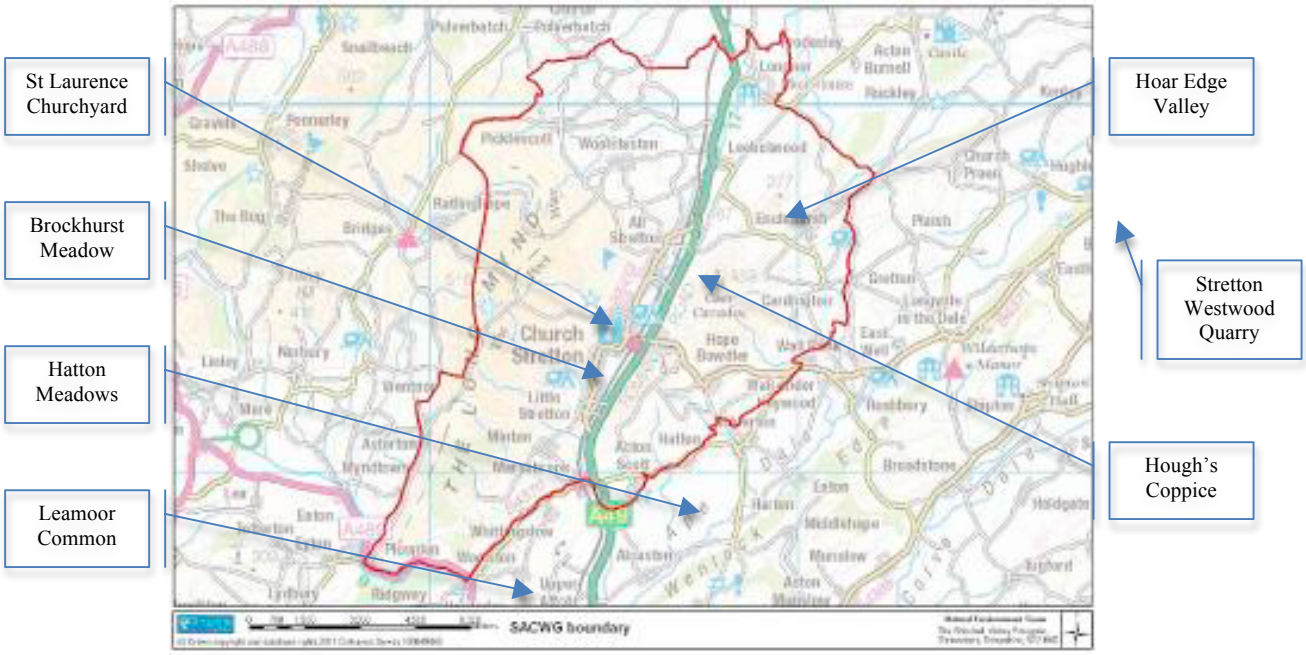
Botanical Surveys 2019 in conjunction with Shropshire Wildlife Trust (SWT)

In 2019 the Strettons Area Botanical Survey Group surveyed seven sites of interest, Local Wildlife Sites[1] or potential LWSs:



A Brief Methodology

We aim to cover the whole of each site as thoroughly as possible. All the vascular plant species observed are recorded using a Shropshire Botanical Society (SBS) recording card. The frequencies of indicator species 'axiophytes'[2] are noted and NVC quadrats done where possible. In addition 'site visit cards' provided by SWT are also completed to make an assessment of the habitats and the condition of a site. Any other relevant information is also noted and photos of the site taken. The maps provided by SWT enable us to check site boundaries and indicate the extent of each habitat by annotating maps. A GPS is used to take precise grid references for NVC quadrats and any rare species.

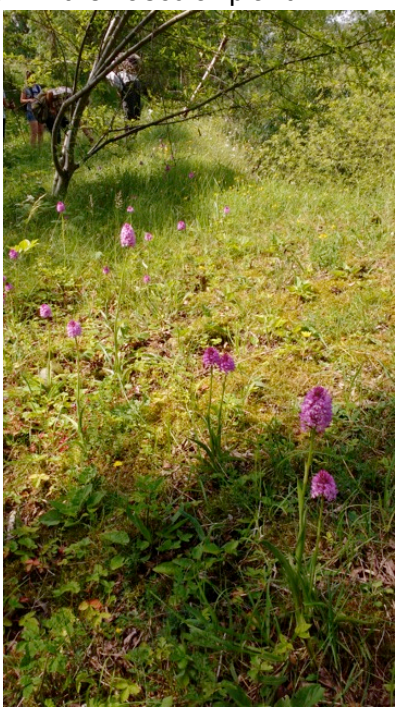


Figure 1 Pyrimidal orchid in Stretton Westwood Quarry in late June

The data gathered from each survey is processed at SWT and a species list for each site is sent to the landowners and also to the county recorder along with any useful management suggestions.

Description of Sites Surveyed in 2019

1. **Stretton Westwood Quarry** SO 596984, May 7 2019

[1] Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) are places that have been shown to have special local nature conservation value. They are the most important places for wildlife outside the legally protected areas, such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). Many of them are in private ownership and **not accessible to the public** except along existing public footpaths or where the site lies within designated open access areas.

[2] Axiophytes are species of particular interest to botanists and ecologists because of their strong association with important habitats. They are not necessarily rare, but they are useful indicators.

This quarry is on the south side of the Longville to Much Wenlock road. It ceased to be an active quarry about 50 years ago and is now owned by Shropshire Council. In recent years it has been used to deposit material from the Much Wenlock flood-alleviation scheme. The spoil has been landscaped into heaps topped with local limestone topsoil leaving rock faces exposed. Work has now stopped and the quarry has been fenced with funding secured by SWT. The site is now leased to the National Trust and is open to the public with a car park. It is well worth a visit especially if your interests are geological or botanical.

Andy Perry, Ecologist at the National Trust arranged a field visit of the Shropshire Botanical Society (SBS) on 29 June 2019. Andy asked our group to visit in early May to catch any spring ephemerals which might have finished their life cycle by late June. We recorded 87 species in a short visit (plus several aliens no doubt from garden waste over the years). The SBS field visit recorded 158 species including 27 axiophytes[3] including a number of rarities, one not previously recorded in Shropshire. We felt duly humbled! However our list did include 22 species not on the SBS list, which confirmed the purpose of our visit. This is a fascinating site; do visit it. On Google it is now labelled Stretton Westwood Nature Reserve.

2. **Hough's Coppice** SO 468954, May 9 2019

Figure 2 Toothwort in Hough's coppice

This is an L-shaped woodland lying on the west side of Caer Caradoc parallel with the A49. Most of the wood, unusually for the Stretton valley, is on limestone, an outlier of Silurian lime-rich mudstone. The southern section is of mainly etiolated ash with some oak, overcrowded, of uniform age 80-100 years old. The middle section (where a public footpath enters from the A49 to ascend Caradoc) is conifer plantation of norway spruce, larch and douglas fir. The larger northern block is oak woodland with hazel coppice and some wetter patches of alder and willow. A stream issues from Caradoc, enters this block via an old overgrown woodland pond, then descends to the valley floor and joins the Cound Brook on the edge of All Stretton.

The southern and middle sections have limited ground flora with little regeneration because of heavy grazing; here the wood is unfenced and is used by sheep for shelter. Surprisingly we found a few patches of early purple orchid *Orchis mascula* in the conifer plantation close to the footpath; this has presumably hung on for 80 years when this was perhaps a broadleaved wood.

The northern block has a more or less effective fence to keep out sheep so has a more abundant and interesting ground flora and plenty of regeneration. Highlights were moschatel (townhall clock) *Adoxa moschatellina* and the parasitic, chlorophyll-less toothwort Lathraea squamaria. Wood speedwell *Veronica montana* and wood anemone *Anemone nemorosa* were abundant in places. The shaded stream banks had frequent ferns including soft shield fern *Polystichum setiferum*. The wood margins had some excellent hedges, tall, bushy and mixed. In all we recorded 75 species including 10 axiophytes; not bad for so early in the year.

3. **St Laurence Churchyard, Church Stretton** SO 453937, 30 May and 9 August 2019
We visited the churchyard twice to compile a full species list. The churchyard is managed following a plan developed using Caring for God's Acre training resources. Some areas are regularly mown, others are treated as meadow, others are left uncut for overwintering wildlife. Some seed of local provenance has been introduced.


Figure 3 St Laurence churchyard

A total of 126 vascular plant species were recorded. Only 3 are axiophytes, yellow rattle *Rhinanthus minor*, eyebright *Euphrasia nemorosa* and salad burnet *Poterium sanguisorba*. But diversity rather than rarity is the priority here.

4. **<u>Hoar Edge Valley</u>** SO 496972, June 6th 2019
The middle and northern end of this valley is a tenanted part of the Corbett Estate, lying between the Lawley and Hoar Edge. The Edge to the east is a scarp face of tough Hoar Edge Grit with a plantation of scot's pine and larch with volunteer rowan. Valley sides and floor are of rough sheep grazing at low density. The valley floor is of glacial deposits overlying Shineton Shales. The valley sides are a mosaic of upland grassland with, in damper places, mat grass *Nardus stricta*, tormentil *Potentilla erecta* and heath bedstraw *Galium saxatile* and, in drier areas, bracken *Pteridium aquilinum* and soft grass *Holcus mollis*. The mid and north-end valley floor does not have a permanent stream; it may be culverted, or fairly free draining glacial till. Towards the southern end water collects in more botanically interesting mire with star sedge *Carex echinata* and carnation sedge *C. panicea*, lousewort *Pedicularis sylvatica*, bog pimpernel *Anagalis tenella* and quaking grass *Briza media.* In all we recorded a modest 54 species including 13 axiophytes.

Modest perhaps botanically speaking, but this valley is an important corridor, parallel with the much busier Stretton valley, of limited agricultural productivity, but very significant for conservation linking as it does better known habitats like Lawley, Caer Caradoc, Lodge Hill, Yeld Bank, Hope Bowdler Hill and the Wilderness. A public footpath runs through part of the site.

5. Leamoor Common and the Wettles SO 435869, 13 June 2019
We surveyed five fields which are moderately species-rich grassland used for horses and late-cut hay. The hedges around all the fields are generally excellent, tall, bushy and diverse. But our brief in the time available was to survey the grassland, not the hedges. All fields are more or less level, but draining south, in some fields to a wetter area or seasonal pond with diagnostic species like mint *Mentha aquatic* and meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria*. Common spotted orchid *Dactylhoriza fuchsia* was present in one field; green winged orchid *Anacamptis morio* was reported in the same field earlier in the year but we found none. Other interesting species included pale sedge *Carex pallescens* and ladies mantle *Alchemilla sp* that didn't look like a garden escape.

6. **Hatton Meadows** SO 463890, 27 June 2019

Figure 4 Hatton Meadows

This 34ha site is part of the Acton Scott Estate. A bridleway and a footpath (the Shropshire Way) access the site. It is comprised of several fields gently sloping and draining to the southeast with drainage impeded by the now dismantled railway line. The bedrock is Silurian sand and mudstones overlain with glacial till. The fields are of extensively managed mesotrophic, neutral-ish, and botanically uninteresting grassland mostly M9 *Holcus lanatus*, *Deschampsia cespitosa* though with many diverse bushy hedges some with fine mature oaks; also remnants of hedges, planted parkland oaks (many planted in the last 25-30 years); and self-regenerating hawthorn. Nettles and creeping thistle are a real problem in many areas, the former especially where sheep have sheltered and dunged.

Towards the railway line there are signs of frequent inundation with rushes including sharp-flowered rush *Juncus acutiflorus*, meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria* and heath spotted orchid *Dactylorhiza maculata*. This was a large site and mapping the various features and management issues took much of our time. In total we recorded 79 species including 9 axiophytes.

Figure 5 Heath spotted orchid

7. Brockhurst meadow SO 447927, 12 July 2019

We were asked to survey the field in front of Brockhurst House. The residents are interested in managing the field as a meadow. The flora was very uniform with just 4 species dominating, common bent *Agrostis capillaris (*about 60% cover) plus yorkshire fog *Holcus lanatus*, red fescue *Festuca rubra* and sweet vernal grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum*. This field was clearly sown as a sports field when Brockhurst was a school. Suggestions were made for developing a species diverse meadow; it will be interesting to see how they get on.

Many thanks to everyone involved in the 2019 surveys.

We're not sure how our link with SWT will pan out in 2020. Our recent 'mentors' Kate Singleton moved to the SWT rivers department in 2018, and Fiona Gomersall left SWT in 2019 to join the Severn Rivers Trust. But, whatever happens, we as a group plan to continue surveying.