

Drovweways – ancient corridors for wildlife



Throughout the Saxon era, the ancient drovweways of Sussex formed a road system that connected the oldest developed settlements at the foot of the Downs to the interior of the Weald. These green lanes thus ran mainly south to north and were used to drive cattle and swine to remote summer pastures. Many are fragmented now, others have been converted into roadways, like Plumpton Lane/Station Road, but others still survive, at least in part, and can be traced on old and modern maps. A good example is the one that runs from St Helena Lane just west of The Plough south to Ducks Bridge on Streat Lane south of Marchants Farm. The scattered farms and ancient settlements in this part of Low Weald all needed easy access to drovweways. David Millum tells me that Marchants Farm itself was the site of medieval pottery and that medieval hut platforms have been found at Ducks Bridge.

But I digress. I am interested in the drovweways mainly because they can be corridors of wildlife habitat, harbouring plant species that have largely disappeared from the modern farm landscape. In early August, I walked from St Helena Lane to Ducks Bridge, noting species of interest on the way. The northern part of the drovweway is high ground with spectacular views to the Downs. The oaks that border the track are Sessile Oak, which has acorns without stalks and leaves with stalks whereas Pedunculate Oak (our other native oak), which is much more common in Sussex, has stalked acorns and unstalked leaves. Sessile Oak favours more acid soils and is also an indicator of ancient woodland, as is the Wild Service Tree, of which there is a fine example almost opposite Bluebell Cottage. Heading south between high clay banks I found other acid-soil indicators: Goldenrod with its spikes of bright yellow stars and sprays of cream-yellow-flowered Cow Wheat. The latter copes with nutrient-poor, acid soils by partially parasiting grass roots but it can survive without doing this, as I think this local population does because the bank on which it grows is bare of grasses.

Further on, the oaks are a mixture of Sessile, Pedunculate and their hybrids, accompanied by Hornbeams, Holly, Hazel and Aspen. I stop to run my fingers along a rotting log clad with a mat of a tiny liverwort called Bifid Crestwort. Its translucent, bilobed leaves are only 2mm long but produce a delightfully sweet aroma when stroked. At the end of the wood, below Bluebell Cottage, just past a group of very old Wild Cherries with their lovely ringed bark, ESCC has dug deep ditches on either side of the track and surfaced it with chippings. It makes for very easy walking now, whereas once deep mud made this part almost impassable in winter. I used to see toads crossing here and I wonder how they will manage to negotiate the steep-sided ditches. Further down, the track bisects a wood where past surveys have found Pignut, whose roots were once eaten and said to be delicious. It must have been quite common but now is not. I would love to try one but it is illegal to dig up wild plants. Pignut is also an indicator of ancient woods, as is Butcher's Broom. There is a large bush of that on the top of the bank, but it doesn't look very healthy and its roots may have been damaged during the resurfacing work.

I emerged from shade into sunlight on Upper Street Green, north of Dean's Farm. Old maps show that two other droveways converge here and it may have been an important overnight stopping place or, as David Millum suggested, perhaps even the site of an ancient market. From here I leave the acid-soil indicators behind. We are on neutral grasslands and the track down to Shergolds Farm is bordered by tall hedges of Elm, Hazel, Blackthorn and Field Maple. Patches of bright yellow Bird's-foot-trefoil are attended by Common Blue butterflies and clouds of Gatekeeper butterflies flutter among masses of yellow-flowered Fleabane.

As I drop down to the Bevern Stream there is a delightful flowery bank where Strawberry Clover grows among the more familiar White Clover and Red Clover. It is more common on coastal marshes so I wonder how it came to be here. Another uncommon flower here is the Spiny Restharrow with bright pink flowers. It is largely confined to the Weald Clay in Sussex. And here I must pause.

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