Cambridgeshire Bryophyte Group
24 November 2024: Hardwick Church and Childerley Hall

Present: Nick Jardine, Monica O'Donnell, Chris Preston, Jonathan Shanklin, Lucy Wilson.

A small group of bryologists met at Hardwick Church. Our numbers were low for various reasons, including seasonal bugs and the threat of Storm Bert. A few days before the meeting, the weather forecast for today was indeed dire, predicting heavy rain all day, but we got away with strong winds and a single light shower in the afternoon, a striking contrast to the torrential rain further west.

Our only previous visit to Hardwick churchyard was in February 2005, when we recorded 28 species. We found 35 this time, including as many as 14 additions to the previous list. Most of these were not unexpected, but it is surprising that we had overlooked the uncommon churchyard species *Thamnobryum alopecurum* last time, as it is now present as a dense sward in the turf on the north side of the church. *Syntrichia laevipila*, which is probably now our least frequent *Syntrichia* species, was fruiting on a churchyard lime tree.

We went on to Childerley Hall. Shrunken or deserted villages are a feature of the sticky claylands of West Cambridgeshire, an agriculturally marginal area which took many centuries to recover from the depopulation of the Black Death. Childerley is a classic example – the village has completely disappeared, and only a field with conspicuous humps and bumps marks the site of the main street and church. However, there is a substantial Hall, a 16th century brick mansion remodelled in Victorian times, and this was our main site for the day. We visited the grounds of the Hall, the centre of a very well-maintained estate. Although there are a couple of early records from here (1933, 1940), there is only one comprehensive list, made on our meeting in January 2009. That was a very well-attended meeting, with 15 bryologists, and after recording the Hall grounds we were able to split up and cover much more ground than we visited on this occasion.

Unlike our list for the churchyard, the species we recorded in the Hall grounds were very similar to those seen on our previous visit. Last time we found 58 species, this time with fewer bryologists we saw 49. I was keen to check whether *Porella platyphylla* has survived in its unusual habitat of concrete by a shallow, artificial stream, and indeed it has, along with *Neckera complanata*. However, the banks of the stream, which were recently disturbed and tinged red with fruiting *Ephemerum recurvifolium* in 2009, were now much too overgrown to support any *Ephemerum*. The only significant addition to the Hall list was, predictably, *Syntrichia papillosa*, frequent on a parkland *Acer*. Though this was the least frequent Cambridgeshire *Syntrichia* in our 2000–18 survey, it has certainly increased in frequency since then. An unusual substrate was a soft toy (a chimp? see below) lodged in an oak tree, colonised by *Lewinskya affinis* and *Syntrichia montana*.

I collected *Dicranella varia sens. lat.* at both sites. The plant on the clay of Hardwick churchyard was *D. varia sens. str.* whereas that on the clay above the lake in the Hall grounds had the broad, ill-defined midrib of the segregate *D. howei*, although the leaf lamina towards the base of the leaf appeared unistratose throughout. As these records suggests, it is difficult to

detect any ecological distinction between these two species in our area, and I do wonder whether they would be better treated as subspecies.

We finished the day recording the plantation Black Hall Wood, near the Hall, and the orchard near Double Plantation. There were fewer species of disturbed habitats in the Wood this time as a ditch which was then recently dug (or enlarged) was now less disturbed. We may also have been handicapped by the dense cover of fallen leaves. The fruit trees in the orchard, though mossy with much *Hypnum cupressiforme*, had disappointingly few epiphytes. Some apple varieties are known to support fewer bryophytes than others – perhaps the varieties here are amongst them.

Chris Preston 26 November 2024

Examining an unusual substrate. *Lucy Wilson*.