AUTUMN MEETING 1996: GRANGE-OVER-SANDS

The Berners Close Hotel exuded an air of decaying elegance which is the hallmark of a suitable headquarters as it usually means large rooms, a lenient management, and few other guests. The bedrooms were equipped with wireless rather than TVs, hand bells had to be rung to summon the staff from the depths; on the first evening supper was delayed while the cook, a volunteer fireman, was called out; there were prunes for breakfast. No one was complaining; at only £20 for dinner, bed and breakfast several members stayed for a fourth night.

The object of the meeting was to investigate the limestone around the head of Morecambe Bay, so mornings were spent clinging to convex crags or picking our way over pavements while enthusiasm and chisels were at their sharpest. Afternoons were spent dealing with other habitats, or sometimes we returned to the morning one, as detailed survey work is too often sacrificed for variety. All the best sites were nature reserves and had managers who are becoming sensitive to collecting, so at most we had to behave ourselves. Gait Barrows NNR was an exception, we had a collecting permit, but resisted the temptation to load up our vehicles with rockery stone as the pavement is protected by a preservation order. Just as well, as we discovered swards of Synalissa symphorea which none of us had seen before.

I make it a rule never to visit sites before a meeting so that there is a sense of discovery which occasionally turns to a sense of disappointment. The only useless site was Sea Wood, a reserve owned by the Woodland Trust and renowned for its large trees. It was so unbelievably dull that to find anything other than Lepraria incana was quite a challenge. Our optimistic president spent an hour there but to no avail. On Sunday evening Brian Fox thought he had left Vanessa behind at Dallam Deer Park, and guilt-stricken, imagined her plodding back in the dark late for supper. He later plied her with red wine to make up for his scare, though really she had been asleep upstairs all the time.

As an insurance against bad weather Jeremy Gray brought his Women’s Institute talk to which he treated us one evening. It kept us spellbound, so much so, that he was pressed to give another the next night. Autumn meetings require a close network of pubs for recuperation, as the weather cannot be relied on; we had a tempest forecast but it never came, so we only needed them for refreshment. To speed up service at the Ship Inn, Arnside, we donned windproofs and ate Sunday lunch sitting at picnic tables while one of the highest tides of the year lapped at our feet. The sea was a major feature of the weekend. At Humphrey Head it raced in over the sands, as fast as a galloping horse, and tossed greedy brown spray at our ankles. Later we discovered it had all but washed the hub-caps of our cars parked on the saltmarsh. Like Canute we had forgotten the danger while locked in ardent discussion.

Oliver Gilbert

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