

Southern Group – March 08

East Tisted, Hampshire

After gales the previous week, the weather for this field meeting was better than feared with a fine morning, some rain at lunchtime (so lunch in the cars rather than picnic mode) and fine again for most of the afternoon, although activities were finally curtailed by rain. At least the bryophytes were not shrivelled up!

This meeting at East Tisted, 5 miles south of Alton on the A32, concentrated on four areas: the church and churchyard, Rotherfield Park (by kind permission of Sir James and Lady Scott), a wooded cutting of the former Meon Valley railway line, and an arable field between the cutting and the A32. The bedrock in this area of Hampshire is chalk of Cretaceous age, but here it is overlain in places by a head deposit of gravel, flint and fractured chalk along the line of the A32, and by acidic clay-with-flints in Plash Wood on higher ground in Rotherfield Park. The railway line was cut deeply into chalk.

LEUCODON SCIUROIDES

Field work started in the churchyard at East Tisted where we admired a large area of *Leucodon sciuroides* that had colonized the sloping ledge about 1 metre up on the south-facing wall of the church. I came across this colony in July 2006 and voucher specimens were lodged with Fred Rumsey. On the field meeting we also found a few plants on the back of a tombstone near the church porch.

Once thought of as a common epiphyte on base-rich bark of trees, especially elm, *L. sciuroides* disappeared from this habitat because of the air pollution of the 20th century. The *Flora of Hampshire* (Brewis *et al.*, 1996) records it as 'occasional on exposed walls and tombstones, though usually

in small quantity' in Alan Crundwell's chapter on bryophytes. Here, limestone was able to neutralize any acidity. In rural Hampshire, less affected by air pollution, mature elm trees were lost in the 1970s to Dutch elm disease. *L. sciuroides* has been reported in recent years by Ken Adams as being frequently found on tombstones in Essex (pers. comm.), and Howard Wallace on this field meeting reported seeing it in several Surrey churchyards, but only in small quantity.

This moss is at its most distinctive when dry (as first discovered in July 2006) when it is a dark olive-green, the leaves are rolled up and there is a glossy shine from the curved shoots, hence the English name, squirrel-tail moss. A few patches on the vertical wall of the church above the ledge demonstrated this dry state which is harsh to the touch. On the ledge, where it was still wet, the leaves were well spread out and not rolled up, so it looked quite different. In some places it was growing with *Homalothecium sericeum*, with which it has a superficial resemblance, but this species is always soft to the touch. At a distance the two could be distinguished by colour.

EAST TISTED CHURCHYARD (SU702323)

The church and churchyard at East Tisted dates back to the 14th century, but the church was largely rebuilt in 1846. We explored the usual churchyard habitats of lawn grass, kerbs, gravestones, church wall, low roof tiles of lean-to, path and tree trunks, and 38 species of bryophyte were identified, some after being taken back for checking under the microscope. The more noteworthy ones were *Cirriphyllum piliferum*, five species of *Didymodon* (the result of Howard Wallace's microscope work),



- ◁ *Leucodon sciuroides* in dry (top) and wet (bottom) states. June Chatfield
- ▽ BBS members in the churchyard at East Tisted. June Chatfield

flora, including *Homalothecium sericeum*. Trunks of sycamore and oak trees in the open parkland near the main gate were searched, hoping that we might find *L. sciuroides* in its epiphytic habit – but no luck. The trees were also not particularly old.

Plash Wood at the other side of the park approached by the north lodge gate (SU698331 –SU697328) is a mixture of oak, ash, birch and hazel, with a carpet of bluebell leaves promising a fine sight later in the spring. The more acid nature of the clay-with-flints capping on the chalk was

Fissidens pusillus on a piece of malmstone, *Plagiomnium rostratum*, *Rhynchostegiella tenellum*, *Schistidium crassipilum* (checked microscopically) and *Zygodon viridissimus*.

ROTHERFIELD PARK

Rotherfield Park was set up by the Scott family, brick-makers from London, and is referred to by William Cobbett in his *Rural Rides* (1830). Much of the building stone of the estate is malmstone (locally called Selborne stone), a white rock from the Upper Greensand that resembles chalk at first sight, a fact remarked on by Gilbert White whose Selborne home is no more than 2 miles away. 29 species were found before collecting was curtailed by rain.

Before lunch we investigated the walls and hard surfaces near the main entrance gate opposite the church (SU/702322) and found typical rupestral



immediately evident from the bryophytes found – *Dicranum scoparium*, *Mnium hornum* and *Polytrichum formosum*. Epiphytes included *Frullania dilatata*, *Hypnum andoi*, *H. lacunosum*, *Isohetecium myosuroides*, *Orthotrichum affine*, *Syntrichia laevipila* and *Ulota crispa*.

ARABLE FIELD

The public footpath from the north lodge at the A32 crosses an arable field to reach the Meon Valley railway (SU705332). Arable bryophytes found were *Barbula convoluta*, *B. unguiculata*, *Ceratodon purpureus*, *Didymodon fallax*, *D. insulanus*, *D. vinealis* and *Pseudocrossidium hornschurchianum*, with *Homalothecium lutescens* on the field-edge bank. Normally seen in its dry state on chalk

▽ The railway cutting north of East Tisted. *June Chatfield*



downland or sand dunes, *H. lutescens* took us rather by surprise in its wet state. This would have been more widespread on the chalk grassland of the railway cutting before the track was abandoned and wooded over.

MEON VALLEY RAILWAY CUTTING

This was a relatively late railway line to be cut, opening in 1903, and linked Basingstoke and Gosport via the Butts junction at Alton. Early in the 20th century it was a traditional access for Gilbert White pilgrims visiting Selborne, who, after alighting at East Tisted station (now a residence), walked on footpaths through fields and across Selborne Common before descending into the village by the zigzag. It was closed as a passenger line in 1955 and the Alton to Faringdon goods traffic up until 1968 did not include this stretch. At East Tisted, the deep cutting, now wooded after 53 years of plant succession, provides a shady moist place for bryophytes of calcareous soil. A few vestiges of the more open chalk habitat of railways days were found in patches of *Ctenidium molluscum*. Damp seepages from the chalk supported substantial growths of *Neckera complanata*. Some areas of chalk rock were exposed, sometimes on the root-plate of wind-blown trees. Specific to this habitat was the liverwort *Leiocolea turbinata* in fissures and the small moss *Seligeria calycina* (nicely capsulate) on chalk fragments.

June Chatfield

Anglefield, 44 Ashdell Road, Alton, Hampshire
GU34 2TA

REFERENCES

- Brewis, A., Bowman, P. & Rose, F. (1996). *The Flora of Hampshire*. Colchester: Harley Books.
Cobbett, W. (1830). *Rural Rides*. London: Penguin.