

**Cambridgeshire Bryophyte Group**  
**10 February 2024: Monks Wood NNR**

Present: Astrid Biddle, Nick Jardine, Chris Preston, Rohan Richard, James Rowland, Jeff Scott, Jonathan Shanklin, Pete Stroh.

We have been fortunate in recent years in the conditions for our annual visit to Monks Wood, a well-known ancient wood. Conditions were again ideal, with a bright sunny day and well-hydrated bryophytes. We are aiming to repeat a compartment-by-compartment survey which Kevin Walker and I first undertook between 2004 and 2007. The party was smaller than the numbers usually attracted to this site but we formed a good search team. We visited four of the five numbered compartments we still had to resurvey, 3, 7, 19 and the northern part (the area in TL1980) of 20. This just leaves compartment 15 at the south-eastern corner of the wood and two areas of secondary woodland, the ‘wildernesses’, to cover. I’m hoping that these can be covered by an informal party, so that this visit will be the last in the current sequence of Cambridgeshire Group excursions.

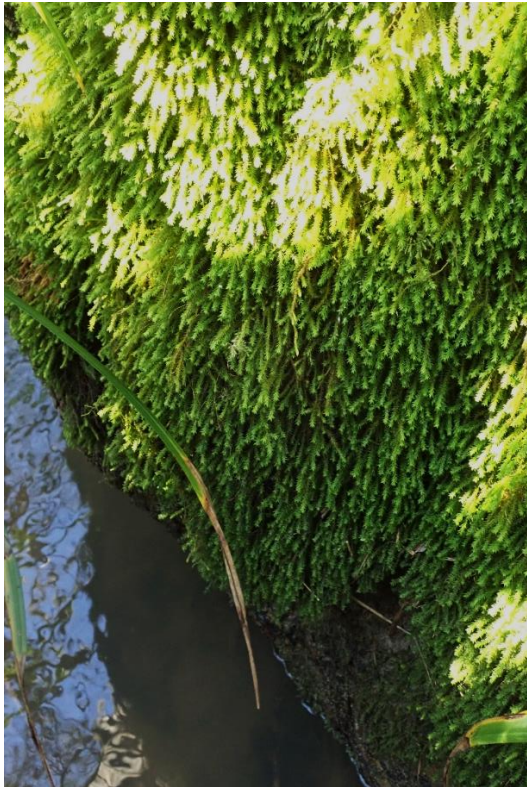
The number of species recorded in each compartment is set out in the table below.

	Compartment 3	Compartment 7	Compartment 19	Compartment 20
<b>Total 2004–07</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Total today</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>26</b>
Refinds	18	19	18	18
Additions	11	13	18	8
Not refound	9	7	12	13

We therefore found more than last time in three of the four compartments, falling short only in the last. We were certainly losing momentum by the end of the day, but we also visited only the northern part of compartment 20. Here, as elsewhere in the wood, large stands of *Carex pendula* often extend as far as the eye can see. This sedge was always a feature of Monks Wood but in the book *Monks Wood* (1973) it is described as forming “large clumps in the wet, clay, ditches” and my memory of it in the 1980s is similar, a species forming stands alongside the wood’s ditches. It has increased enormously since then.

We noted last year that we found rather few of the scarcer epiphytes, and the same was true on this visit. As last year we found just a single tuft of *Orthotrichum stramineum*, this time in very immature fruit and well spotted by Pete. He also found one tuft of *Plenogemma phyllantha*, also very uncommon in the wood. By contrast *Cryphaea heteromalla* was added to the list for all four compartments, a sign of how frequent this species has become in our area. It was surprising to find *Bryum moravicum* in three compartments, though it is not that rare in the wood. It is a species we see rather spasmodically and I have no clear idea of its ecological preferences. Jonathan, liverwort hunting, found *Myriocoleopsis minutissima* on a blackthorn in one compartment and *Metzgeria violacea* on a hazel in another. The common epiphytes of street trees and other open sites are uncommon in the interior of ancient woods. James did find a little *Orthotrichum diaphanum* in one compartment. I accused him of lowering the tone but had to eat my words when I found another nitrophile, *Syntrichia papillosa*, on an ash trunk (though it was the only *Syntrichia* we found). A single small patch of *Porella platyphylla* two

metres high on field maple was only the second record from the Wood since 1985, after we found it one metre high on a sloping ash trunk in 2020. This suggests that it is colonising the site, although we don't normally think of it as a colonising species. A species which often grows with it, *Anomodon viticulosus*, is more frequently found in the wood and we found a lovely stand of it on a single ash by the stream in compartment 7.



(left) *Anomodon viticulosus* covering the base of a ditchside ash; (above) *Homalia trichomanoides*, seen on several shaded ash bases. Astrid Biddle.

On the ground, the calcifuge *Polytrichum formosum* was quite frequent in the drier areas of Compartment 20, but although I searched hard for other scarce calcifuges in the area I failed to find anything other than *Dicranella heteromalla* on the root plate of a fallen oak. Several of the species we failed to re-find are calcifuges, including *Campylopus introflexus*, *Dicranum scoparium* (seen in three of the four compartments in 2004) and *Fissidens bryoides*. *Dicranoweisia cirrata* was found in just one of the four compartments in which we found it in 2004. I strongly suspect that when we come to write up these two surveys, the decline of the calcifuges will be one of the themes that emerges.

This is of course a very well recorded site by now. None of the 51 species (including 11 liverworts) we saw during the day were new to the Wood, and indeed we have only added one species to the total list on our last three excursions, last year's *Neckera pumila*.

Chris Preston, 3 February 2025



Jonathan Shanklin amongst a sea of *Carex pendula*. Astrid Biddle.