

Ledbury Naturalists' Field Club

Field Survey 2017

Dales Hall



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Introduction

The club was introduced to Dales Hall during a summer outing in 2014. Members were well entertained by the owners, Tim and Rosemary Cameron, and enjoyed seeing their delightful smallholding on the east of the Malvern range. When Peter Garner, county botanical recorder and club member, was tasked with writing a book in 2017 titled, "The Nature of the Malverns" the club was asked if it could contribute by adding data for this area by carrying out the annual survey there. The Camerons kindly consented to our monthly visits and helped as much as possible.

Background

Dales Hall is situated at SO 768 390 on the east side of the Malvern Hills at the NW corner of Castlemorton Common, and adjacent to Shadybank Common to the North. It is in the Malvern Hills AONB and subject to the rules of the Malvern Hills Trust (formerly



"The Wonderment"

Conservators). The Camerons have lived and farmed there for 36 years with many rural enterprises but always following a wildlife friendly regime. The farm is currently in the government's Higher Level Stewardship scheme. They farm 42 acres which was originally owned by Eastnor Estate. This includes a flowery hay meadow, "The Wonderment", both ancient and newly planted woodland, an old orchard, some pasture and steep bracken covered hillsides. The whole site slopes to the east with wonderful views of the Severn Valley and the Cotswolds beyond. It is all well drained though the lower area is more marshy. The Camerons have planted several areas of new woodland which are now 30 years old. They also have commoners rights and used to graze sheep on the adjacent commons.

Dales Hall is situated just to the east of the major East Malverns Fault Line which runs behind the Wonderment. To the west are the Precambrian rocks of the Malvern ridge, which in this area were erupted from volcanoes.

In the Dales Hall area, there are scree deposits, formed when rocks from the hills above were frost shattered, moved down the slope and were deposited on top of the red Triassic mudstones of the Severn valley.



Ancient woodland in March

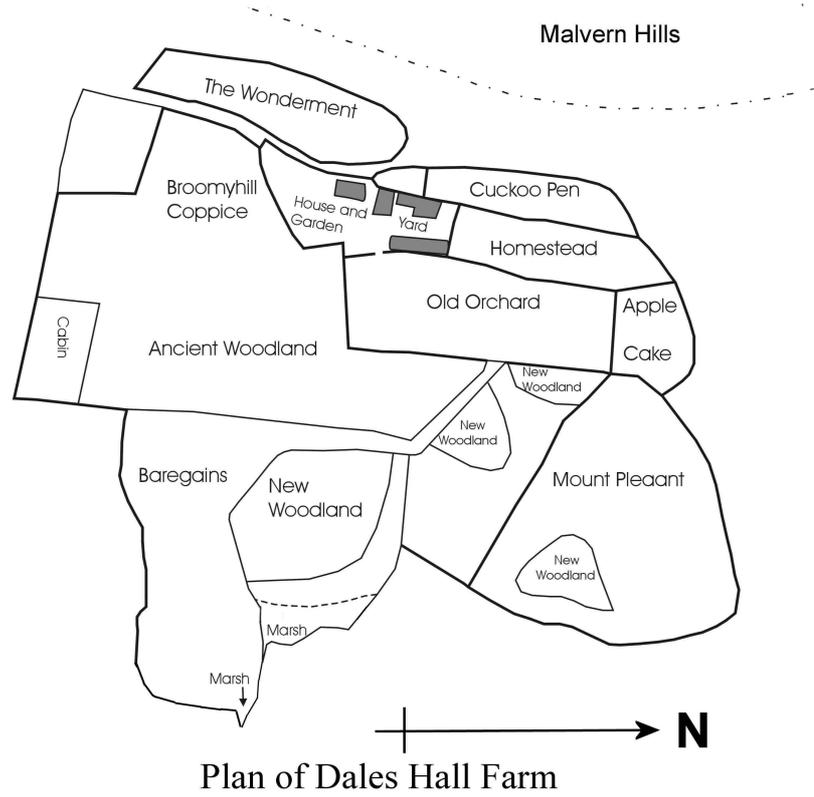
Moira Jenkins carried out a geological survey giving further details of the underlying geology. This can be found in Appendix 1.



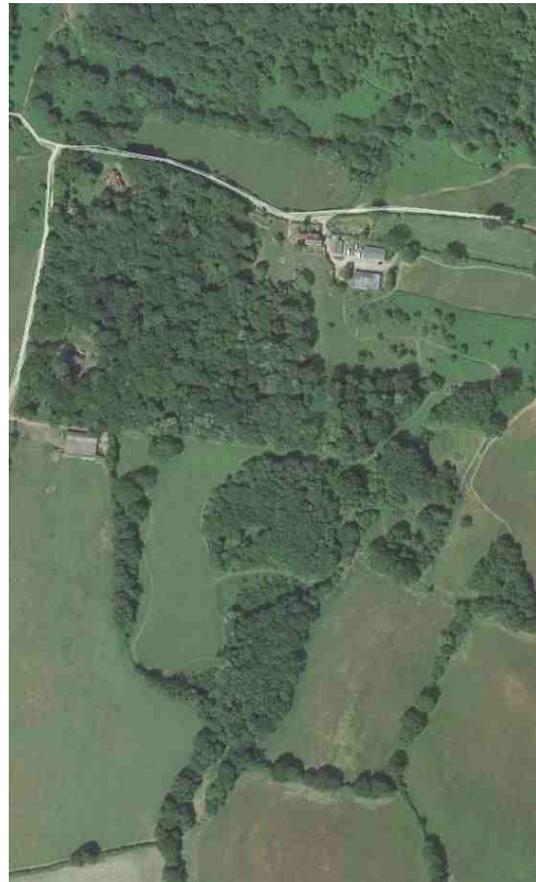
Old Orchard looking east

The farm has no public footpaths through it, though several paths pass by giving access to the Malvern Hills which rise steeply to the west. There is an historic farm house of great age and complexity and an extensive garden which adjoins the woodland but was not included in the survey apart from some interest around the small pond.

The farm map shows the areas more clearly.



Dales Hall Aerial view 1945



Dales Hall Aerial view 2014

Over the years, management techniques have changed but there has always been an eco-friendly approach to the land. The historic pictures above show how the tree cover has changed, particularly on the slopes of the Malverns at the top of each image. The hay meadow had soft fruit grown in strips at one end in the 80s but was later sown with grass seed and is now managed by late mowing which has benefited the flora. The woodland is over-stood coppice and was felled in 1914 to make gun carriages for WW1, but has since regrown. In 1988/9 areas of new mixed woodland were planted on the steeper sections and which are now maturing. The lower field, Baregains, has always been pasture and, as its name suggests, was never very productive for other crops. A marshy area at the bottom of the lower field was planted with Alders which thrive there and have taken up a lot of the moisture (see Appendix 1). Part of the steeper land to the north is bracken covered like the adjoining common and not productive and only used for grazing. The old orchard has been left and now has many very mature trees many of which have lost branches and fallen but continue to flower and fruit well.



Steep bank



Old Apple tree

Conducting the Survey

Volunteers from Ledbury Naturalists' Field Club paid eight visits to the site between March and October in 2017 to carry out the survey. The dates of the general meetings were March 16th, April 13th, May 11th, June 8th, July 13th, August 10th, September 16th, and October 12th. Moira Jenkins conducted a geological survey of the area as a follow up to one started in 2005.

On each date members spent about 3 hours in the afternoon walking around the site. All flowering plants, grasses, trees, fungi, ferns, birds, insects, and other invertebrates found along the way were recorded. Visits at other times by members and friends have added more species to the records and the Camerons (R&TC) helped with bird records. Hilary Ward supervised the botany and Michael Bradley and David Taft tackled the invertebrates. Cherry Greenway identified the fungi. Peter Garner, County Botanical Recorder, joined our team on several outings. The club is fortunate to have the support of these experts in their fields, and great trouble was taken to verify each record to ensure the reliability of the survey as far as possible. However the records are doubtless an underestimate of the species present due to the limited time spent and in some cases due to lack of expertise available. Unfortunately no moss or lichen experts were available this year. Complete details of the survey can be found in Appendix 2.

In summary the following numbers of species were noted.

Herbaceous Plants	Grasses Sedges Rushes	Trees	Fungi and Ferns	Birds	Mammals and other Vertebrates	Insects and other Invertebrates
153	32	38	47	43	6	130

Discussion



Orchids and Yellow Rattle in Meadow

The varying habitats yielded a good range of species. Of the 153 flowering plants identified, the most densely populated area was the hay meadow. Here there was abundant Yellow Rattle, Pignut, Ox-eye Daisy and Meadow Vetchling as well as many Common-spotted Orchid flowers widely distributed in May. There were also several patches of Broadleaved Helleborine, about 15 to 20 spikes in all. It was very pleasing to find this quite rare plant blooming well. There was a range of other plants such as Burnet Saxifrage, Red Campion, Musk Mallow, Goat's Beard, Ladies Bedstraw, 3 Stitchworts, 3 Clovers and 5 Speedwells, mainly in the meadow. The old orchard was grazed but had a range of common flowers and a few Harebells in summer

A range of 19 grasses were identified, mainly in the meadow including Sweet Vernal Grass, Yorkshire Fog and Crested Dog's-tail. Surprisingly, no Quaking Grass was found as this is often in ancient undisturbed grassland. Damper patches yielded 4 types of Rush and one Woodrush as well as 8 species of Sedge. These were distributed in the woodland and damper areas of the farm.



Broadleaved Helleborine

In the old woodland, the floor was carpeted with a wonderful show of Bluebells in April and then Ramsons in May as well as having typical woodland plants such as Golden Saxifrage, Woodruff, Wood Anemone and some Wood Spurge. The marshy area in the lower part of the farm had Wild Angelica, Meadowsweet and a little Ragged Robin as well as commoner Marsh Thistles.

There were 38 varieties of trees and shrubs. The ancient woodland, once coppiced and now regrown



Bluebells in April



Ramsons in May

was mainly Oak and Ash with some Silver Birch but there was a stand of Small-leaved Limes again indicating an ancient woodland. The newer woods were planted with Oak, Ash, Cherry and Birch as mixed woodland with the intention of using the wood for fuel and in other enterprises on the farm and they had grown well in the 30 years since they were planted. Hedgerows also contained a good mixture of Blackthorn, Field Maple, Hawthorn, Spindle, Holly, Hazel, Wild Service, Dogwood and 3 species of Rose. There was a

magnificent ancient Oak tree at the top of Baregains pasture and another of great age by a path to the north. They would have been part of the common before it was cultivated and escaped being used for timber. Hopefully they will survive many more years.



Veteran Oak at the top of Baregains field



Adder's-tongue



Rustyback Fern

There were 9 species of Fern including many patches of Adder's-tongue in the meadow early in the year showing its undisturbed status as do the Orchids and Helleborines. A Rustyback fern was found on the garden wall and the woodland had Scaly Male-fern, Broad Buckler-fern, Male-fern, Hart's-tongue and Hard Shield-fern, whilst Bracken abounded on the steeper hillsides by the common.

There were not a great many fungi to be found in the autumn as it had been rather dry and cool. However, 34 were identified, mainly in the woodland. They included the unusual *Abortiporus biennis* found round the base of the old Small-leaved Lime stools. This is rarely found in the county. Others included Honey fungus, Yellow Fieldcap, Field mushroom and Parasols as well as a selection of rusts and galls such as the Alder Tongue fungus on Alder catkins.

A slime mould graphically called "Cat Sick" was also seen in October. It had been thought that the garden lawn was a good site for Waxcaps but none appeared during the survey.



Abortiporus biennis



Alder Tongue fungus



Small Copper



Common Blue

Of the 130 invertebrates identified, 57 were Lepidoptera and included a good selection of butterflies enjoying the profuse flowers in the meadow. They included Small Tortoiseshell, Orange tip, Ringlet, both Dark Green and Silver-washed Fritillaries, Holly and Common Blues, Brimstone, Small Copper, Peacock and Marbled Whites flying above the flowers in the summer. There was also a range of moths amongst the vegetation during the day including the Hummingbird Hawkmoth. There were doubtless many more night flying insects but no moth traps were run this year. Hoverflies, aphids and midges, beetles, grasshoppers and sheildbugs were also represented.



Tree Wasp on Helleborine

Six species of bee were noted and a few wasps, one of which, *Dolichovespula sylvestris*, a tree wasp, was on nearly every Helleborine flower. This wasp is an important pollinator for the species. There were 4 species from the dragonfly family by the pond. Many galls were found mainly on leaves of trees including the unusually shaped Red Nail Gall on Dogwood. They are detailed in Appendix 2.



Sheild bug laying egges

Afternoons, which were survey times, were not the best time for bird spotting. However, 43 species were noted and the list was supplemented by the Camerons who were in a better position to notice them. The list included common woodland birds such as Nuthatch, Green and Greater-spotted Woodpeckers, Rook, Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler, Goldcrest, Whitethroat and Wren. Raptors such as Sparrowhawks and a Peregrine had been seen as well as a pair of Red Kites which seem to be in the area now. There were 4 species of tit, House Martins, Swallows, Spotted Flycatchers and Pied Wagtails near the house with pond visits from Mallards and Heron. A Woodcock was heard calling in the lower meadow and Cuckoos sang in May.

The survey did not actively look for vertebrates but the pond had frogs and an unidentified newt, probably palmate. Signs of badgers, rabbits and moles were frequently encountered and a Muntjac deer was heard calling as well as leaving droppings and hoof prints. Camerons noted that there were many bats flying in the summer but the species had not been identified.

Conclusion

Dales Hall is a delightful place and a haven for wildlife with a good range of habitats from meadow to ancient woodland. There are plenty of wild and undisturbed corners with rotting wood and natural vegetation all inter-connected by thick hedgerows allowing easy movement of species. The management over the last 30 years has enhanced the environment for wildlife so now there are abundant flowering plants supporting insect life which in turn provide food for birds and mammals and the rest of the complex food chain. Hopefully this smallholding in its historic landscape, will continue to enhance the environment and add to the special ethos of the Malvern hills for years to come.



Edge of new woodland in September

Distribution

1. Ledbury Naturalists' Field Club, survey team and committee members
2. Tim and Rosemary Cameron
3. Peter Garner Botanical Recorder for Herefordshire
4. Worcester Wildlife Trust
5. Herefordshire Wildlife Trust.
6. Malvern Hills Trust
7. Malvern Hills AONB
8. Natural England..
9. Herefordshire Biological Records Centre
10. Ledbury Town Council
11. Ledbury Library
12. Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club



Some of the team heading home

Appendices

Appendix 1 Geology notes by Moira Jenkins

Appendix 2 Species records collated by Janet Parry