ and ‘**Meetings**’ do what it says on the tin – give you up to date information about current events including, sadly, cancellations because of Covid-19. Let us hope that these messages can change in the not too distant future.

Under ‘**More**’ there are two sub-options, ‘**Publications and Downloads**’ and ‘**Gallery**’. The first provides access to the more recent copies of the Newsletter and also to Wiltshire Botany as well as to ‘**Other Publications**’. The first two of these will be of interest mainly to those who have joined The Society relatively recently and would like to read back-copies. There are also downloads of a few articles written by members and a section ‘**Yearly Plant Records**’. These are the annual lists of plants which constitute ‘new records’ for each of the 10km squares that comprise the county. ‘New’ is defined as not recorded since the Wiltshire Flora 1993. Such lists may not attract the casual browser but they are worth looking at not least because some of the entries could surprise you. Plants as common as Shepherd’s Purse, Hairy Bitter-cress and Smooth Hawk’s-beard are on the list together with garden escapes like *Montbretia* and *Cyclamen* intermingled amongst many other more unusual and rare species. So, if only we realised that they had not been recorded, it would be easy to keep a look out for them and give a purpose to a walk during lockdown.

Unsurprisingly, the gallery provides illustrations of various aspects of The Society including field meetings as well as pictures of plants mentioned elsewhere. I’m sure that Sharon Pilkington would be grateful for more contributions from members!

From the gallery



Edge of a turlough, Co. Clare. Our visit to the Burren in 2017.



Sainfoin *Onobrychis viciifolia*
by Pat Woodruffe.



What's this fern? Our field meeting at Longleat in 2018 led us to a particularly fern-rich area.

Newsletter

Downloads

The Society issues a newsletter once or twice a year, with accounts of its outings and indoor meetings and news of local plant life. In 2020 we started to issue our series of Covid Special Editions every month or two to keep in touch with members during the coronavirus pandemic (Issue 50 onwards).

Contributions are always welcome; please email the Newsletter Editor, [Richard Aisbitt](#). Back issues of the Society's newsletter can be downloaded by clicking the links below.

For guidelines for contributors of articles please click [here](#).

[No. 50d 2021](#)

[No. 50c 2020](#)

[No. 50b 2020](#)

[No. 50a 2020](#)

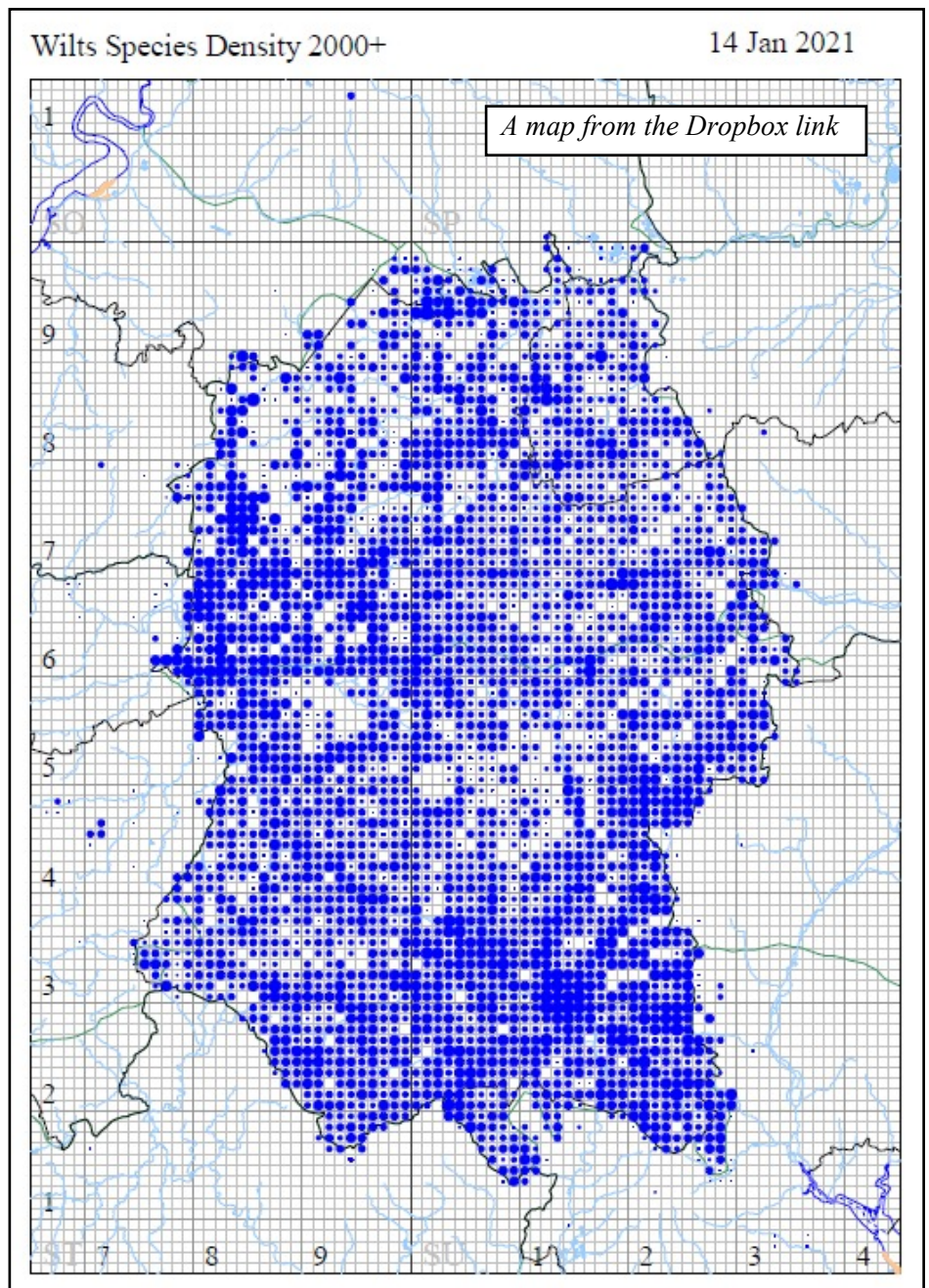
So, if you are new to an area, or simply want to find somewhere different to walk, a few clicks of the mouse can tell you which areas, down to a 1km square, still need more records, which species have yet to be found and, if you look on another set of maps, where the key **designated sites** are in that location.

There is something on this website for everyone, you might be able to find a square for which a daisy or dandelion is a new record so it is not just a matter of seeking out the rare or exotic. You may, through work or personal contacts, have access to places where the general public is not allowed: do please try to make the most of such opportunities. Importantly, please recognise the time and effort that has been put into constructing this website and bringing together all the information so that it is easily available to members. The best way that we can thank Sharon and Richard is by using it and contributing to it.

Pat Woodruffe

It is under the heading '**Recording**' that the greatest surprises lie. Here there is a huge wealth of information that is well worth exploring. I will deal with the straightforward subheadings first – Richard's data entry sheet, the instructions for its use and the recording forms for use in the field. Whilst these are more or less self-explanatory, it must be said that the method of data entry is so easy to use, once mastered, and it ensures that your records will reach our BSBI County Recorders for verification and be passed on to both the Wiltshire and Swindon Biological Records Centre and to the BSBI. Therefore they will be available at both local and national levels and, at the local level, can be used to inform planning issues amongst other things.

Under the heading '**Wiltshire's 10km square maps and data**' are the most detailed accounts of the recording that has taken place in the county over the last two decades; the period in which recording for Atlas 2020 has taken place. Richard's **Dotty Maps** provide information on the level of recording in each 1km square over the whole county, based on the size of the dot, and if you want to know how many records were made then a second series of maps, labelled '**Taxon Counts**' will provide that information too. On top of that the '**Yearly Counts**' will tell you how recently the main recording effort was made and '**Lost and Found**' will tell you what really needs seeking out.



Plant a Tree!

Great Idea – But WHERE?

I must admit to a certain misgiving when I hear or read about the large-scale tree-plantings proposed over the coming years. I have no problem with the thought that more woodland and wildlife corridors will lead to increased biodiversity and also help to address some climate change issues. My concerns are about the choice of sites and of species. Even prime meadowlands can look pretty uninteresting for quite a few months of the year and, other than to the specialist, provide few clues to their spring and summer magnificence. Think about the fields at Clattinger Meadows or North Meadow in the depths of winter; how attractive are they to the vast majority of people?

Peat bog ploughed for tree planting - photo Miles King



Sadly, my concerns became justified when I read an account in British Wildlife December 2020 p 229 'Berrier End Farm tree-planting fiasco'. In short, it relates to a grant of £100 000, which has been awarded to a farmer on the edge of the Lake District National Park, near Penrith, to plant conifers on a 30h stretch of his farm. The site was well known to local botanists and supported 20 Red Data Book species and 10 species of Sphagnum moss but, unfortunately, it had no formal designation of any sort.

I hope, but do not feel confident, that this will be a one-off event and it seems to me that it brings into sharp perspective the reason why it is important to flag up those areas which we believe to be special.

Close to home we can take Morningside Meadows, as an example. WBS is hoping to gain access to the numerous County Wildlife Sites which are now under the auspices of Wiltshire Council so that those keen to record can visit them and bring the records up to date. Some have not been visited for 20 years. Not all members may wish to participate but another way of helping is by making contact with owners of such sites who may be local and known to you. The personal touch can go a long way to helping to gain access and there are other members who will be all too keen to visit and record. It is only by being aware of what we have that we can hope to avert the 'fiasco' that has taken place in the Lake District.

Pat Woodruffe

Miles King's web page on tree planting at Berrier End Farm: <https://westcountrybylines.co.uk/berrier-end-farm-under-trees-100-acres-of-bog-heath-and-grassland-destroyed-by-tree-planting/>

Contacts

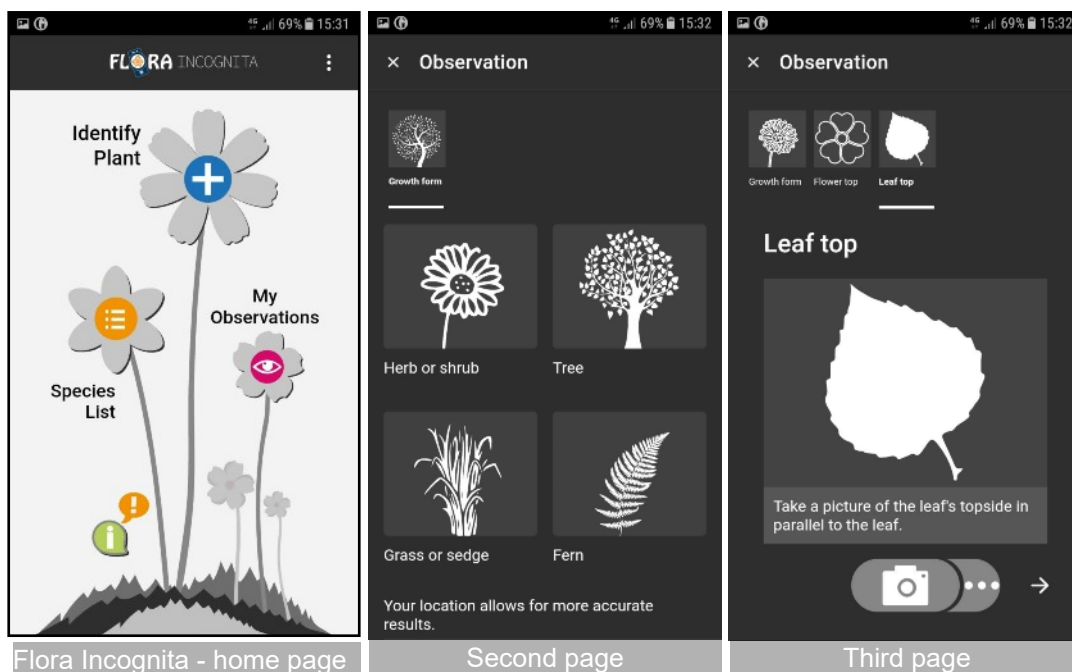
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Do you have any news or comments? I would be pleased to publish these in the next issue. Maybe you would like to write a full-blown article.

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Plant ID Apps

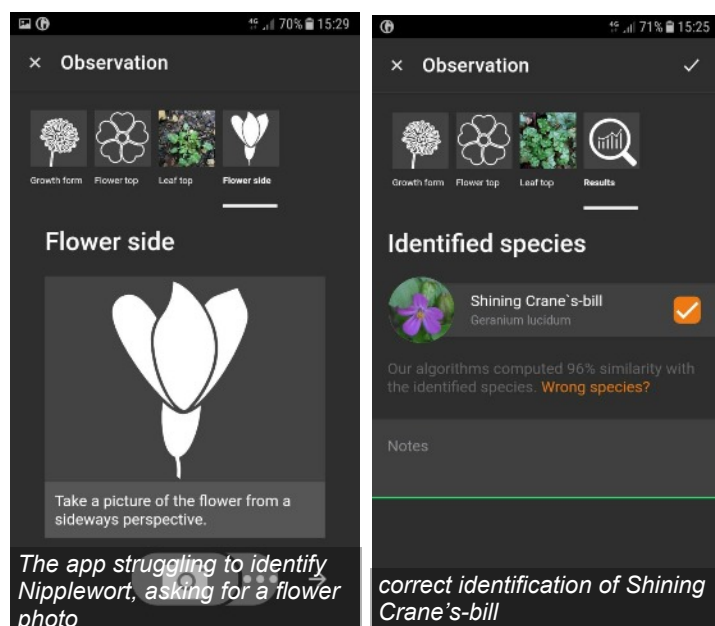
More and more of us are getting into exploring the world via smartphone apps including the many available for Plant ID. There is a confusing number of options out there, from those which are free to those which cost an annual fee. Some use photo recognition technology others have access to experts for verification (I wonder who these experts are?).



In a recent article published in BSBI News (April 2020 144 p.34) https://bsbi.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/BSBI-News-144-pp34-40-plant-id-apps-final.pdf five free Plant ID apps were put to the test. There were different pros and cons but overall, the findings were that identifications were only 39% - 57% correct to species. In addition, 48% of identifications by the worst performer were not even close.

As an experiment, I have just installed Flora Incognita on my smartphone. I have chosen this app as it includes only European wild plants (other apps include garden plants or plants from across the world); it has medium percentage of correct identification and one of the lowest percentages of incorrect identification; it is also free. As a self-confessed technophobe I found this app quite user friendly. On opening the app, you are asked which growth form you want to use e. g. flower or leaf. You then take a photograph via the app which is then identified (or not). I trialled five species four of which had only leaves from which to make an identification. The four species were a willowherb *Epilobium* sp.; Nipplewort *Lapsana communis*; Shining Geranium *Geranium lucidum*; Ivy-leaved Toadflax *Cymbalaria muralis*. The fifth species was Cornelian Cherry *Cornus mas* in flower. The first two were unable to get an identification - the app asked me to take an additional photo of the flowers. The second two species were identified correctly to species from leaves alone. The fifth species was identified correctly to species just from the flowers even though the photograph was out of focus.

As someone who has developed skills in botany in the old-fashioned way, I have so far avoided these apps but it is intriguing how they work using only a photograph, especially for critical species. I will continue to put this app through its paces and not necessarily be gentle with it.



I am also interested in this modern phenomenon where one can rely on mobile technology (or ask Alexa) to provide instant answers to all the questions we might have about life in general but also which plants we see out on a walk. I feel this technology could make people lazy and miss out on developing Botanical skills or accepting identification which may not be correct.

Whilst it is great that these apps might encourage people to engage more with the natural world, is this a good idea that people rely on and trust this technology without questioning the identification the apps give them? Are there ecologists and surveyors out there already who are relying on this technology? Will the future see the use of these apps instead of trained botanists?

Feedback to this article would be most welcome.

Penny Lee

Tanks for the memory

Thalictrum simplex L. subsp. *galiodes* (1st record for Great Britain).

In September 1997, I was undertaking ecological survey work on the MoD: SPTA (Salisbury Plain Training Area) in VC8 South Wiltshire. The site, although criss-crossed by a limited number of public footpaths is only open certain days of the year; otherwise, the area is completely out of bounds to the public to allow for Army troop training and live firing; 'The Plain' as it is universally known, is off limits.

However, a limited number of passes are issued for access annually and so it was with 'Red Card' approval in hand I was stood looking at a plant that I could not identify. As it was late in the botanical season, the colony that was around 5 m², had finished flowering. I speculated that I was looking at either an umbellifer or a *Thalictrum*.

I took specimens and using the, as then, new scanners on the market, scanned an image and sent it to the late Mike Mullen, keeper at that time, of the herbarium at the Natural History Museum. (see attached). He tentatively named the plant as *Thalictrum simplex*, but did not have any material in the Museum's collection to compare it with.

Mike suggested that I bring a specimen to the forthcoming BSBI Exhibition meeting that autumn. During that day, Francis Rose, passed me on his way to obtain a much-needed cup of tea and recognised it immediately. He confirmed that it was *T. simplex* and then added, whilst continuing his approach to the tea urn, that there were several sub-species!

I forwarded material to Eric Clement who determined that it was in fact *Thalictrum simplex subsp. galiodes*. The colony of plants was revisited the following year with the relevant MoD conservation officers and notes on the habitat together with a 6-fig. grid reference taken.

Eric, in a later note, asked me to publish the record; this feature document finally fulfils that request. At that time, I was also Vice-county recorder for North Wiltshire VC7, but as this *Thalictrum* record was in South Wiltshire VC8, I packaged up all the relevant information and sent it off to my opposite number, Ann Hutchison, and in due course this record reached the local and national record centres. Alas, nothing else emerged from the record, the data I had sent was not returned and life and time went on.

The site where I found the *Thalictrum* is contained within the Salisbury Plain SSSI which extends over 19,689 hectares; 12,933 hectares of which is unimproved and forms the largest known expanse of chalk downland, not only in the UK but in Europe. The location of the colony lies within the Central Section of the SPTA, south-east of the village of Tilshead. This is part of the huge SSSI that consists of extensive, unfenced, and unimproved chalk downland that has been under the MoD ownership, in some cases, from the late 19th century. As mentioned earlier, much of this area has been used for infantry but also tank training since its purchase and churned up turves and tracks still seen today shows the on-going use, with tree shelterbelts acting as hideaway areas for tanks on manoeuvres.

This downland was, until the early 20th century, sheep grazed grassland for a considerable time prior to its compulsory purchase by the MoD. Salisbury Plain is now managed for its unique grassland and for those species that inhabit it. There had been little tree cover originally, but in the last 30 years or so the downland has been 'augmented' by the MoD by the planting of shelter belts.

The single *Thalictrum* colony was growing in species rich downland turf in a matrix of NVC grassland types CG3, *Bromopsis erecta*; CG2 *Festuca ovina*, *Avenula* and MG5 *Cynosurus*, *Centaurea*, grasslands. There were areas of recent disturbance with bare soil and turves thrown up in places.

Update of original record 2014 to the present day

In 2014, I had the sad task of helping to sort through the botanical storage of the retired and recently deceased VC8 recorder, Ann Hutchison. She had given over 30 years service and in that time had accrued much in the way of reference books and recording data. Whilst searching through one of the boxes I found the details of the *Thalictrum* I had sent to Ann all those years before. This re-ignited my interest.

In 2015, I applied and was issued with a new SPTA 'Red Card' pass that allowed me access to the site. Historical recall is a wonderful idea but on the ground it does not work that well! On my return to the area, I strode out confident that even without using the grid reference I would walk up to the location without a problem. Oh dear! I was so wrong. You will recall that I said that Salisbury Plain is huge and there I was standing in a very small part of it. That wonderful unimproved chalk grassland, looking identical to everything else I could see in all directions.

What were my clues in relocating the colony? There had been a piece of MoD rusting hardware in the immediate vicinity 18 years previously but clearly someone had moved it or blown it up as I couldn't find it

I re-visited the Plain five times over the next four years, sometimes alone or with fellow botanists. It was not hard work hunting this plant on this wonderful sloping downland as you never knew whether you were going to walk over clumps of Dwarf Sedge *Carex humilis*, Knapweed Broomrape *Orobanche elatior*, Pale Flax *Linum bienne*, Dyer's Greenweed *Genista tinctoria*, Autumn Gentian *Gentianella amarella* or walk through drifts of Betony *Betonica officinalis*, Dropwort *Filipendula vulgaris* or Devil's-bit Scabious *Succisa pratensis*. All rather distracting though.

The site had been revisited in 2002 by MoD conservation ecologists and a 8 figure grid reference had been taken, This second location was within several 100 metres of the first.

Why was it so difficult to refind the location? 1997 was prior to commercial GPS devices being available and you just calculated a six-figure grid reference the best as you could using a map and a couple of rulers. However, a 6-figure grid reference covers an area that is 100 x 100 metres and that is a big chunk of downland to search, especially if you are not convinced you are in the right place when you start and if you've got your grid reference right in the first place

I never did refind it. Why not? Eventually by powers of deduction, I realised the 1st colony had been in the middle of a relatively newly created tank track, a track that has been used for years and years and was now ground down to pure chalk. And there was no sign of the plant at the second site.

Assessment

Was the *Thalictrum* native, or was it an introduction, well naturalised and spreading? It was growing up to 60cm in height and had flowered at mid-season, late June/July. It was rhizomatous and appeared to have perpetuated itself by this means. Due to the size of the clump, this colony had apparently been in this location for some years. There were no outlying specimens, with all plants appearing to be associated within the one colony and no seedlings were observed.

Prior to finding the *Thalictrum* in 1997, the British Army had been returning all its hardware including its tanks from Central Europe to Salisbury Plain, amongst other sites (The Berlin wall fell in 1989). It can only be conjectured that as *Thalictrum simplex* subsp. *galiodes*, being a native in Europe and occurring on the central European plain, an area used by the British Army to train on, came back to this country as roots or seeds on the tracks of armoured vehicles and subsequently transferred itself to the SPTA.

My supposition then is that it was an unintentional imported species or it was a completely unknown member of the native British flora, waiting to be discovered. You choose.

In my mind, is the plant still there? Yes, somewhere, after all it is a big place.

Oh well, 'TANKS FOR THE MEMORY'.

History of the species distribution

Based on the European databases, *Thalictrum simplex*, occurs from eastern France, through all of central and southern Europe, including Scandinavia, Asia to Mongolia and on through Siberia.

T. simplex subspecies *galiodes* has a much more limited distribution, but includes all of France, Baltic states, parts of Scandinavia, Romania, Hungary, Ukraine and Yugoslavia. Based on these findings I believe my hypothesis still stands true for a Central European origin.

My thanks to Martin Buckland for commenting on this text

Dave



Wiltshire Botanical Society recording proposals 2021

As set out in the February newsletter, it has been agreed that the Project Group takes forward the field recording work of the society. As you know we have now completed the BSBI Atlas recording project and all records for that work are being correlated. We look forward to the results of all our hard work in the near future. The year 2020 was always considered, not only by the BSBI but also all the other botanical societies that took part in the project, as a year off from recording. Little did we know that we would have a pandemic to contend with.

Now to the future. What we have been left with, after the hard work of square bashing for the last 10 years, is an immense set of records covering the vast majority of the county.

Nationally, we know that this information will be used to further the understanding of the British flora in the early part of the 21st century, having covered the period 2000 to 2019 inclusive. The Wiltshire records gathered are far more detailed than those required by the BSBI and within the county it has always been considered that this data should form a base for a new Flora of Wiltshire. Therefore from 2021 to 2024, inclusive we intend to continue to fill in 1 km squares that have not previously been visited, plus update those squares which presently have low numbers with the view that in 2025 we will have sufficient data, covering a 25 year period, to enable a new County Flora to be initiated.

There are 3,795 kilometre squares partly or wholly within Wiltshire, VC7 or VC8. 441 of these have no records since 2000; 704 have 10 or fewer. Many of these low-scoring squares are borderline with other vice-counties. Eliminating these leaves 333 with no records and 542 with 10 or fewer records.

As part of the analysis that was undertaken during the winter to see where the best efforts should be directed, three specific areas were identified:

1. **Species that have been previously recorded in each 10km sq. but have not been seen since 2000.**
2. **The species that are historically rare and scarce in the county.** Although many have been refound, recent recording indicates that they are in fewer locations. Scrutinising the dot maps has indicated a possible decrease in frequency of some of these species. Many have a long history of occurrence in the same location, the difficulty has been that over the last few years, the concentration has been on recording new squares rather than going to specific locations at the correct time of year to see whether a particular plant is still occurs.
3. **Proposed investigation and survey of County Wildlife Sites and/or SSSI.** Access to these sites requires agreement with Wiltshire County (who manage the County Wildlife Sites) or with Natural England. We know that many of these sites are lacking in recent records and that they have considerable potential to add to our database. Most are in private ownership and will not have been visited by WBS members unless by special agreement with the land owner. When we make further progress we will update members by email and newsletter. Should you know an owner of such a site, then do please see if you can agree access for yourself, or for other members of the society, to visit and record.

Here is how can you help:

‘Square bashing’

Most of the locations that need visiting are in the north of the county, a part of Wiltshire which is very sparsely covered by active local botanists. It would be helpful if some people were willing to travel to visit these squares. **(Please see map on page 2 and, If you would like to help, please check with Richard Aisbitt first).**

Filling in the gaps

We realise that there is still a lot of work that you can do in the near vicinity of your home. Many squares were only visited once and have relatively low numbers so it would be very helpful for recorders to revisit squares at a different time of year. (See website for current numbers for the square you intend to revisit)

Species not seen since 2000

The website has a page showing the species not seen in each specific 10 km square. Often these are quite common species. See the article on the website, in this newsletter for details. The lists can be printed and serve as an aid memoir when walking around botanising.

Please download this for your square and hopefully we can record a number of the species in the next four seasons.

Rare species

Many of these plants have a long history in a given location and we have available the OS grid references associated with the last sitings. If you wish to search for a specific species, we will be able to give you background information about where to go. (If you would like to help please contact Richard Aisbitt, whose name can be found on the website, to discuss). **A list of good plants to look for will be sent as an addition to this newsletter.**

County wildlife sites. – see 3 above.

Cover picture: Green Hellebore in Clouts Wood - photo Steve Beal