

# Ideas for County Recording

## Follow-up notes to meeting 8 March 2020

Thank you to the 20 people who attended and contributed to the discussion last week, and to Nigel Johnson and Rosemary Webb for bringing in display boards that demonstrated how searching for infraspecific taxa can be a pleasure as well as a challenge! Here are some notes from the meeting on the various projects discussed, together with follow-up thoughts and some actions (mostly for Tony (ARGM) and me (MR), lest we forget). Other people mentioned: EJC = Eric Clement, FAW=Felicity Woodhead, RMW = Robin Walls.

### 1 Atlas 2020 outcomes

MR explained that there would be no large printed Atlas as produced in 1962 and 2002. Accounts would be prepared with similar content and format to *Atlas 2000*, but available only online. This will be a disappointment to many people, but down to the fact that no funding is currently forthcoming to produce it.

There will be a substantial published work of analysis detailing recent changes in the Flora, and summary accounts of findings will be produced for governmental and voluntary conservation bodies, with sections covering each nation separately.

*[Note: there is some uncertainty around both the above paragraphs. Check the Hants Plants web site for announcements.]*

MR also demonstrated that the BSBI Distribution Database (DDb) can already provide a wealth of information, since all Atlas data up to the end of 2019 have now been gathered in (though validation and correction will continue for much of 2020). Mapping down to a tetrad level is available to all, and authorised users can map and search down to full resolution for almost all data. Maps are highly configurable, and there is documentation for this on the web site. The URL is: <https://database.bsbi.org/>.

### 2 The new Hants Plants web site

MR stated that with the end of Atlas 2020, he felt that it was time to give the Hants Plants web site a thorough remodelling. Work on developing the site began in 2004, and available software technologies have progressed a long way since then (as has his understanding of them!) The initial focus was on content, sometimes at the expense of aesthetics or accessibility; design and development have been piecemeal; and for the last few years most of the development effort went to support Atlas 2020. As that draws to a close, much of the server-side code can be pensioned off or adapted to new projects, and the “look and feel” of the new site can be greatly improved.

The main changes for users are as follows.

- The menu and paging structure of the whole site are being remodelled, in general avoiding long pages with huge swathes of text.

- Although it was possible to view the old web site on a mobile device such as a smart phone, it was hardly a pleasant experience. Some features of the new site will still be best viewed on larger screen sizes, but the site now automatically adapts its layout to suit the dimensions of the device in use.
- The page structure will incorporate a simple “dashboard” where summaries of latest news and upcoming events are always visible, and more details are available with a single click.
- The built-in (Google) calendar will be replaced with a customised calendar better suited to our needs.
- New projects will be supported only on the new web site. Atlas 2020 support will be reduced to a brief retrospective and links to the BSBI’s national web site.
- New material related to the Hampshire Notables list and Hampshire Rare Plant Register will be confined to the new web site, as will updated documents for the Hampshire Axiophyte list.
- Perhaps the most important change will be a secure sign-in system for people wishing to contribute to news or activities publicised through the site. Apart from name, email address and a (heavily encrypted) password, no other personal details will be held. People who sign up at the basic level will be able to contribute items of news and details of events of botanical interest in the county. All content will be mediated by the site administrators. In addition, people can request to be contributors to individual projects, and on approval will have access to the resources and data for those projects. The site administrators will bar anyone maliciously or repeatedly posting inappropriate content or otherwise abusing their privileges. Signed-up users will also be able to ask for notifications by email of new news items or events.

The old web site continues to exist as <https://hantsplants.org.uk> and will continue to do so for a while. The new web site is based for the time being at <https://hantsplants.uk>, but will migrate to the old address when it has taken over all necessary functions from the old. For the time being, the events calendar and news items will continue to be posted only to the old site, but it is hoped that the new user registration system, news log and calendar will be migrated by the end of April 2020.

People are welcome to use the new site, which has had a lot of the static content ported from the old site, and already holds new material for Hampshire Notables and Hampshire Axiophytes. Features not yet implemented, or in development, will not be accessible from the menus. It is possible to go through the motions to register as a contributor, but one can’t complete the process. Occasionally there will be some maintenance work on facilities that are already in place and this may cause the site to misbehave; please ignore these events and try again later. For any other issues, either of content or presentation, MR will be very pleased to have reports.

### 3 Threatened plant monitoring

This proved to be one of the two most popular projects for continuing survey and recording in the county. MR noted that the project originated as a national BSBI project running from 2009 to 2013, culminating in the BSBI publication *Threatened Plants in Britain and Ireland (2017)*. The analysis was based on randomly selected known sites of threatened species spread across Britain and Ireland, but participants were also encouraged to record at further known sites in their area. It is possible that the BSBI will re-run the project nationally, but meanwhile there was no reason that recording should not continue on any known site at local level, to continue to build up a repository of information of conservation value. Sheets for 'no-finds' are just as important as for refound populations.

It was asked whether it was worth revisiting sites that had been recorded in the original project. MR's view is that one of the weaknesses of the project was that all site visits for a given species had been limited to one year, successive years being given a different set of species to check. So resurveying sites covered then will be worthwhile, as will looking at new sites repeatedly.

The group looked at the standard recording sheet used for the national project, which is quite complex and caters for a lot of detail about the individual species and its site. There are no prima facie reasons for making changes to the form, and MR will make this available electronically for individuals to print off. It was asked whether a version could be provided for online completion; MR said this was certainly possible but because of its complexity it would take a while to get it implemented, given competing requirements for web development.

**Action MR**

After discussion it was decided that it would be worthwhile to have some small-group field workshops to help people complete the forms. MR and ARGM will publish some dates on Hants Plants for this. They will be informal "Recorders' Meetings" rather than HFG workshops. There is a set of notes issued by BSBI for the national project on completing the forms, and MR will investigate making them available on Hants Plants.

**Action MR, ARGM**

MR has developed a list of 89 candidate species in Hampshire meriting Threatened Plants treatment. This was circulated and will also be published on Hants Plants. It may be worth prioritising some of these. Future priorities may be influenced by the revival of the national project.

**Action MR**

**Action MR**

Participants asked how to deal with recording more than one threatened species at the same site. MR proposed that a recording card should be prepared for each species, but detail that was common to all need only be completed on one, provided that the other cards were cross-referenced to it.

There is already an archive of recording cards from the national project which is currently only available to BSBI HQ and the VCRs. There are also similar detailed recording cards for individual species from other projects such as Biodiversity Action Plan surveying. These need to be scanned and made available to participants in the project. MR will make the scanned documents available on Hants Plants, but is looking for volunteers to undertake the scanning, either at his home or at the Wildlife Trust offices.

**Action MR**

**Action: for all to consider**

AEB raised the question of seasonal access to sensitive sites such as known sites for breeding wetland birds on the New Forest. MR pointed out that there was not always a formal ban on visiting such sites, and sometimes the need to monitor other species was important. However, anyone who finds that they are causing disturbance should retreat quickly and quietly, and this would be appropriate behaviour on any site, regardless of whether the public were requested not to go there.

## 4 Localised Floras

This was the other popular option for the coming years. MR pointed out that localised Floras were very diverse in approach and scope, and exhibited several examples from across England and Wales to demonstrate the point.

Typically, localised Floras can:

- provide people who have an interest in protecting or managing an area with a detailed knowledge of what they have and where it can be found;
- bring together historical and current information to identify changes over time and inform future management;
- provide a basis for continuing monitoring of a site;
- encourage an appreciation of, and concern for, the flora among local residents and visitors.

Localised Floras (i.e. those covering less than a county) often come in one of two forms: Site Floras and Parish Floras, although they may also cover a city, borough or district.

- **Site Floras** typically cover a fairly small area which can be visited and revisited often and recorded in considerable detail, with precise locations of conservation-worthy plants.
- **Parish Floras** and those of wider areas will often be less detailed and may simply comprise an annotated checklist.

Opportunities for producing a Site Flora are varied.

- **National Nature Reserves** may lack the detailed record of plant localities that they merit. Some may be rather large for comprehensive treatment by one person, but an area within them could be selected.

- **Wildlife Trust reserves** often need more updating, new acquisitions need baselining and subsequent monitoring, and management initiatives need monitoring.
- **Local Nature Reserves** often have keen volunteer teams but may lack specialist knowledge.
- **Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)** have infrequent condition assessments that are based solely on the features given in their citation. Other valuable features may be overlooked and would benefit from closer study, where access can be obtained.
- **Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs)** receive periodic but infrequent monitoring from the County Ecologists. Again, where access can be obtained, closer and more frequent recording could be valuable.
- **Farm clusters** are a relatively new initiative, and some areas within them (e.g. ancient woodland, arable plant hotspots) could benefit from a Site Flora. Access would usually need to be negotiated with the landowner but Wildlife Trust personnel may be able to mediate.
- **Informal open spaces** with some botanical interest may be deserving cases, especially where there is some commitment by the local authority and/or local residents to conserving or restoring the habitat.
- **Road verges** are a special case and the better ones may have good documentation from the past. Many of those previously found to be species-rich may present safety challenges in today's traffic conditions, and should not be worked alone or without hi-vis clothing.

For anyone wanting to undertake a Site or Parish Flora, MR can provide data from the county database that is clipped to a site or civil parish boundary. For sites he will need a sketch of the boundary related to existing geographical features. For people using Living Record, Adrian Bicker has also offered to digitise site boundaries for us to appear on the mapping and satellite imagery.

Quite often sites and parishes have historical records that have not been digitised but are available in printed material, some of which is archived on the Web. MR and ARGM may be able to advise on sources.

Some people may want to incorporate maps in their localised Floras, even if only for an overview and key. One way to accomplish this slickly is by using GIS software. Commercial GIS packages are expensive but there is a very capable contender known as QGIS which is completely free (although the maintainers always welcome a donation!). No GIS package is famous for its ease of use, but there are some basic operations that everyone can learn and some tools to make data import and presentation straightforward. MR offered to run small-group QGIS workshops in 2020/21 winter season if there is interest.

Many sites and parishes will have local groups taking an interest in their wildlife and its conservation, and there will usually be advantages for both sides in making contact with these groups. Parish Councils will often also have interested members. These groups may provide information on the occurrence of species, the history of a place or its management. On the other hand, botanists may be able to provide expert help with the plants and heighten local interest. For more on this, see the next topic.

Usually a desirable outcome from a localised Flora project is a printed document, especially if it can be produced relatively cheaply and sold to a wider local and/or visiting audience. Several HFG committee members may be able to offer advice and help in bringing this to fruition.

## **5 Mentoring**

FAW raised the point that those engaged with caring for a site, whether amateurs or as paid managers, often lacked botanical ID skills, which were now hard to come by or non-existent on many professional courses. Recording projects could offer an opportunity for BSBI / HFG members to engage with people in such roles through mentoring or leading training sessions. She stressed that one didn't need to be a high-powered botanist to take this on, as often the level of knowledge was very low. The localised Flora projects are likely to be the best springboards for this.

## **6 Monad (1km) monitoring**

This project received a certain amount of support at the meeting. It would fall between the "square bashing" that was required for Atlas 2020 and the sort of activity required for a localised Flora, typically without producing a printed account.

Participants would select one or more 1km squares which they would visit several times a year (EJC suggested at least 6), recording all vascular plant species to at least the 1km resolution and trying to cover all the ground that was accessible to them within the monad. Visits would be repeated in successive years. This level of recording effort could be valuable at showing changes and perhaps their drivers at this very local level.

Given the number of monads in the county, one would not expect more than a small proportion to get coverage. For effort at a local level, there would be no attempt to impose statistical respectability through random selection of monads to record. The recording effort required probably means that most people will select squares close to them; and given human nature, probably many of the squares would have a bias towards the more diverse, attractive or botanically rich. But it would be just as relevant to conduct monad surveys in less appealing areas.

This has also been discussed by the BSBI as a national project to bring on in the next few years. In order to be able to draw inferences about change at a national level, monads would have to be selected using an unbiased method, so it is likely that a whole range of extra monads would be thrown into the ring to be taken on board.

For anyone wanting to take on monad recording, the two VCRs would be able to provide lists of digitised records for the monad. If there is sufficient interest, MR will implement a monad checklist and recording sheet similar to the tetrad sheet provided for Atlas 2020.

## **7 Alien monitoring**

RMW suggested that if one was going to have a Threatened Plants recording scheme, it might be just as valuable to have “Threatening Plants” studied in the same way – in other words, horizon scanning for non-native plants that showed early signs, or provided evidence from elsewhere in the world, of becoming invasive.

There was general approval for this. Surveys might be written up on a form like the Threatened Plants form but with some minor adjustments. MR will consider this and draft a modified form for circulation and comment.

**Action MR**

MR also said that to focus effort and make it a manageable project, we needed a checklist of candidate taxa. He offered to produce a draft of this.

**Action MR**

## **8 RPR update**

MR showed the new Hampshire Notables list, which is available on the new Hants Plants web site only. Changes to content partly reflect better knowledge of distributions of some plants, and partly respond to changes in the criteria to be used by HBIC for species- and habitat-based designations of Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) within the county. Changes to format aim to present more information about the county status of plants, and to present it in a more eye-catching way.

Updates to the Hampshire Rare Plant Register are certainly needed as it is now nearly 10 years since the text was completed. Some updates and additions have been prepared in the intervening years, and have been issued as electronic documents for the individual taxa concerned. This is the basis on which any future updates will be handled.

Much of the work of updating is likely to fall on the VCRs, although MR invited other people to become involved if they wished, and offered support. There was not a strong response to this, and MR and ARGM agreed that this would not be a priority in their work in the immediate future. Other projects are likely to offer fresh data to be incorporated later.

## 9 FoH Supplement

MR showed the state of play with the Online Supplement to the 1996 Flora of Hampshire, which remains unchanged from a year ago. The current web site service provider (who is different from the provider hosting Hants Plants) offered a good framework for development of this quite complex web site, but MR had found during the year that the site's responsiveness and reliability presented some problems, and there was no-one else providing a better service with the same framework. He now intends to port the project into the new Hants Plants site. Unfortunately, this means some considerable rewriting of the server software, since the server software support is different, and this is not likely to be tackled before the autumn/winter. Meanwhile, the current FoH web site will be kept open and if anyone wants to contribute, then the content in the database would still be relevant and would be ported into the Hants Plants environment. There is a document explaining how to make contributions, available on demand from MR.

**Action: others to consider**

## 10 Intraspecific taxon recording

MR proposed that it would be worthwhile improving our understanding of the distribution of some subspecies and varieties, either because they represented native taxa with differing ecological requirements, or because some native species included both native and exotic plants that could be distinguished on morphology and confused the picture of distribution, abundance and threat status for our native forms.

People needed to know species of most importance for this exercise, and also to have access to ID information which is not always available in the mainstream field guides and Floras that most people own, and can be widely scattered. MR offered to bring these two aspects together in a document. ARGM pointed out that before leaving the county Adam Lucas had prepared lists of all intraspecific taxa given in Stace, and he would send these to MR as a starting point. **[Note: done]**

**Action: MR**

**Action: ARGM**

## 11 Digitising the herbaria

ARGM raised the subject of digitisation of the Hampshire County Museums Service herbarium (now Hampshire Cultural Trust, but the international code remains HCMS) at Chilcomb House. This is something whose feasibility MR and ARGM investigated well over a year ago with the equipment at hand on site and digital cameras. This gave very workable results, and the curator with overall responsibility (Ross Turle) is keen to see it progressed. Tony would like to get on with it, and there is scope for others to participate. It would be good to do the same for the Portsmouth City Herbarium, but the logistics may be a bit trickier.

**Action ARGM**

**Action: others to consider**