

Woolhope Club Field Meeting to Moccas and west Dorstone Hill 3 July 2021

At 10.00am about 18 wet Woolhopians gathered at Park Cottage, on the edge of the Moccas estate. Rachel Jenkins and David Lovelace were there to greet us, together with Sue Olver, who ticked us off (not literally) as we arrived. This was fewer than anticipated but from the evidence of the array of waterproofs, there was little anticipation of a fine day. In fact before we moved on the rain had stopped and our spirits began to improve. Moccas is a happy hunting ground for the Club, indeed, several of the founders of the Club visited Moccas in 1849 with the Hereford Philosophical Society. Two years later a splinter group of the Society, eager to hold more frequent field meetings, founded the Woolhope Club.

The Club had visited Moccas Deer Park in June 2019 and discovered that all was not well with the veteran trees. Indeed the 'Club Oak' so named by Henry Graves Bull, and given to the Club in c.1870 had died (See Tom Wall in *TWNFC* (2019), pp.38-46). It had been last measured in 1998 when it was in robust health. Rachel and David decided to seek expert opinion and, before the on-set of Covid, had been hoping to hold a symposium to discuss the matter.



Healthy Oak in Moccas park



The oak on the left will soon go the way of the dead one on he right



A large herd of cattle in Moccas park



A very old oak in the park

David Lovelace explained the variety of oak species in the Park. The two main species present at Moccas are *Quercus robur* (Pedunculate oak) and *Quercus petraea* (Sessile oak). As he remembered, the consensus been has that *Q. robur* was dominant in most of the park but *Q. petraea* was present in the upper part of the park. Hybrids also occur but it probably requires DNA analysis to be certain.

He talked about the dieback of Oak and how the estate, which is managed by tenants, compares with unfavourably with the Kenchester estate which is also a deer park but does not have the same problems of overgrazing (note cattle herd) or Oak dieback. He showed us the various Oak trees and about the hybrid oaks. *Quercus robra and quercus* He also showed us the very old Oak where top branches have been pollarded and overtime spread their trunks and split open. – a natural state.

A variety of thoughts have already been aired, which may, or may not be of significance. The park is intensely grazed by a large herd of deer. In addition, the lower slopes of the park feed a considerable number of cattle. Unlike many heritage deer parks, Moccas has to pay its way and is integrated commercially into the wider Moccas estate. It has been noticed by many observers that the quality and diversity of the grassland is poor. The sward is not species-rich and, as one of our members noticed, there is very little growth of shrubs and self-sown trees. English Nature has, it seems, been rather inactive, although aware of the problem. It has experimented with bark mulching, visible under a group of trees. This seems to be ineffective. Obviously this is a complex issue but it needs to be sorted-out quickly by the various parties and agencies involved.

Pied Flycatcher

Rachel, who lives close to the park, has taken on the responsibility of looking after the Herefordshire Ornithology Club's nest-boxes. The nest box provision was commenced by her father in the 1960s, specifically to attract Pied Flycatchers who arrive for Africa in early June, mate and nest, and are gone by early July. In recent years, the number of Flycatchers using the boxes in Moccas Park has declined considerably. Rachel believes that crossing an expanding Sahara is making it difficult for the birds.



President David Whitehead and Rachel Jenkins inspecting one of the nest boxes

After inspecting some nest boxes, we walked back down the glacial pools and Sue Olver outlined the geological factors that created a series of 'kettle holes', parallel to the Wye between Eaton Bishop and Moccas. Finally, we visited the 'Stags Horn Oak', since the demise of the more famous 'Moccas Oak' in c.1900, probably the oldest oak in the park and, no doubt one of 'those grey old men of Moccas' noticed by Francis Kilvert in 1876. Lunch was taken where we had parked our cars, albeit our appetites were moistened by a little rain. David Lovelace took his leave and Rachel suggested we go to the top of the park on Dorstone Hill where a new area of woodland had been planted, managed by the Forestry Commission. We drove up the hill – a thrilling experience in itself for those unfamiliar with its winding and steep gradient



View from the top of Moccas park

We found a new car-park across the fields to the south where Rachel explained how this area had been detached from the Moccas estate at the end of the Second World War. It was still enclosed by the great park wall built in the late 18th century, which had been well restored in recent years by the Commission. A story-board had been erected,

which gives some misleading historical information about the park. We set-off southwards on a well metalled track – slag from South Wales, Sue Olver observed, deep in high bracken but were soon aware of the wonderful views across lowland Herefordshire towards the Malvern Hills. The other hills to the south-west and in the Canon Pyon area provided clues to help find familiar towns and villages obscured by a mist. Only the polytunnels at Staunton-on-Wye spoil the idyll. Rachel took us down a larch avenue to look at an area that had been cultivated during the Second World War. The avenue, she informed us, was left to guide the bats that roost in the park down to the river Dore, where they feed on flying insects. Various theories were put forward to explain why the bats turned west and ignored the Wye. Was it the pollution?

The return walk took us along the western side of Dorstone Hill where we were able to see the site of the original medieval deer park, which in the early modern period crept over the hill to become Moccas Park. With the skies brightening a little we were presented with a view of ‘ravishing varieties’. Nothing jarred from Dorstone down to Dore Abbey. The only man-made objects that impinged upon the scene were the spire of Peterchurch church and the craggy keep of Snodhill Castle. A seat had recently been placed near the best view where we dithered for a while. It was a fitting climax to an excellent day and for some of us a symbolic line drawn under Covid.

David Whitehead, David Lovelace, Rachel Jenkins