Abinger, Surrey (VC 17)

14 December 2014

Combining two areas on the south side of the North Downs, this field meeting was an excellent opportunity to see many calcicole species. We could also follow in Charles Darwin’s footsteps, since the landscape was one of the few places he would visit in the 1870s, staying with his niece and her husband at the now demolished Abinger Hall.

Now managed by the National Trust, Abinger Roughs is on the greensand, which meant we could contrast its species with those of the chalk later in the day. To begin with Joan Bingley led us into the woods near the car park, in which were epiphytes such as Metzgeria violacea, with its gemmae on its leaf tips, and a neat patch of Cololejeunia minutissima, clearly displaying its five-keeled perianths. Within the Roughs Zygodon conoideus was also frequent.

Heading over the railway line, we stopped to look at the plants on the bridge, which enabled us to compare Barbula sardoa with B. unguiculata, and also to examine Syntrichia ruralis and Schistidium crassipilum.
Once in the woods on the north of the railway we were on the chalk of the North Downs, with its distinctive flora. Shaded 'rocks' in the wood had plenty of *Tortella inflexa* as well as *Fissidens gracilifolius* and *Seligeria calycina*.

The floor of the old chalk pit was a perfect environment for *Abietinella abietina* var. *hystricosa*, where it was present in abundance. It is much less frequent on the South Downs, where there is little suitable south-facing habitat. As might be expected, it was associated with plenty of *Entodon concinnus* too, as well as a huge amount of *Trichostomum crisplum*. Other common associates on chalk were also present: *Ctenidium molluscum*, *Ditrichum gracile*, *Leiocolea turbinata* and *Homalothecium lutescens*.

We sat for lunch on a small bank at the top of the workings, which was also home to three species of *Microbryum*: *M. davallianum*, *M. rectum* and *M. curvicolle*, so could readily appreciate the clear differences between them. This area also provided our second species of *Seligeria*, *S. calcarea*, which is uncommon in Surrey.

Tom Ottley located a small patch of *Didymodon acutus* from this upper edge of the chalk pit, which he subsequently verified, along with large quantities of *D. fallax* from the chalk pit floor, and *D. vinealis* on a wall by the farm buildings on our return to the car park. The rim of the pit contained a rather branched *Weissia* with capsules on short setae, which Tom determined was all *W. longifolia* var. *angustifolia*.
By this time it was beginning to get cold and we headed back through the woods and found *Porella platyphylla* and *Neckera complanata*. It was also good to see the sizeable patches of *Encalypta streptocarpa* near the road in two places and a decent bank of *Anomodon viticulosus*.

Finally, as we approached the car park we paused to look at the memorial to Samuel Wilberforce, the bishop of Oxford who died here in a riding accident in 1873. It may be recalled that he was the (anonymous) author of a famously hostile review of *The Origin of Species* in the *Quarterly Review* of 1861, and had publicly clashed with T.H. Huxley over Darwin’s theory the year before.

So ended a very satisfying bryology meeting, with Victorian reminiscences.

**BRAD SCOTT**