

The British Bryological Society's *Mosses and Liverworts of Britain and Ireland: a Field Guide* is the BBS's first foray into publishing for the non-specialist, with close-up colour photographs and accounts of 75% of Britain's bryoflora, and 848 pages that are as 'beginner-friendly' as possible. Published in 2010, its retail price of £24.95 (or £19.95 for people who took advantage of the pre-publication offer) appears extremely competitive. But in fact the *Field Guide* has so far faced no competition at all, for no equivalent guides have been published, and the book fills a huge gap in the market. Bryologists smile wryly at the chapter-heading 'Field Guides Aplenty' in David Allen's *Books and Naturalists* (2010), for it transpires that nearly all these guides have been too large, more eye-catching groups of animals and plants. As with inconspicuous invertebrates, the 'smalls and greens' have always had a raw deal; commercial publishers consider that these unpopular groups do not merit a guide, and they therefore remain neglected.

The *Field Guide* honours the BBS's 'mission statement': that the Society 'exists to promote the study of mosses and liverworts'. Its publication has brought the BBS a very considerable windfall of revenue to plough back into furthering this charitable aim.

Why then did the BBS wait so long before publishing a field guide?

#### Historical perspective

The Moss Exchange Club (forerunner of the BBS) was established in 1896 in order to do exactly what its title states – exchange mosses – so that members might familiarize themselves with a wider range of species. This initiative coincided with publication of Dixon's *Student's Handbook of British Mosses* (1896), and a few years later MacVicar's *Student's Handbook of*

*British Liverworts* (1912) also came onto the market.

But then the First World War led to economic and social conditions that were too austere for the British bourgeoisie to sustain or foster their interest in natural history. By the time of the Great Depression in the 1920s and '30s, the professional classes found themselves working to be paid, rather than paid to work. No longer was every second vicar an enthusiastic natural historian. People had more pressing concerns than a leisurely investigation of the beauties of nature, and their interest in natural history atrophied in equal measure to their prosperity and leisure.

Only with the economic expansion after the Second World War, as prospects and standards of living improved (slowly at first, then more quickly), did the public's leisure time wax once more, along with their disposable incomes, rekindling their interest in natural history. Within the BBS, immediately after the Second World War, a generation of young, university-based thrusters took over from a cohort of aged amateurs whose time had passed, and set about modernizing the Society. Watson's *British Mosses and Liverworts* appeared in 1955 and went a long way towards helping bryological beginners identify plants they encountered. But Watson's book omitted many species, and his key for identifying bryophytes using only features that can readily be seen in the field met with sustained criticism that deterred him from including updated versions in subsequent editions of the book. As a review in *Kew Bulletin* of the second (1971) edition of Watson's book bewailed: 'How much do I regret this omission [of the field key] and question its wisdom. It was an inestimable boon to the young, keen but impecunious budding bryologist to whom a microscope was just a dream of future riches, and at one stroke the publishers have cut themselves off from what was, I feel, a sizeable

*potential market. It is to be hoped that they, and the author, may be persuaded to issue it as a separate, inexpensive booklet. For excellent as it is, if you have no microscope I cannot recommend that you buy the work under review for the price at which it is offered.'*

This reviewer is asking for a field guide that beginners can use. But the key was never reissued separately, nor was it restored to the third (and last) edition that appeared in 1981; the trenchant criticism of the field key that had emanated from Watson's fellow members in the BBS saw to that. With its field key missing, Watson's book became far less useful when identifying bryophytes in the field, and this gap in the market persisted until the *Field Guide* was published – more than half a century after the first edition of Watson's book.

Although comprehensive moss and liverwort Floras were published later in the

Mosses  
and  
Liverworts  
of Britain  
and Ireland

a field  
guide



Edited by  
Ian Atherton  
Sam Bosanquet  
Mark Lawley



# The BBS Field Guide: pregnancy and post-partum

The long and occasionally difficult gestation period is behind us and the book has been delivered into the big wide world. Twelve months after publication, co-editor **Mark Lawley** tells the story behind the *Field Guide* project.

20th century, beginners still lacked a guide for use in the field. Moreover, none of these Floras were prepared or published under the aegis of the BBS; rather, they were the initiatives of accomplished individual bryologists. In almost a century of existence, and despite its mission statement, the BBS had neither published nor arranged to have published a single identification manual.

## Circumstances for producing a field guide became more propitious at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century

At the end of the 20th century two technological advances – digital photography and the internet – suddenly made it very much easier to produce such a book.

Digital photography revolutionized opportunities for taking sharply focussed, close-up,

colour photographs of small objects such as bryophytes. As recently as the 1980s only a few gifted photographers such as John Birks and Harold Whitehouse had been taking high-quality photographs of bryophytes, but by the end of the century it had become possible for almost anyone to capture quality images and delete and replace substandard pictures. Moreover, pictures could be circulated by email and form part of a library for use in a corporate project such as the *Field Guide*.

Similarly transmission of text was made quick and easy by the internet and email, whilst programs such as Adobe InDesign made preparation and formatting of files and desktop publishing entirely feasible for the computerate.

### Development of the *Field Guide* to the point of publishing the first edition

At the BBS's Spring Meeting in 2004 I proposed the preparation and publication of a field guide to BBS Council in the following terms: '*...Many natural historians who might take up bryology and join the BBS are deterred from doing so because the Society has produced no attractive, user-friendly literature for naturalists wishing to take up bryology...*

*For eminently good and understandable reasons, the BBS is run by a Council of active and experienced bryologists whose current interests ... are too esoteric to attract the public's interest. For most of us here in this room, our own first hesitant bryological steps have long since receded into history, and with the passing of time we have forgotten what it's like to be a beginner, unable to identify most of what one finds, so we find it difficult to empathise with the beginner's plight. I think this is why the Society has yet to carry through a big project aimed at helping members of the general public who are interested in wildlife but remain deterred from taking up bryology by a lack of readily available,*

*informative, and easy-to-understand publications.*

*The BBS could and should do much more to help people take up field bryology, and the Field Guide will go far towards correcting our negligence [in not doing more to foster] bryologists of the future. Of all the topics discussed by Council during my time of service as a councillor, the Field Guide will be by some long distance the most widely influential publishing venture planned by our Society, and the most important for the future development of field bryology in this country.'*

Later in 2004, Alan Hale agreed to start formatting files to go online, and 2005 saw the first progress reports and sample accounts of species published in *Field Bryology*. Ian Atherton first heard about the project through Mark Pool at a Cornwall Bryology Group meeting in early 2006. In the spring of that year he offered to design and prepare files for publication, and became a co-editor. Without his professional expertise the *Field Guide* might never have happened. John Birks and Des Callaghan provided a critical mass of photographs. In 2007, Sam Bosanquet, who had been an enthusiastic supporter of the project and who by that time had already written many texts for species accounts, as well as providing photographs, joined the editorial team, adding huge doses of bryological expertise and authority. In 2008, 50 copies of a prototype were printed for trialling by contributors and other invited bryologists. 2009 was spent amending and updating material for the guide, proof-reading, processing pre-publication orders, and finalizing which printer to use.

Investigations into how best to publish the *Field Guide* led to interesting exchanges with potential publishers. The Field Studies Council publish an excellent series of AIDGAP books for identifying some of the less popular groups of organisms, so in 2004 I contacted their Publishing Department at Preston Montford.

However, they suggested a retail price of at least £80 for a 600 page book with 480 colour images.

Such a high price might have deterred many potential newcomers to field bryology. I therefore contacted WildGuides, who also publish field guides. Their price for an A5 book of 600 pages and 480 colour images would have allowed a retail price of around £30 – about a third of FSC's.

But if the BBS published the guide, might the figures be even lower than those supplied by WildGuides? I sought prices from a local printer that specializes in printing and binding books, and did indeed obtain prices that were significantly lower than those quoted by WildGuides.

Later on, Cambridge University Press, hearing of our intention to publish a field guide, approached me asking if they might publish it. Unfortunately, they did not consider that a small print run for a book with colour images would be commercially viable, and envisaged a guide with black-and-white photographs. Some BBS members felt that the kudos of having our book produced by such a prestigious publishing house would make up for the absence of colour photographs. However, after careful consideration the Society's Publications Committee decided that newcomers to the field struggling to identify unfamiliar mosses and liverworts would probably rather have colour than black-and-white photographs; subtle variations in hue are often useful when distinguishing species in the field.

So self-publication by the BBS using a commercial printer seemed the best option since it allowed us to keep the price of the book low while retaining copyright and thereby the right to publish further editions when it was bryologically rather than merely financially appropriate. Above all, all profits would be the

BBS's and so could be used to foster bryology instead of lining the coffers of a publishing company.

### Tribulations along the way

When the proposal for a field guide was tabled to BBS Publications Committee in 2003 and Council in April 2004, my criticism (see above) of the BBS's record in public relations and publication of easy-to-use manuals of identification provoked indignation in several councillors, who felt there were good reasons why the BBS had never contemplated such a project. One objection was that there would be little demand: *'We would be very lucky to sell more than a few hundred copies.'* Another complained that *'we do not have a business plan'*, and that there was *'insufficient information in the proposal to approve publication'*. Others felt that it is not possible to reliably identify many bryophytes in the field; a book could not adequately convey the 'jizz' of a plant, and a field guide would therefore mislead people, resulting in misidentifications. One member of the Publications Committee suggested that the *Field Guide* should be a private venture rather than an initiative of the Society *'because of possible risks to the Society's reputation'*. Another line of argument was that *'if we needed a field guide to bryophytes, we would have produced one before now.'* As the Reverend Sydney Smith wrote in 'The Noodle's Oration' (*Edinburgh Review*, 1802), *'What would our ancestors say to this, Sir? ... Is beardless youth to show no respect for the decisions of mature age? ... If this measure be right, would it have escaped the wisdom of [our] Saxon progenitors ...? Would the Dane have passed it over? Would the Norman have rejected it?'* The Publications Committee weighed these objections and decided nevertheless that the project should be backed by the Society. Many of those who expressed opposition to the *Field*

*Guide* when the idea was first mooted changed their minds as the book took shape; indeed, by the time it was published nearly everyone seemed agreed that it was a good idea.

Nobody was paid for their work on the *Field Guide*, and while more than 50 members of the BBS gave time and energy to its making, several other people were unable to do so because of other commitments. ‘*Worthy though the field guide is,*’ one member wrote when asked to contribute, ‘*I am very pressed.*’ Such a firm ‘no’, while disappointing, was helpful insofar as it gave the editors notice that an alternative author would have to be found. Unfortunately, other members were labouring under such acute time pressure that they could not reply to or even acknowledge invitations to contribute. Sometimes this time pressure subsequently eased, only to then worsen again; one member, for example, who failed to respond to an invitation to contribute nevertheless later spent time studying the prototype and found several ‘*serious errors*’ in the draft. It was renewed pressure of time, presumably, which prevented this person from telling the editors what these errors were.

A quite different conflict of desire arose over the kind of language to use in the guide. It was ever thus! While translating Linnaeus’s

*Systema Vegetabilium*, Erasmus Darwin wrote to Sir Joseph Banks in 1781 that he thought English would be more vivid and precise than Latin, ‘*so the words awl-pointed, for acuminatum; and bristle-pointed for cuspidatum are more expressive than the latin words. And so end-hollowed for retusum; end-notch’d for emarginatum, edge-hollowed for sinuatum; scollop’d for repandum; wire-creeping for sarmentosus...*’. Similarly with the *Field Guide*, the intention from the very outset was to eschew as much technical jargon as possible: ‘*...we have adopted almost zero-tolerance of ‘bryo-babble’, and ruthlessly extirpated many terms that might deter naturalists from taking up bryology*’ (*Field Bryology* 95, 42). It was felt that newcomers to bryology might well be put off by technical terms – ‘lanceolate’ and ‘ovate’, for example – that are rarely if ever used by the public. After all, a search of the vast 100-million-word *British National Corpus*, widely regarded by linguists as a representative sample of contemporary English, confirms that ‘lanceolate’ is not in everyday use, being restricted to arcane technical contexts. Fortunately, ‘spearhead-shaped’ is more readily understood, and, according to dictionaries, means exactly the same. In *The Doctor’s Dilemma*, George Bernard Shaw pithily summarized the predilection to obfuscate: ‘*every profession is a conspiracy against the laity*’.

This determination to rid the *Field Guide* of as many technical terms as feasible caused indignation amongst several experienced bryologists, who felt that not using such terms would reduce the guide’s accuracy. One member objected to ‘spearhead-shaped’ on the grounds that the term would only be appropriate in a book ‘*aimed at Roman legionaries*’. This objection caused some bafflement: after all, it could be argued that ‘spearhead-shaped’ would be *less* intelligible to these putative, bryologically inclined, Latin-speaking legionaries than ‘lance-



olate' (from the Latin *lanceolatus*). Meanwhile, those in the 'Erasmus Darwin' camp felt entitled to point out that for many social groups – be they Goths, punks, trainspotters, or bryologists – the use of certain words becomes a distinctive 'badge of membership' helping to make clear who does and who does not belong to the group: this use of specialized vocabulary to mark 'in-group membership' is well documented in the journals of socio-linguistics. At all events, the dispute rumbled on, with further skirmishes fought over 'ovate' and 'cleistocarpous', for example.

I have mentioned the pressures of time some BBS members experienced during the genesis of the *Field Guide*. Despite heroic efforts, some contributors were late in delivering their texts. Several were unable to file their corrections to the prototype as requested by the end of March 2009, or failed to respond to comments about their contributions by other people. In the autumn of 2009, six of the 20 text authors were unable to meet the deadline for checking their edited texts and sending in any further amendments. Text authors were invited on several occasions to request drawings for their accounts, but very few did so. Indeed, that is the reason why only a minority of accounts in the first edition include drawings. Likewise, several authors were unable to provide annotations for the illustrations in their accounts, or measurements for scale bars.

## Merchandizing

### (a) Pre-publication

A pre-publication offer to sell the *Field Guide* at £19.95 instead of £24.95 up to the end of October 2009 was advertised from the beginning of June 2009, when flyers were issued with *Field Bryology* 98 and it became possible to place orders via PayPal on the BBS website. Late in June 2009, flyers were also sent out with *British Wildlife* (circulation 9,000) and

the British Lichen Society's *Bulletin* (circulation 700). Even at this early stage of promoting the *Field Guide*, more than half the orders came from people who were not members of the BBS. By the end of July 2009, 25% of orders received had been placed online using PayPal. In August 2009, a quarter-page advertisement appeared in the magazine *Natural World*, which goes to 328,000 members of the county wildlife trusts, but did not appear to stimulate many orders, although it is possible that some people who saw the advertisement ordered copies online.

Flyers were sent to members of the Botanical Society for the British Isles in September 2009. This helped to boost orders to 1,139 copies by the end of that month, and October 2009 was the best single month for orders (see table below), as people took advantage of the last opportunity to order the guide at the pre-publication offer price of £19.95. Of every three copies ordered, two came from non-members of the BBS. These

Month	Copies ordered	Cumulative total
<b>2009</b>		
June	257	257
July	364	621
August	232	853
September	286	1,139
October	551	1,690
November	73	1,763
December	61	1,824
<b>2010</b>		
January	88	1,912
February	258	2,170
March	337	2,507
April	261	2,768
May	112	2,880
June	230	3,110
July	195	3,305
August	82	3,387
September	118	3,505
October	129	3,634
November	134	3,768
December	116	3,884

people had decided that they wanted to learn how to identify bryophytes, but were not sufficiently entranced by bryology to join the BBS. There could not have been more copper-bottomed proof that lack of a field guide had been deterring many people from taking up field bryology, or more embarrassing demonstration of this deficiency to a Society whose professed aim is to '*promote the study of mosses and liverworts*'.

Not surprisingly, the rate at which copies of the *Field Guide* was ordered fell away after the pre-publication offer ended, and only about 200 guides were ordered during November and December 2009 and January 2010, before soaring again once the guide had been published.

By the time the guide went to press in December 2009, more than 1,800 copies had been ordered and paid for, which encouraged the BBS to order a print run of 3,000 copies for the first edition. About a third of these 1,800-odd orders had been placed online using PayPal, and the proportion of orders paid for using PayPal increased continually thereafter (e.g. to 38% by mid-March 2010, a month after publication), for no flyers were distributed or advertisements placed after 2009, and the trickle of cheques received thereafter came mainly from government organizations and some booksellers who eschewed electronic payment.

By the time that the *Field Guide* was published on 10 February 2010, 1,958 copies had been ordered and paid for by 1,589 individuals or organizations.

### *(b) Post-publication*

Demand for the book soared and remained high in the months following publication, necessitating a second print run of 1,500 in April 2010. Over 400 copies were ordered in the 5 weeks following publication, and the original print run of 3,000 sold out during June 2010.



Rather surprisingly, 19% of orders placed by the end of 2010 had come from people living abroad. People in Germany had ordered 119 guides, followed by France (104), Netherlands (102), Belgium (87), Denmark (64), Norway (40), USA (37), Iceland (32), Switzerland (31), Sweden (28), Italy (14), Spain (14), Canada (12), Australia (12), Turkey (10), Finland (9), Czech Republic (5), Austria (4), Poland (3), Portugal (2), Romania (2), Slovenia (2), and single copies to Estonia, Hong Kong, Japan, New Zealand, Serbia, Slovakia and Uruguay. In addition, more than 150 copies had gone to Ireland (Eire), which was both expected and encouraging in view of the recent surge of interest in bryology there. Of other countries, most of South America and all of Africa are not represented, and China is also a notable absentee in view of the known interest in bryology in the Far East. It will be interesting to see if demand from the Far East gathers momentum in future.

In the fortnight following publication, 20 guides went to Denmark, where postings on a website appeared to stimulate considerable interest. Soon afterwards a similar flurry of orders came from France, and then at the end of March 2010 the Flemish and in July the Icelandic markets came alive.

### Promotional articles

Promotional articles that introduced mosses and liverworts to non-bryologists were submitted





## The *Field Guide* story

◀ **Far left.** The huge, 10-colour, Heidelberg press at Latimer Trend in Plymouth where the *Field Guide* was printed. The press worked continuously for over 24 hours to print some 80,000 double-sided, 32-page sections. **Left.** Stacked sections waiting to be folded, trimmed and bound. *I. Atherton*

for inclusion in *Natural World*, *BBC Wildlife Magazine*, and the members' magazine of the National Trust. However, these magazines did not carry these promotional articles perhaps because more powerful interests than bryology clamour and compete for the limited space available in periodicals that find their way into millions of homes and thousands of waiting rooms. Just as commercial publishers refuse to publish field guides for unpopular groups of organisms, bryophytes aren't, it seems, sexy enough to warrant coverage in mainstream magazines, which therefore decline to publish anything about them, so they continue to be neglected.

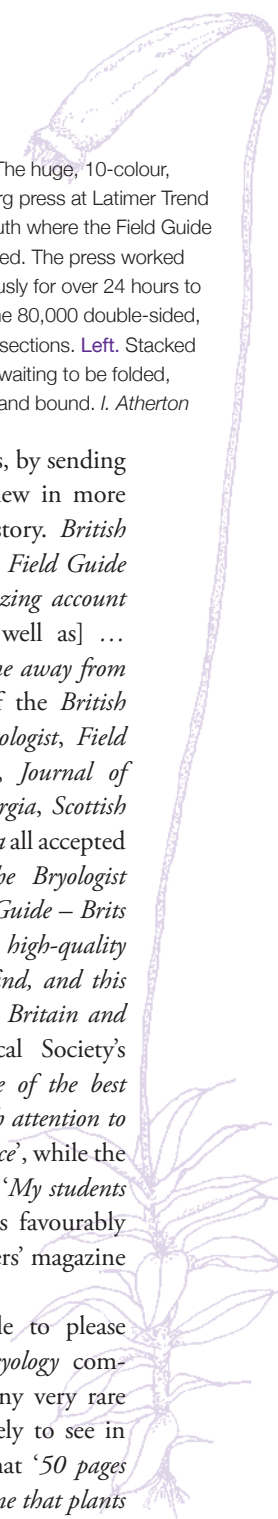
### Reviews

Of natural history publications with very large circulations, *Plantlife* and *British Wildlife* reviewed the book. The reviewer for *Plantlife* wrote that 'one of [this guide's] greatest strengths lies in its accessibility to people of all levels of bryophyte expertise', and the reviewer in *British Wildlife* commented that 'the absence of a well-illustrated field guide ... is no longer the case ... The British Bryological Society ... has produced a superb guide ... The style of writing is refreshingly free of unnecessary scientific jargon ... a superb example of what can be achieved by a small society... a ground-breaking guide.' The members' magazine of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds also reviewed the guide favourably.


Further success was achieved at the other end

of the spectrum of interested readers, by sending out complementary copies for review in more bespoke periodicals on natural history. *British Lichen Society Bulletin* reviewed the *Field Guide* favourably in summer 2010 ('*amazing account ... accessible to non-specialists [as well as] ... aficionados... It's enough to tempt one away from lichens ...*'). The review editors of the *British Ecological Society Bulletin*, *The Bryologist*, *Field Bryology*, *Irish Naturalists' Journal*, *Journal of Biology*, *Journal of Bryology*, *Lindbergia*, *Scottish Wildlife Trust Magazine* and *Watsonia* all accepted review copies. The review in *The Bryologist* appeared under the heading 'Field Guide – Brits Lead the Way', going on to say: 'A high-quality user-friendly field guide is hard to find, and this publication can be used well beyond Britain and Ireland ...' The British Ecological Society's reviewer wrote 'This has to be one of the best thought-out guides I've ever used with attention to small details that make all the difference', while the reviewer for *Lindbergia* ended with 'My students love it!' In addition, the guide was favourably reviewed in *Balsam Post*, the members' magazine of the Postal Microscopical Society.

But of course it wasn't possible to please everyone. The review in *Field Bryology* complained about the inclusion of many very rare species that most people are unlikely to see in Britain or Ireland, and similarly that '50 pages of field keys ... will probably determine that plants are more often identified at home than in the field.'







This reviewer in fact appeared to think that the *Field Guide* should not perhaps have been a field guide: ‘*The decision to emphasize the ‘field guide’ aspect to the total exclusion of microscopical characters is questionable in my opinion*’. If the *Field Guide* should not have been a field guide, what should it have been? His concluding sentence suggested one answer: the field guide’s success might encourage the publication of ‘*that much-needed flora for beginners*’.

A more enthusiastic reviewer in *Journal of Bryology* pointed out that including rarities which can be recognized in the field ‘*will undoubtedly help to bring in fresh records. In any case ... bryological equivalents of Lady’s Slipper Orchid and the Large Blue butterfly merit attention, ‘flagship species’ that both inspire celebration of the natural world and remind us of its vulnerability.*’ Similarly, bryologists could have justifiably complained had the general field key not included most common species.

In many respects, reviews would better sum up the strengths and weaknesses of publications if they were somewhat delayed, and appeared a year or so after their subject has been published because errors, omissions and shortcomings will have become more apparent by then. This is particularly true of practical manuals such as field guides. However, a feedback facility on Alan Hale’s web page ([www.bbsfieldguide.org.uk](http://www.bbsfieldguide.org.uk)) provides everyone with a continual opportunity to post comments and suggest improvements for future editions of the *Field Guide*.

### The future

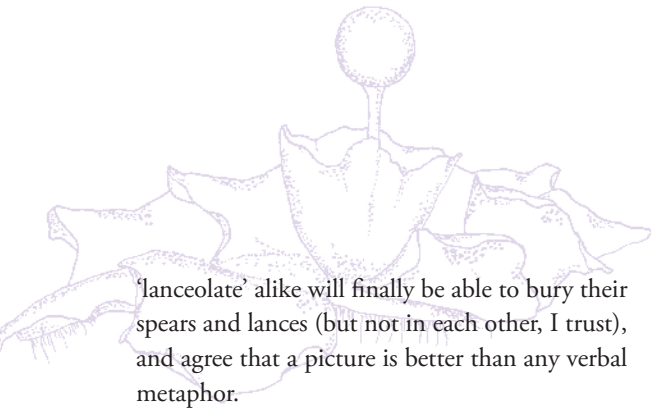
A lot of people worked hard and long in preparing the *Field Guide*; their names can be found in the acknowledgements on page iii of the guide. Their goodwill in putting in such extended effort with no expectation of financial gain is an enduring tribute to the spirit of cooperation and altruism

within our Society. Generations of naturalists will be grateful to all those who helped to make the *Field Guide* happen.

Immediately upon publication, people saw how much the *Field Guide* had been needed, and what a huge gap in the market it filled: previously bryologists and aspiring bryologists had no reasonably comprehensive, fully illustrated literature to take with them into the field. So the manual they got, with its first-class illustrations, informative text, and user-friendly keys, was and will remain a boon.

Yet only after a book’s ‘honeymoon period’ do its readers realize that their cup is half empty as well as half full. Shortcomings that inevitably mar any factual publication become apparent, and one starts to think about a new, improved edition. The *Field Guide* would be better if each leafy species had a drawing or close-up photograph of a leaf, for many of the photographs in the first edition do not adequately illustrate the shapes of individual leaves, even though these are clearly visible through a hand lens in the field. Furthermore, many photographs in the first edition do not clearly show some of the species’ important distinguishing features, so should be replaced by better photographs in subsequent editions. To give one example from many instances, the account of *Plagiochila porelloides* mentions as a distinguishing feature the plant’s thread-like branches, so these should be illustrated, rather than leaving readers to imagine what they might look like.

So the first edition is just work in progress. As better photographs and new drawings of leaves, capsules, and other features are incorporated into the files, most of the textual description in the ‘Identification’ paragraph in each account may become superfluous and might be omitted in favour of additional illustrations. Then those who favour plain Anglo-Saxon and the supporters of



'lanceolate' alike will finally be able to bury their spears and lances (but not in each other, I trust), and agree that a picture is better than any verbal metaphor.

Indeed, our guide's most influential and long-lasting contribution to bryology in future may prove to be its ability to stimulate the conviction that the book can and must be continually improved. The *Field Guide* became one of the first publications in natural history to fully embrace the newly available technologies of digital photography, the internet, and self-publication by those who prepared it, thereby not only bringing a very modestly priced guide before the public, but also reassurance that it need never go out of print or fail to develop and improve further as subsequent editions appear. This publishing protocol is an ideal template for other natural history societies to copy.

In addition, the BBS might now turn its ambition to preparing an equivalent, multi-volume *Bryoflora of Britain and Ireland*, lavishly illustrated with a multitude of colour photographs, subsidized by revenue from sales of the *Field Guide*, and modelled as a combination of our *Field Guide* and the excellent and beautiful Swedish *Bryoflora*. Adequate funds are certainly available, for the *Field Guide* has already made a profit of tens of thousands of pounds (or perhaps one should say 'surplus' when discussing the financial performance of a charitable organization such as the BBS), and future editions (which will be much easier to produce) can earn still more. The *Field Guide's* foreword, after all, promises that '*the BBS will ... publish new editions of the guide every few years*'.

The Guide's foreword was written in 2009 and describes bryology as a '*backwater of natural history*'. Several BBS members objected: "*'backwater' with its connotations of slow flow and stagnant water, is scarcely appropriate to the BBS I*

*know – and hardly an enticement to join the ranks of bryologists*". Yet a society with 700 members is minute on the world's stage, whereas if the BBS matched the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, with over a million members and therefore able to influence political decision-making, one might agree that it is mainstream rather than a backwater. It is quite understandable to like the BBS and the state of field bryology as they now are, but that need not prevent us wondering how they might be improved. How much better – more vibrant and popular – bryology might become in the best of all possible worlds. Are we happy with the status quo? Do we prefer to persist with entire counties bereft of bryologists, and most other districts lucky to have one or a few souls ploughing their lonely furrows? Or can we further 'promote the study of mosses and liverworts' by publishing manuals such as the *Field Guide*? Can we imagine a society of 7,000 members instead of 700? Why shouldn't there be as many bryologists as there are ornithologists? The question we must ask ourselves is '*Do we feel plucky?*' Well, do we?

Mark Lawley (e [m.lawley@virgin.net](mailto:m.lawley@virgin.net))

