



Special Covid Edition No. 2

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Do you love plants?

With the world in the midst of a sixth extinction, the on-going slaughter of wild animals, the burning of Amazon rainforests, palm oil in every product we eat or use and now Covid-19 keeping us company I have been thinking a lot of what I treasure most in life. Family, of course, but my mainstay has to be the interest in the natural world together with the groups of NGO's that support it.

Why is it you joined this society? Was it to see and enjoy wild flowers? To learn more and improve your skills? Meet like-minded people or just to get out and enjoy the countryside? I suspect it is a combination of some or all of these reasons. And when we care about a subject we may go further and join our local Wildlife Trust perhaps? If we wish to specialise, we might join one of the botanical charities.

This got me to thinking; how much support do the Wildlife charities receive in comparison to some other national charities? Understandably, the likes of the British Heart Foundation and Macmillan Cancer Support receive huge amounts with income of £338m* and £232m, respectively. What of our other well-known charities? National Trust £634m, RSPB £142m and Royal Horticultural Society £97m. Pets obviously produce a great response in people as incomes at PDSA are £112m, Dog's Trust £109m and Cat's Protection League £68m.

So what of our Botanical charities? I was surprised how little they receive. Plantlife UK £3.5m and BSBI £0.45m. Even the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust has an income of £4.3m.

Bearing in mind how important plants are to our lives on this planet, I was very surprised to see the massive imbalance of power.

I know it's a tough time at the moment but if you can, try to support a grass-roots charity, (pun intended) by treating yourself this Xmas perhaps? And we would be very pleased with your continued support of the Wiltshire Botanical Society as well, thank you.

Martin Buckland

(Some of my personal favourites you may well like to look up are Species Recovery Trust [based in Salisbury], People's Trust for Endangered Species, Fauna & Flora International and the World Land Trust).

*All funds quoted are simplified and the true figures are obtainable on the Charities Commission website <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/>

Botanising against the odds

(or rather, a tribute to the spirit of botanists)

Let's face it, botanising in 2020 has been...difficult. When the national lockdown began in March most people went out only for 'local' exercising, work and other essentials. With great reluctance and a sense of inevitability, planned events were cancelled for the foreseeable future, including all of the field meetings of the Wiltshire Botanical Society.

But people walked and cycled more, determined to enjoy the wonderful spring sunshine and with it, the first flush of spring flowers. As a result, we botanists spent a lot more time than usual exploring our local areas than we would usually have done and enjoyed nature burgeoning close to home. Some of these perambulations inevitably resulted in records of interesting species and additions to Wiltshire's botanical inventory.

The earliest such find came, somewhat unexpectedly, from the streets of Swindon in early April. Richard Aisbitt spotted a strange-looking grass growing plentifully along a stretch of an urban road. It had the look of our familiar annual Fern-grass *Catapodium rigidum*, but was larger, with wider leaves and more divergent panicles. It turned out to be the rare subspecies *majus*, not seen before in Wiltshire. Where had it come from? A native of the Mediterranean and SW Europe, in Britain and Ireland it is mainly associated with coastal districts, so its appearance in Swindon is odd.



Catapodium rigidum subsp. *majus* - Richard Aisbitt

A couple of weeks later, I had a report from Darrell Harrison about an interesting fumitory that he'd spotted while exploring during his lockdown exercise near Westbury. I went to check it out and found many splendid plants of White Ramping-fumitory *Fumaria capreolata* (see cover picture), another first for Wiltshire. This herb, with large white and purple flowers, rarely strays too far from the coast. Its habitat gave a clear nod to its likely origins, in an area of land where licensed tipping of soil and other inert waste is carried out. Presumably its seeds had been brought in with soil from beyond the county line. Not surprisingly, other unexpected plants were also seen nearby, such as Narrow-leaved Ragwort *Senecio inaequidens*, a common plant in the London and Home Counties.

In early May, Dave Green managed to visit Cumberwell Landfill site and discovered Subterranean Clover *Trifolium subterraneum*, a species new to VC7 and yet another characteristically coastal plant. He spotted around 20 flowering plants close to each other 'on recently dumped and levelled soil'. It is not the most conspicuous clover but it just goes to show

what can be found by a sharp-eyed botanist. Later in the month, Dave also spotted two plants of Hairy Bird's-foot-trefoil *Lotus subbiflorus* growing as weeds in a raised bed in Bradford-on-Avon, an unexpected find of an uncommon plant that lacks the right kind of sandy, bare ground habitat to be native to Wiltshire.

By mid-May there was a relaxation of lockdown in England and many people took the opportunity to travel and enjoy the still-glorious weather. No doubt many will long remember the crazy scenes from beaches in Bournemouth and at Durdle Door. For Wiltshire botanists, however, this was an opportunity to go just that bit further afield and to botanise once more in pairs or small groups. By then, of course, spring was well underway and there was much to see.

At the beginning of June, Darrell Harrison made another find, this time metres from his home in Westbury. He was puzzled at first by an unfamiliar grass in a pavement crack but got help from experts on Facebook, who declared it to be Mediterranean Hair-grass *Rostraria cristata*. I confirmed this a few days later when I next walked down into town. Stace describes this species as a fairly characteristic wool-alien that also germinates occasionally from dropped bird-seed, which seems more likely in this case. Another species for Wiltshire's list.

Gutch Common, in the far south west of Wiltshire, is a well-botanised site with many interesting plants and unusual habitats. During work there in June I found the hybrid of Grey Willow *Salix cinerea* and Eared Willow *S. aurita*. The latter, a common enough species of organic soils in Wales and other upland areas, is rare but much misrecorded in Wiltshire. A few bushes occur in flushed ground on Gutch Common and *Salix x multinervis* was found nearby. Oddly, the hybrid has not been recorded there before, or anywhere else in VC8.

Another county first was spotted from the car a few days later in the central reservation of the M4 motorway near Lower Seagry. Any botanist who has travelled around London's M25 orbital motorway in recent years cannot fail to have spotted the many tall, robust plants of Greek Dock *Rumex cristatus* growing on the verges there. This perennial herb, which could be taken for an over-large Broad-leaved Dock *R. obtusifolius*, is not native but has become widely naturalised in the Thames Basin and other parts of SE England. Over the years, I have noticed it spreading west along the M4, first to Slough, then Reading and Newbury. Inevitably perhaps, it has now arrived in Wiltshire. Will it spread into our towns too?



A *Catapodium* lawn, part of the same population in Jack Oliver's garden nearby - photo: Peter Wasmuth

Rumex cristatus plants (from Portsmouth) - Sharon



Dave Green was also venturing further afield in June and on the 17th he and fellow botanist (and BSBI Recorder for North Somerset) Helena Crouch visited the very edge of Wiltshire at Gare Hill, near Maiden Bradley. It's a shame there is so little parking in this area as it would be a great place for a WBS field meeting. Its wooded sandstone valleys are dissected by small streams and its soils are mainly acidic and support a lot of county notables. Dave and Helena managed to find not one, but two notable plants in the woodland there. Helena, who is a keen pteridologist, spotted a rare form of Golden-scaled Male-fern *Dryopteris affinis*. In the past, subspecies *paleaceolobata* was considered to be a sound taxonomic concept but it is currently out of

favour and has been reabsorbed in *D. affinis* subsp. *affinis* by Stace 4. Despite this, it is still a very beautiful and distinctive fern.

Dave, for his part, spotted an interesting-looking sedge tussock in wet ground, which the BSBI sedge referee confirmed as *Carex x boenninghausiana*, the hybrid of Remote Sedge *C. remota* and Greater Tussock-sedge *C. paniculata*. Whilst both species are locally frequent in Wiltshire, this is the first verified sighting of their hybrid.

In July, news reached me of an interesting orchid in Savernake Forest, long known as a great spot for lovers of woodland orchids. Sightings of a purplish helleborine with stems nearly a metre tall attracted someone who knows his hybrid orchids. Rich Mielcarek has been monitoring a population of *Epipactis x schulzei*, the hybrid offspring of Purple Helleborine *E. purpurata* and Broad-leaved Helleborine *E. helleborine* in Somerset for some time so is familiar with its characters. This very rare hybrid was confirmed by John Richards subsequently.

So, while 2020 may not have been the year many of us would have liked, it has not deterred us from still getting out and about and enjoying the bounty of nature. Indeed, without being able to see and enjoy wild plants, it would have been a far more challenging year. Field botanising has also turned out to be a relatively safe way to get some exercise and maintain mental well-being. What's not to enjoy?

Sharon Pilkington, October 2020

Keeping in Touch survey

Thank you to all members who took part in the email keeping in touch survey in October. The committee discussed this recently and as few people wanted or could attend a social Zoom meeting decided to review this in the New Year. We think the best way to keep in touch is through a regular Newsletter.

It is unlikely we will be able to organise the 2021 New Year Plant Hunt for the Societies members, and at the moment, it does not look as if the BSBI are expecting these to go ahead.

Alison Robinson

Rumex cristatus tepals - Sharon



Do you list?

A light-hearted look at the natural progression of keeping lists, boy to man.

I have had many conversations with members of WBS about keeping lists of all the plants that they have ever seen, and it appears that very few, if any of you, do this. But, why not? I suggest that this should be natural to you and the following three interests may or may not have anything to do with the author of this article.

Trainspotter - Ferroequinologist - Anorak

1. Someone who is very interested in trains and spends time going to stations and recording the numbers of the trains they see. (Collins). (see 5).
2. Someone who is considered odd or boring because he or she is interested in knowing everything about a particular subject, even very small, unimportant details (Collins).
3. Carries a flask and sandwiches.
4. Not popular with land-owners.
5. Keeps a list of all the numbers they have ever seen. Also, annual or seasonal listing e.g. to try and see all locomotives of a class in a particular year or season.

Birdwatcher - Ornithologist - Twitcher

6. A birdwatcher is a person whose hobby is watching and recording wild birds in their natural surroundings. (see 5). Maybe considered odd and boring.
7. The study of birds including their physiology, classification, ecology and behaviour. (Collins).
8. Carries a flask and sandwiches.
9. Not popular with land-owners.
10. Keeps a list of all the birds they have ever seen. This may include world, UK and county and annual listing e.g. the most species seen in the UK or Wiltshire in one year.

Phytologist - Botanist - Plant Lover

11. A person who enjoys all forms of flowering plants. Maybe considered odd and boring.
12. A scientist who studies plants. (Collins).
13. Carries a flask and sandwiches.
14. Not popular with land-owners.
15. Contributes to long-term or short-term recording schemes such as BSBI Atlas or Plant Monitoring Scheme but doesn't keep personal life lists *.

* There is something really wrong here; Botanists don't keep lists? Let me see, these groups appear to have similar social pariah features; what do they have in common? Botanists go to sites like trainspotters go to stations. Botanists go to nature reserves like bird watchers do. Train list. Bird list. Where's the plant list, and, not just the one you've recorded for the BSBI but the one you look at to see how many you've ever seen?

Lister: a person who compiles a list or lists (Webster).

I cannot possibly see how carrying out botany as a hobby does not lead to keeping a tally of one sort or another. The New Atlas of the British & Irish Flora 2002 lists 2951 species of plants and I could not possibly remember what I had seen out of all those; moreover, I don't understand how you wouldn't want to know what you have and haven't seen. There are so many plants, can you remember them all?

Perhaps listing is no more than a form of collecting but I do it as it...

- Shows what I have achieved.
- I feel a sense of accomplishment.
- A thrill of the hunt perhaps?
- A small personal victory.
- Happiness when I add a new species.
- Strive to get more.
- Instils optimism.

As a botanist, listing is part of your *raison d'être*, - "If you don't make a list, you're not a botanist".

So you see as far as I'm concerned listing is part of the natural progression of child to adult or trainspotter to birdwatcher to botanist and those of you who missed out on the first two hobbies should start one of them now.

And finally, freely found through Google and on numerous websites:

'Dr. Uta Frith of the Medical Research Council's Cognitive Development Unit, believes that the obsession of train spotting may be a sign of Asperger's Syndrome, which is a type of autism. It is characterised by social problems and obsessive compulsive behaviour. The syndrome, identified by a Viennese doctor shortly after the Second World War, is characterised by social ineptness, an over-literal and pedantic approach to language, a lack of sense of irony or humour and obsessively pursued hobbies – finding, as it were, safety in numbers.'

Please look out for me, I'm just a train spotter!

Martin Buckland

How Should We Record in the Future?

Over almost 40 years I have been involved in plant recording in Wiltshire; firstly, the mapping project (WFMP) that led to the production of the Wiltshire Flora in 1993, then several BSBI projects and, most recently, the Atlas 2000 updating initiative.

In each instance it has seemed sensible, and relatively easy, to use pre-printed species lists and to simply strike out when seen. Generally, only those species not included on the lists were recorded separately and in greater detail because they were perceived as being relatively unusual. As a result, the vast majority of records have only limited details about the site where found or the frequency of the species. This is quite adequate for the production of distribution maps at county or UK levels but how much use is it to those interested in the flora of a particular site?

My involvement in Bentley Wood (BW) began in 1984 just after it was bought by the newly formed Bentley Wood Charitable Trust. Fortunately, when recording I tended to wear two hats, that of the WFMP recorder and also that of a supporter of the BW Charitable Trust. I was able to obtain detailed woodland maps (the wood covers 1700 acres and lies within two 10km squares) and quickly learnt to refer to the compartments used for management purposes. Ness Williams and I covered the wood in this way. Prior to 1984 the wood was managed by the Forestry Commission and before that it was privately owned so records that predated 1984 were few and far between.

As I have become more deeply involved with the wood and its management, and as I have aged, the importance of providing the next generation of trustees and managers with a vision of the many significant changes that have been undertaken has become more and more important to me. The county Biological Records Centre (WSBRC) has allowed me access to all of the records for the wood and for all taxa. I estimate that there are of the order of 50,000. It's difficult to be certain because some records lie outside the woodland boundary, some are duplicates and, of particular relevance to this article, some are insufficiently specific to be attributed to the wood, let alone a compartment or site within it.

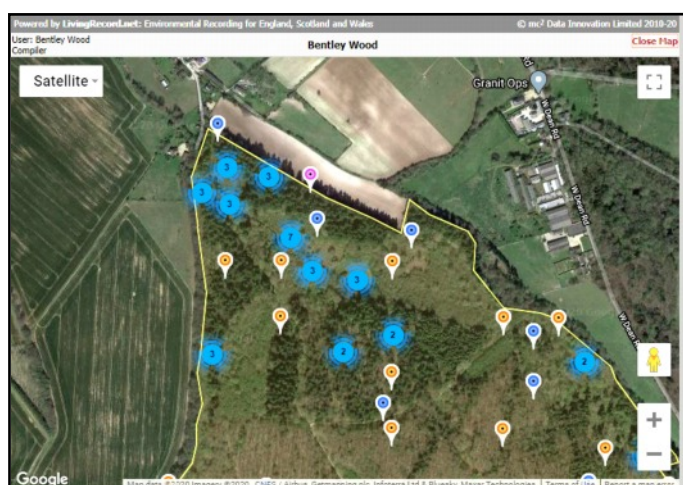
With the intention of making our records more meaningful to future custodians, the Trust has engaged with the owner of Living Record (LR), Adrian Bicker, who has developed a system for us that fulfils these needs. LR allows a recorder to pinpoint the location of a record down to a ten-figure grid reference (1msq) if wished by dropping a marker on an aerial photograph using Google imagery. So, if you can identify where you were, at whatever level is most suitable, there is little need to record a grid reference in the field. The system 'knows' the outline of the wood and the recorder can then add the compartment number or name, where within the site (e.g. a pond or clearing). Like other programmes, a level of security is built in so that your records are only available to yourself and other trusted members of a team. This means that sensitive species can be recorded accurately although they may be available to others only at a 10km square level.

Do you have any news or comments? I would be pleased to publish these in the next issue. Maybe you would like to write a full-blown article.

By email: richard@theaisbitts.co.uk. By post: Richard Aisbitt, 84 Goddard Avenue, Swindon, SN1 4HT

The image below left is of Richwellsted Copse in the north of Bentley Wood. It has a range of habitats, as can be seen from the aerial photograph and the markers can be positioned to reflect where the recording took place. A linear marker is available for tracks. The blue circles indicate that there are several markers at this position and they will be revealed as one zooms in. Orange markers cover 100m², blue markers 10m² and magenta markers 1m².

Below right is a drone image of the Barnridge Meadows showing the range of habitats and the need for detailed information. - photo Andrew Dodd 2018



Appreciating the value of this facility, I decided (with much help from Adrian Bicker) to add all of the historic plant records supplied by WSBRC as well; probably around 20000. This undeniably daunting task is made easier once you know exactly how to format the Excel spreadsheet before uploading it. The challenge lies in getting the format right and this, in turn, takes us back to the value, and potential use, of the original record. Fortunately for us at BW, two of the major contributing projects in the recent past have been site specific. In 2001 Phil Wilson undertook a NVC survey of the entire wood, recording in each compartment and also using quadrats. All records can therefore be ascribed to a compartment and many to a small area within. Likewise, in 2009 Anne Appleyard, Sue Fitzpatrick and I undertook a detailed survey of ancient woodland indicator species, again by compartment and/or 10 figure grid references. Since the earlier WFMP records were also reasonably detailed, they too can be added although sometimes with less detail than is desirable. Other records have proved to be of minimal value and cannot be incorporated usefully into the system. For example:

Viburnum opulus	SUJ	No site
Adoxa moschatellina	SU250295	Bentley Wood centroid
Carex hostiana	SU2530	Bentley Wood centroid, borders of BW, Rogers WM 1888

All of these experiences make me wonder how the society should approach recording work in the future. I feel that we should be more site-specific if the value of our records is to be maximised. If you look at the distribution map at county level (referred to as one of Richard's dotty maps) printed in the Newsletter 2017 Issue 47, you will see that it tells a recorder or an ecologist quite a lot about the overall coverage but, even if such a map was confined to a single species – as was done for the Wiltshire Flora - how much value would it be to a farmer or land manager? Without doubt any record is better than no record but there is a great deal of satisfaction to know that you are stood in the same spot, looking at the same species, as another botanist did 100 years ago. Perhaps we should think beyond the pleasurable activity of field work and try to put ourselves in the position of those who might need our records in a world where the environment is ever-changing and keeping track of trends in the vegetation could become very important.

Pat Woodruffe

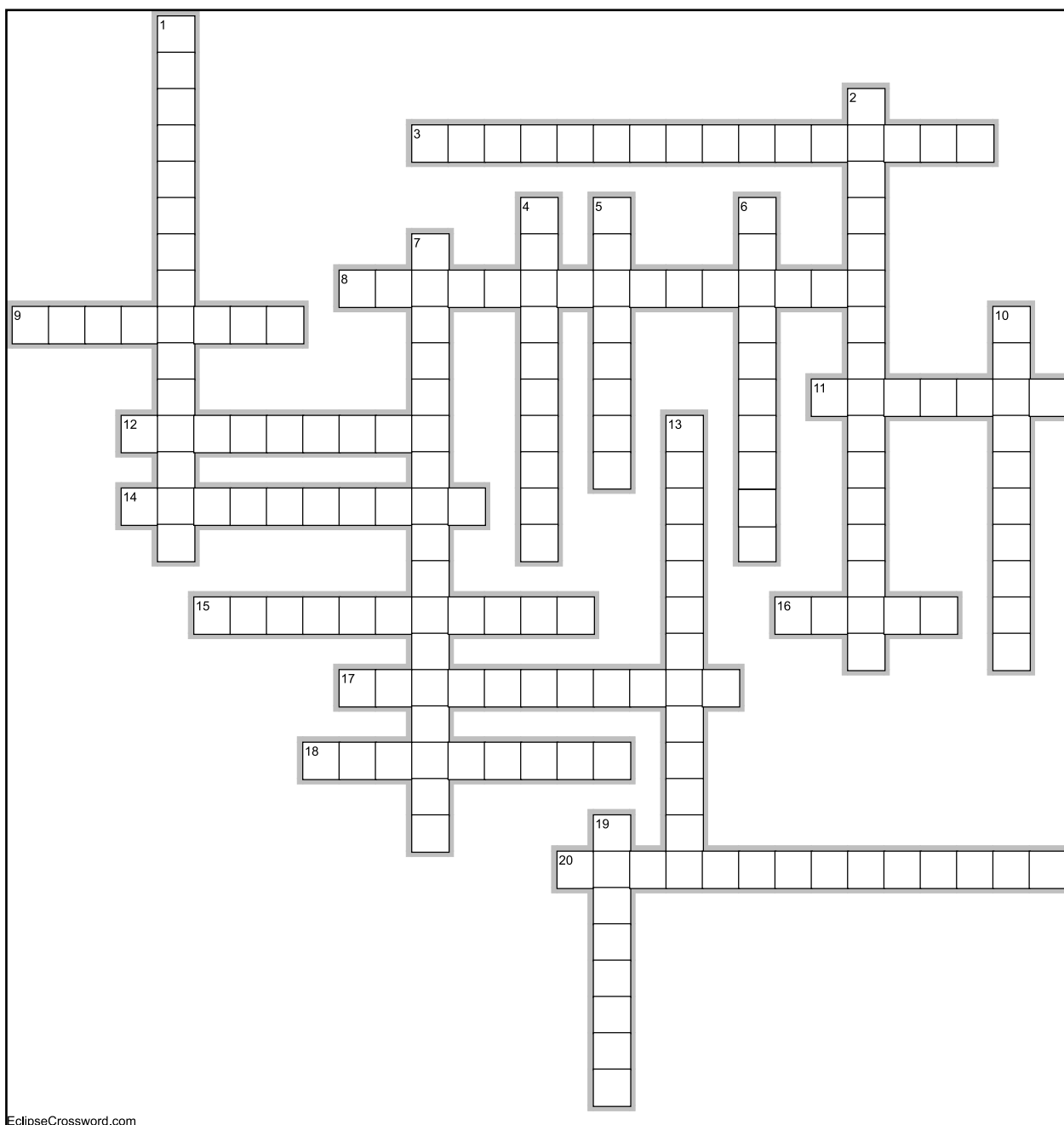
Contacts

Chair, newsletter, records
Treasurer
Plant ID queries, records
Secretary

Richard Aisbitt 01793 694680
Sue Fitzpatrick 01722 410807
Sharon Pilkington 01373 827074
Alison Robinson 01793 731947

richard@theaisbitts.co.uk
susan@fitzpatrick7.plus.com
sharon.pilkington1@btinternet.com
alisonrobinson300@gmail.com

A Botanical Crossword



EclipseCrossword.com

Across

3. This bird runs me ragged. (6,10)
8. A cordate linden. (5,6,4,)
9. This forest (?) is in a hurry. (8)
11. Round leaved or sharp leaved, they both put in the boot? (7)
12. Star-of-Bethlehem in Bath? (9)
14. Rough as a bear's ar** apparently. (6,4)
15. Plantlife's County flower for Wiltshire has gone up in flames? (5,6)
16. This nut was a type of chewing gum. (5)
17. This garnish is for my 'on the cob' dinner? (4,7)
18. The Dwarf from Portland was very Petty about his Cypress. (9)
20. A sedge of the woods. (5,9)

Down

1. Wordsworth rambled on about these imposters. (15)
2. We seek him here, we seek him there? (7,9)
4. "Parle Mummy?" (anag.) We need to speak about the sour bread. (10)
5. This tree is all that's left after a fire? (8)
6. Veronica is often found in the Churchyard. (10)
7. Arachnid in spring flower show. (5,6,6)
10. WBS logo flower. (10)
13. This grass grows greener on the other side, year after year. (6,7)
19. Pliny the Elder? (8)

Answers in the next issue.