

# Wychwood Flora Group Report for 2025

As in previous years, our main activity was monitoring the rare plants in West Oxfordshire. It is of concern that the populations of several of them appear to be struggling to survive or are in decline. In some cases, this is due to lack of management, resulting in the habitat, in which these species are found, not being maintained in a favourable condition. The continuity of our recording is proving to be very important. When the status of a species is being considered by the vascular plant species assessment group for inclusion of a species in the Red List, several criteria need to be met. One of these is detailed data on population sizes through time. These data just do not exist for many threatened species.

## Rare Plant Monitoring

### *Astragalus danicus* Purple Milk-vetch

In the New Vascular Plant Red List published in November this species is in the Endangered category.

#### Westwell Gorse SSSI

Having not being able to find any Purple Milk-vetch last year in the two remaining small areas, where the plant has been recorded in the past, we were hopeful that it may have returned as a result of the sward being cut and collected in autumn 2024 and closer strimming and raking away of thatch in February 2025. On the evening of the annual survey, we carried out a though search of the sward in these two areas. After not finding Purple Milk-vetch in the southernmost area, we were very relieved to find three very small vegetative shoots in the other.



Photo taken by Tess Wright at Westwell Gorse 11 June 2022



Andy's photo of the work he carried out in the *Astragalus danicus* area on 2 November 2025

On 2 November, with the objective of making the habitat more favourable for the milk-vetch, Andy Byfield was on site with his brushcutter. Using the mulching blade, he gave about two-thirds of the *Astragalus danicus* area a very good 'short back and sides'. Afterwards he raked up all the cut vegetation and removed it to the side.

#### Taynton Downs Quarry

Despite the sward being cut and collected again in the winter by a volunteer team for the Cotswolds National Landscape's Glorious Cotswold Grasslands project at this

historical site, no Purple Milk-vetch was found when a survey of the grassland at this site was conducted in June.

## ***Gagea lutea* Yellow Star of Bethlehem**

In the New Vascular Plant Red List published in November this species is in the Least Concern category



Photo taken by Joe Trinder in Whitehill Wood in 1997

### **Whitehill Wood**

In 2024 this location was flooded during the period when this plant comes into flower. This year, although there is no flooding, and a much warmer start to spring, this species appears to have not recovered from the previous year. Only one Yellow Star of Bethlehem was observed in flower this year, although numerous non-flowering leaves were observed. Yellow Star of Bethlehem plants start about 450m along the path from the road bridge that crosses the Ashford Mill Stream and continue in fairly regular succession for 260 m or so before dwindling off.

## ***Galeopsis angustifolia* Red Hemp-nettle**

In the New Vascular Plant Red List published in November this species is in the Endangered category and is scarce nationally in GB

### **Lidstone Piece**

For the second year running we were unable to find any Red Hemp-nettle plants in the headland of this arable field. Since a change of ownership, the regime of cultivation, that has been carried out since our surveys started in 1983, has been discontinued with the result it has become completely overgrown. Unless the ground is disturbed the seed of small annual plants, which evolved alongside arable crops, do not germinate. Hopefully this margin will be cultivated this winter giving the Red Hemp-nettle seeds a chance to germinate in the spring.



Photo taken by Genny Early at Lidstone Piece on 1 August 2020

## ***Microthlaspi perfoliatum* Cotswold Pennycress**

In the New Vascular Plant Red List published in November this species is in the Endangered category and is rare nationally in GB.

### **Bridgefield Bridge, Palmers Bank near Stonesfield and Temple Mill Quarry near Sibford Ferris**

Habitat management took place at Palmers Bank and Bridgefield Bridge in 2025 (thank you to Brian Laney). Numbers of Cotswold Pennycress plants, which is found at these sites, were not available at the time this report was being compiled.

## ***Muscari neglectum* Grape Hyacinth**

This species is not listed in the New Vascular Plant Red List published in November

### **Chadlington**



Grape Hyacinths on The Stocks 13 April 2025 (Rachel Lewis's photo)



Raking up the material cut from the base of the wall, Manor Farm on 15 February 2025 (Genny Early's photo)

Quite a few of the flowering heads had gone over before our visit this year, although many were still in full bloom. On the whole, the individual populations of Grape Hyacinth are thriving in the village locations, with record numbers being recorded on the road verge and along the footpath, but struggling in other sites, particularly in Pea Furlong and along the northern boundary of Manor Farm. Camp Field was one of the sites chosen for the translocation of bulbs from the Stocks Allotments in 1998 before houses were built there. It was hoped that the

grassland in Camp Field would be close enough to the grassland on the Chadlington Downs, where Grape Hyacinths had grown naturally before they were ploughed up. This does not seem to be the case as the Grape Hyacinths have not become established here. The low numbers of flowering plants and spots along the field edge where they can be found is cause for concern, as the few that remain at the latter location are the only survivors of the native population growing *in situ*.

## ***Salvia pratensis* Meadow Clary**

In the New Vascular Plant Red List published in November this species is in the Near Threatened category and is scarce nationally in GB

### **Cornbury Park**

The plants in the permanent enclosure here were not checked this year.

## Grintley Hill Bridge



Members carrying out the survey on 1 June 2025 (Genny Early's photograph)

Here Meadow Clary is found on both sides of a fence which separates a species-rich calcareous meadow from land which belongs to Network Rail.

The meadow was grazed last year by 26 Romney sheep for 2 months at the end of 2024. The vegetation is noticeably less rank, with shorter grass, exposed anthills, and less competition from the competitive grasses for the herbaceous plants. Seventy-six flowering stems had survived being eaten off by rabbits or deer. There were 216 clumps/plants found in 25 quadrats. Overall, the population of Meadow clary appears stable. The area is shrinking slightly, but the density seems to be increasing slightly. The number of flowering stems is higher than last year, but there are still a large number of stems that have been eaten off.

No progress has been made with Network Rail about getting the scrub removed on their side of the fence, despite chasing. Consequently, the Meadow Clary plants there are threatened.

## Holly Court Bank

This bank is the site of the largest population of Meadow Clary in the UK but it is under pressure from grazing deer. Around 99% of flowering stems had been eaten. There were only a small handful of flowers. The Meadow Clary plants are still extremely numerous, in places very thickly covering the ground. The population seems to be

holding its own despite not successfully flowering and setting seed for several years now (since 2021). However, if the site could somehow be protected from deer during the flowering season, May to August, this would allow seed to set, and new seedlings to establish.

## Langlands, Finstock

Most of the Meadow Clary plants at this site are found at the top of a sloping field where there are under threat from encroaching blackthorn scrub. The total number of flowering stems on the 18 clumps was 226 but 138 of

these had been eaten off, most likely by rabbits, which were visible on our visit, but also possibly by deer. There were few immature plants and no areas of trampled or bare ground where new plants could establish.

## Leaffield Lane, Crawley (Road Verge Nature Reserve No. 27)

The Meadow Clary was not counted this year, but was observed to flower successfully.

## Lower Farm, Taston

The Meadow Clary plants, despite some nibbled shoots, were flowering well. The plants were so dense in one area of the north field that it was decided to take grid references at either end of what was a roughly 11 by 7 m swathe with between 200 and 300 flowering spikes. There were a few young plants and small clumps at some distance from this main group in this field. It was relatively easy to find the plants in the south field which

were holding their flowering spikes above the sward. The one clump that was distant from the rest and less prolific and harder to locate. There was evidence of rabbits and probably deer nibbling the plants. The meadow hasn't been cut for a couple of years. Ideally the management of these fields (a hay crop followed by grazing), which was beneficial to the whole grassland community, needs to resumed.

## Saltway (north)

It was a good year for the Meadow Clary this year due to the favourable weather and management of the track. During the winter the vegetation was cut, reducing the competition for the Meadow Clary and making the habitat less favourable for slugs and snails. A total of 248 tall flowering spikes were counted. The extent of track along which the Meadow Clary is growing appears to be extending, which is also good news for the population.



A flowering clump on the NE side of the track (Genny Early's photograph)

## Stonesfield Common



Members carrying out the survey on Stonesfield Common on 10 June 2025 (Genny Early's photo)

Meadow Clary is now growing in nine different areas on the common as a result of the successful introduction of plants raised from seed to new areas a few years ago. This increase in the number of clumps/plants is hoped to improve the resilience overall to localised events. The total of flowering spikes was 360 flowering spikes this year (compared with 210 in 2024). The hotter semi-drought conditions seem to benefit the plant growth, whilst also decreasing the numbers of slugs and snails. Rabbit and deer damage was evident but not too problematic. Strimming plus removal of arisings took place on a substantial area of the banks, creating an open sward for the flowering herbs. Cattle grazing took place through the winter, which reduces the impact of the encroaching Tor grass, and creates a heterogeneous sward of different heights, with some bare patches due to hoof scuffs.

## Wigwell Nature Reserve

The Meadow Clary plants here fared much better this year than last when they were decimated by slugs. The lack of rain over the summer resulted in reduced competition from surrounding vegetation and fewer slugs to eat the

plants. The total number of flowering stems was 406. Bare soil was created around each plant in the hope that seed produced this year will fall into it, germinate and grow into new plants

## ***Stachys germanica* Downy Woundwort**

In the New Vascular Plant Red List published in November this species is in the Endangered category and is rare nationally in GB

### **Freeboard (Worsham Lane SSSI), Minster Lovell**

New woody growth, mostly Blackthorn suckers, was cut back in February in the area where Downy Woundwort plants were found last year. This area was not rotovated but it was where the 18 flowering plants were found. The annual survey was carried out earlier than usual as the dry spring and early summer had caused the plants to mature earlier. Most of them were quite close to the path but a few were near the hedge. The drought had not only brought them into flower earlier but the plants were also much shorter than usual like all the surrounding vegetation. Two rosettes were also found. On a visit to the site in September only one, small, semi-mature plant that might have been counted in June and a handful of baby plants were found. What has happened to the plants recorded earlier is a puzzle. Were they frazzled in the summer heat?



Photo taken by Katherine Doughty of Downy Woundwort on The Freeboard 25 July 2021

### **Saltway (LWS and SSSI)**

For the second year no seedlings or older plants of Downy Woundwort were found on the Saltway. It is hoped that management work, including rotavation, planned for this winter will produce the conditions conducive to seed

germination resulting in rosettes which if the molluscs don't eat them and they don't become smothered by beech leaves will produce flowering stems in 2027

### **Stony Field (location confidential)**

Genny Early and Brenda Betteridge visited Stonyfield with Jo Alderton from the Species Recovery Trust. Once again, no Downy Woundwort plants were found at this site despite the vegetation having been cut and cultivated in the winter. The sward had grown back again and it was difficult to see any bare ground. We met the estate

manager on site and discussed with him future management which would create conditions favourable to seed germination. As no Downy Woundwort plants have been seen here since 2023 it was agreed that the whole site should be cultivated after the vegetation had been cut down and removed sometime during the coming winter.

## **Other Activities**

### **National Plant Monitoring Scheme (NPMS)**

We were able to continue recording for the NPMS which is an ongoing scheme, coordinated by Plantlife, to collect data to provide an annual indication of changes in plant abundance and diversity. We visited our two 1-km squares, one at Fulbrook and the other near Westwell, in May, with the intention of returning later in the year but with the vegetation suffering from drought after the dry spring continued into the summer, we decided that a second visit was not worthwhile. As in previous years we

recorded species in the same plots in each square. When we saw the state of one of the squares at Fulbrook, which had become completely overgrown with Stinging Nettles, we decided not to continue recording in this square. We are very grateful to all the owners who have given us permission to access their land.

## Survey of Crawley churchyard 24 June 2025



We were invited by Crawley parish council to survey their churchyard which has been closed for burials for many years. The church associated with it is now a private house. From its elevated position in the village there is an extensive view over the Windrush valley. It is a relatively small rectangular area, bounded by drystone walls. Most of the gravestones are still in position. There is a large yew tree which looks several hundred years old dominating one end. The other trees and shrubs we recorded were Ash, Elder, Hawthorn, Holly and Rowan. Most of the flowering plants growing here are those associated with limestone grassland plus a few introduced garden species. None of the 39 flowering plants and nine grasses we recorded is rare but under the present regime of cutting infrequently the diversity of the flora is being maintained.

## Ditchley surveys

*The Flora of Ditchley* was published in 1993, the product of many years of meticulous surveying of the flora of the entire Ditchley estate by Jo Dunn, a founder of the Wychwood Flora Group. As part of neighbouring Charlbury's 'Year of Launching Nature Recovery', the HDH Wills Trust, who manage the Ditchley Estate, invited us to visit the estate with a view to re-surveying many of the areas where Jo had found particularly interesting plants. We were most fortunate to be joined on our initial visit by Rosemary Fitzgerald, who had worked with Jo on the surveys more than 30 years ago, and who was able to guide us to locations where some of the rarest

species had been found. It was such an uplifting day, locating rarities such as the field woundwort, *Stachys arvensis*, which is growing in abundance on at least one site. We agreed that the task of updating the records is a daunting one, but well worth undertaking to inform future management plans. Surveying the arable field margins has already begun in November, with three Red Book 'vulnerable' species recorded in two field margins, *Chaenorhinum minus* (Small Toadflax), *Euphorbia exigua* (Dwarf Spurge) and *Stachys arvensis* (Field Woundwort). The group plan to carry out the next surveys in spring, surveying some of the woodlands

Anne Miller

## Obituaries

In 2025 we lost two of the founder members of the Cotswold Rare Plants Group as the Wychwood Flora Group was known in 1995: Margaret Cochrane and Ken Betteridge. Both of them made significant contributions to the success of the group. Their enthusiasm and knowledge were invaluable to keeping the group going. We very much missed their input when they were no longer able to contribute to our activities. One wonders how many of those rare plants, which are still managing to hold on in West Oxfordshire, would still be here today without their involvement.



Margaret (2<sup>nd</sup> left) and Ken (on the right) with Una Fenton, Jo Dunn and Brenda Betteridge, Chadlington Down. April 1995

## Margaret Minna Cochrane 1938–2025

Margaret's love of and concern for the natural world were rooted in her childhood. Growing up near the banks of the River Thames she was home schooled by her mother in the mornings but was then free to explore the woods, fields and river near her home. Aged 13, she was sent to boarding school, followed by a degree in classics at St Anne's College, Oxford. After a short spell teaching Classics, Margaret joined Pitmans Publishing in London and in 1964 was posted to Canada to work. In 1966, she returned to England, married John and soon her life was taken over by bringing up children, running a house and working in the family business. It was only later that she was able to pursue her passionate interest in nature and conservation.

Soon after the inaugural meeting of the Cotswold Rare Plants Group in March 1995 Margaret took on the role of Secretary, a post she held for 16 years. Before, during and after that tenure she very generously hosted many meetings at her home, Fairspear House, Leafield. One year we celebrated National Meadows Day with a picnic in her glorious meadows at Fordwells. Afterwards, while sitting amongst the special limestone grassland

flowers, we enjoyed hearing from Margaret about her beloved cows and how she used an Austrian scythe to control the ragwort. For many years she was the 'flora guardian' of several of the rare plant sites, only handing over the responsibility to others in 2018.

Apart from the surveys she carried out for the Wychwood Flora Group, she contributed to many others. She clocked up 30 years butterfly monitoring at Foxholes, a BBOWT nature reserve. Her voluntary work for BBOWT was recognised in 2017 when she was awarded their Lifetime Achievement Award. For Butterfly Conservation, together with her husband John, she undertook recording butterflies locally for the *Atlas of UK Butterflies 2015–2019*. During 1996–98 she carried out hedgerow surveys around Leafield for the CPRE. She helped survey Local Wildlife Sites for TVERC from 1998 to 2011. Other organisations to benefit from her input were RSPB, for which she recorded garden birds, and the Wychwood Project. Her legacy also included, a community wood in Leafield and a new woodland near her home in Leafield.

## Ken Betteridge 1942–2025

Ken was born in Appleton, then in Berkshire, in March 1942 and lived there until his marriage in 1969. He grew up in a bungalow with a large, productive back garden, including pigs and an apple tree. His love of the countryside was founded in those formative years as a youth when he spent many hours playing in the woods and down by Northmoor Lock on the River Thames.

On leaving school, he served an apprenticeship as a carpenter and joiner, working for building firms in Oxford, where he picked up the skills to realise his dream to build his own house. It was through his wife, a botanist, that he became interested in wild flowers and became involved with setting up the Cotswold Rare Plants Group. Being a born organiser he was soon roped onto the committee. After Jo Dunn, the leading light of the group, retired in 2009, Ken took on the role of Co-ordinator. His love of maps and his ability to read them came in very useful when we were carrying out follow-up recording of plants in specific locations in West Oxfordshire. When the group struggled to keep going after both the Treasurer and Secretary retired in 2013, he steered it from being an independent group to become one of the interest groups under the umbrella of the Wychwood Project, with a change in title to the Wychwood Flora Group. Five years later Ken gave up being a 'flora guardian' as sadly dementia began to take its toll.

From its inception Ken became a very keen supporter of the Wychwood Project. He and few other members became the Friends of Wychwood, a group whose main role was to raise money to help the Wychwood Project

achieve its aims. With him as chairman and chief organiser of an annual forest fair, they raised enough money for the Wychwood Project to buy land near Hailey, on which to create a community wood, named Foxburrow Wood. He also served on their Executive Committee. His achievements are commemorated in a Pride of Wychwood certificate, a beautiful, framed map of the Wychwood Forest Area and a silver plate.

Always happy to share his enthusiasm and knowledge he had gained about the countryside he gave many talks on local history and landscape interpretation. One of his talks was entitled 'The Rare Plants of Oxfordshire', illustrated by slides taken by him. At botanical society meetings he talked about our work and recording. One particular talk, which was about the Downy Woodwort, was memorable for the wrong reason – on way to the venue, he lost the memory stick with the photographs, but he still managed to give an interesting account even though there were no pictures!

His love of the countryside was reflected in the other roles he took on and the committees on which he served. After becoming manager/warden of the newly acquired BBOWT reserve, Westwell Gorse, a role he filled from 1985 to 2011, he was invited onto the Executive Committee of BBOWT. He was presented with a book (*Wild Flowers of Britain & Ireland*) by BBOWT in recognition of his many years of services to conservation in 2004. While he was chairman of Asthall parish he became a parish representative on the Executive Committee for the Cotswolds Conservation Board.

Brenda Betteridge  
February 2026