



Buried deep somewhere in the British psyche is the hope that one day the Queen will drop in for tea – it’s not likely to happen, but something almost as unexpected did occur on the second Sunday in March when the BBC turned up to film a joint meeting of the Border Bryologists and Worcestershire Moss Group in the spacious grounds of Mawley Hall, one of Shropshire’s finest stately homes now owned by the Galliers-Pratt family. About 15 bryologists led by Mark Lawley (Border Bryologists) and Ann Hill (Worcestershire Moss Group) turned up. The BBC was represented by David Gregory (presenter), Karen (director), and Gary (cameraman). I went along to write the text for this article with Xiaoqing Li to take the photographs.

‘Rain before seven, dry by eleven,’ smiled John Downes, the estate manager as he hopped out of his Land Rover and prepared to escort the bryologists down to a lovely dingle by a weir in the River Rea. And it certainly was a beautiful spring morning, sunny and warm. Waiting below when we arrived were the trio from the BBC who had driven down in their van with all the equipment.

‘... And we was all



The Border Bryologists and Worcestershire Moss Group were descended upon by an unusual trio of visitors at their joint field meeting at Mawley Hall in Shropshire on 13 March 2011 – a BBC film crew recording a piece for *Springwatch*. Jim Lawley recounts the story of the day.



on the cover of *Newsweek*’

BBC meets BBS! I’d been waiting for this moment ... would the observer’s paradox strike? Would the presence of the cameras cause the bryologists to behave differently? Would it heck! The bryologists, expert and tyro alike, did what they always do; they parked their lunch bags at the foot of a tree and set off – alone, in groups of two, in gaggles of three, to look for mosses and liverworts in the river, on its banks, under the bridge, in the weir, on the brick wall.

‘Ooh! They’re moving off ... they’re all moving off!’ exclaimed Karen in shrill tones of dismay: ‘Shall I tell them to wait?’ Too late, Karen; this is the BBS – you’re herding cats! David Gregory, the presenter, watched as the bryologists disappeared

in all directions, shrugged his shoulders and started to leaf through his newly acquired copy of *Mosses and Liverworts of the British Isles: a Field Guide*. I was observing this with some interest from about 15 yards away. He leafed through the *Field Guide* slowly, then he leafed more quickly, then slowly again.

‘They’ve all gone,’ said Karen a touch mournfully. ‘All gone’. But one who had gone was now coming back clutching something. And it was Ralph with *Anomodon viticulosus*.

David, oblivious to his surroundings was absorbed in the *Field Guide*, and I was still watching. Since the really interesting things were happening inside his head, I can only speculate, but he seemed to be thinking something like: ‘So many ... I had no idea there were so many and so beautiful’. I may be wrong, but my hunch is that there are lots of people like David who are well disposed towards natural history but have no

- ◀ Top left. The wooded dingle below Mawley Hall.
- ◀ Far left. The BBC’s ‘Gardener’s World’ camera.
- ◀ Left. ‘They’re all moving off!’
- ▲ Top right. Mawley Hall.

All photos Xiaoqing Li



► BBC reporter David Gregory interviews Mark Lawley for the television programme 'Springwatch'.

◀ **Top.** Ann Hill demonstrates *Platygyrium repens* to television viewers.

▼ **Middle.** Mrs Galliers-Pratt on the right, chatting with bryologists.

▼ **Bottom.** BBC cameraman Gary Darfield uses the boroscope to film the hygroscopic behaviour of *Anomodon viticulosus*, with David Gregory looking on.

All photos Xiaoqing Li



idea that our islands are home to over a thousand different mosses and liverworts. They may indeed think (how else can I put this?) that moss is a plant, not a class of many different kinds. If so, then the quickest way to disabuse them must be to put a copy of the *Field Guide* into their hands. Whatever his thought processes, David's face was that of someone who has just discovered hidden treasure. 'This guide ...' he said out loud but apparently to himself, '... is important. It's a lovely guide actually.' His tone suggested that a decision had just been taken and a day's work mapped out.

Meanwhile Ralph had handed the *A. viticulosus* to Mark. 'Anomodon viticulosus,' said Mark and bore down on David with it. 'Now if we take the *Field Guide* and turn to page 694 ...' The page found, Mark promptly produced a bottle of water spray from his pocket. Now I felt there was a distinct whiff of 'Here's one I prepared earlier' about all this: the Lawley family motto is 'Never join a queue' (hence bryology), but we don't believe in leaving things to chance either, Ralph's an old friend and where did that bottle come from? But Mark assures me that many bryologists routinely carry a spray bottle for refreshing droopy mosses. At all events, the spray promptly did its work exactly as predicted by the *Field Guide*: '... when dry shoots are moistened, the dull green, much twisted leaves change in a matter of seconds from being appressed to the stem to pointing



well away from it'. Here was a moss that did something, and seeing was believing. David and Karen exchanged knowing glances and nods of complicity, Gary recognized the signs and started moving the camera into position, and for the next 45 minutes Mark and David practised 60 seconds' spontaneous conversation about *A. viticulosus*. ('Take 1 ... Take 7 ... Take 22 ...').

With the *Field Guide* established as the star of the show, everything went swimmingly. Mrs Galliers-Pratt drove across her weir in her Land Rover, stopped, descended, spoke a few words to the lucky few, smiled vaguely at the rest of us, instructed the estate manager to give us everything we wanted, graciously accepted a complimentary copy of the *Field Guide* and drove off.

Soon *Platygyrium repens* was discovered: 'Oh! Look! Here's *Platygyrium repens*!' ('Surprise, surprise,' someone muttered). Now it was Ann's turn to explain: '... it wasn't known in Britain until the mid-20th century, but has now spread quite widely through the Midlands'. And again it took the best part of an hour to produce the required degree of spontaneity.

Cue Mrs Galliers-Pratt driving back again, utterly delighted with the *Field Guide* and the idea that a hundred different smalls and greens had been found on her property.

Mark promised her a list of species which she could then match with the relevant pages in the *Field Guide*. 'So kind. Do keep looking! And do always come back again if you want! Good luck!' And she was off again.

Soon it was time for David to interview Mark about the *Field Guide*. They sat on the bridge: 'Now I don't know an awful lot about mosses,' David began, 'but this recently published field guide ...' – 'Cut! Could you move about a foot this way then we can get those ducks in the background.' – 'Now I don't know an awful lot about mosses, but this recently published ...'. Time moved on, but David's bryological career stalled: 'Now I don't know an awful lot about mosses but this recently published field guide ... Now I don't know ...'

Mercifully, it was soon time for the boroscope ('Real close up feel but a wide angle') to be unpacked so that a highly magnified *Anomodon* could again be presented. And then the camera had to be packed up safe again: 'It must be back with Gardeners' World by nine tomorrow morning ... and - we - never - had - it!'

And so the day wore on. The sun shone, the brook babbled, bryologists bryologized, the BBC filmed, Xiaoqing clicked, your scribe scribbled, Mrs Galliers-Pratt drove past on the way up to Mawley Hall and waved to us, and the gods smiled down on this opportunity to popularize bryology. And Mark, his cup overflowing, continued to talk about the *Field Guide*.

'Xiaoqing,' I said to my talented and long-suffering photographer who is almost as interested in bryophytes as I am, 'I think it's time for you and me to go in search of a little something.' So leaving the bryologists, the BBC and the mosses in their dingle below, we trudged back up the path to Mawley Hall. Boldly, we opened the gate and stepped into the secret garden. Over the lawns, breath held but not a soul in sight, past the maze, round the gazebo, along the gravel path, up the steps to the huge door we went to see if we could photograph the house. And (who knows?) perhaps be invited in for tea ...

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