FUNGI WALK at WIDDENTON PARK WOOD on Sunday October 27th 2019

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After a week of pretty miserable weather we were lucky today with wall to wall sunshine though a distinct chill in the air. Our sizeable group, eventually over 30 with an encouraging number of new faces, were looking forward to plentiful fungi today: at last fruiting is properly underway in this area of the county - better late than never! Within a few seconds of entering the wood – one not previously visited by the group – I was kept busy scribbling as a seemingly endless flow of people with specimens approached either Derek or myself for identification. This site, part of the massive Dashwood Estate, has SSSI status on account of the interesting plants found here, it apparently being an area of acidic soil and having some natural springs providing somewhat unusual conditions for the Chilterns - a predominantly calcareous area. There was a good mix of tree species including some Larch and conifer, this reflected in our species list though we were able to cover only a small part of the woodland area due to (a) moving at a snail's pace owing to the numbers of fungi found and (b) the few paths and surfeit of brambles with no obvious circular route that we could find. (None of us knew the wood so it was a case of the blind leading the blind.)

As is often the case when we have a large number of attendees I found no time for taking photos so have only a very few taken on the day by others to share with you. The first of these was of two extremely large mushrooms which were found early on and which we recognised in the field as a species of *Melanoleuca* (Cavalier). Derek took a small part of one cap home with him to examine and identified this as ***Melanoleuca grammopodia*** (Grooved Cavalier) – the common name referring to the longditudinal striations visible on the stem.

Above, two views of the splendid specimens of *Melanoleuca grammopodia* found today. (DJS)

Our lengthy list of just over 90 species includes no less than 17 species of *Mycena* (Bonnet) with many examples found growing on fallen wood. It was good to be able to show people three species we can identify in the field because of their coloured 'juice' which exudes from their stems when picked, unique to each species. ***Mycena galopus*** (Milking Bonnet) has white juice in the stem but otherwise looks extremely like many other litter-inhabiting Bonnets. ***Mycena haematopus*** (Burgundydrop Bonnet) grows clustered on fallen deciduous branches and as well as its telltale vinaceous juice often has a pinkish brown cap. ***Mycena crocata*** (Saffrondrop Bonnet) also grows on fallen wood, particularly Beech, and can have a dark or pale brown, even white cap but the give-away clue to its identity is the bright orange stem which once damaged by picking tends to spread and 'bleed', often colouring both the gills and cap with orange streaking.

Left, *Mycena crocata* showing nicely in a sunny patch today. We actually have two fungi for the price of one here because if you look closely at the piece of wood at the foot of the *Mycena* stems you can see the thick black 'bootlaces' of a species of *Armillaria* (Honey Fungus) – probably *Armillaria gallica* (Bulbous Honey Fungus) which was producing fruit bodies nearby. This genus is notable for its tough black sizeable mycelial strands which can quite often be found creeping over wood in search of a new host tree or shrub on which to grow and possibly inflict serious damage (though it is thought to be only one species in the genus, *Armillaria mellia*, which causes such damage. Not one you want to find growing in your garden! (NF)

One more species of *Mycena* to share with you: under the conifers Jenny found two very small fruit bodies growing amongst cones and litter. Notable for its pretty pink caps, this was ***Mycena adonis*** (Scarlet Bonnet), one that can sometimes be really bright red in both the cap and stem but, as here, can also be less startling in colour. We have just four other county sites where this species has been recorded.

Right, *Mycena adonis* in its pink form found today amongst conifer litter. The photo was taken later at home. (DJS)

For those attendees who were new to many of the things we saw today it was good to be able to introduce them to one of our most dangerous but quite common woodland species. A pristine specimen of ***Amanita phalloides*** (Deathcap) served to demonstrated all the key features of this innocuous-looking mushroom, just a quarter of a cap of which would kill you in a few days if not treated at A&E within hours of consumption. A little later on several examples of ***Amanita citrina*** (False Deathcap) turned up, it being equally useful to be able to note the differences between these two sometimes surprisingly similar species, in particular the distinct smell of potato peelings of the False Deathcap compared to the somewhat sickly almost honeylike smell of the genuine article. (It goes without saying that no-one should think of eating any mushroom looking remotely like an *Amanita*: though some species in the genus are in fact edible the chance of error is certainly not a risk worth taking.) If you'd like to become more familiar with the appearance of these or indeed any other mushrooms, try clicking on Images and Googling the Latin name for a good range of photos. Please bear in mind, however, that - as with many things on the web - there are going to be some errors with species having been misnamed!

Our list today does at least contain a few examples of the normally common mycorrhizal woodland genera which have been notably conspicuous by their scarcity, even absence, so far this autumn in our area. We found representatives of four different genera of Boletes (confusingly

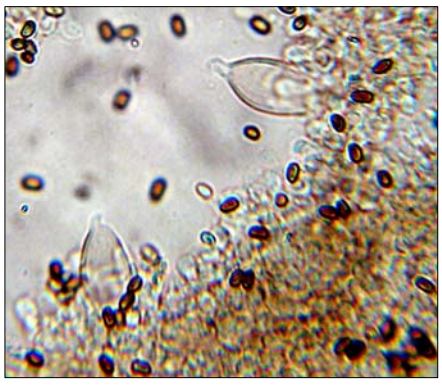
none of them now residing in the genus *Boletus*: *Imleria, Leccinum, Suillus* and *Xerocomellus* though ***Imleria badia*** and ***Xerocomellus pruinatus*** are likely still to be named as *Boletus* in most field guides). As well as *Amanita,* it was good to see examples of other mycorrhizal genera such as *Lactarius* (Milkcaps), *Russula* (Brittlegills), *Tricholoma* (Knights) and *Inocybe* (Fibrecaps), though only one species of *Cortinarius* (Webcap) was namable. This was ***Cortinarius torvus*** (Stocking Webcap), so called because its stem appears to have (with a bit of imagination) long socks on! The day after our walk, when in Burnham Beeches, I saw many collections of this attractive fungus showing this feature well.

Left, *Cortinarius torvus*, a species we saw today but here fruiting at Burnham Beeches the following day. (PC)

We have only a few brackets on our list but one small species is particularly notable because though considered quite rare it seems to be becoming much more common and we've seen it on several of our walks this year. ***Plicatura crispa*** (Crimped Gill) grows on dead branches of various deciduous trees and forms colonies of small yellowish brown brackets at first glance somewhat similar to the very common *Stereum hirsutum* (Hairy Curtain Crust). When collected it is clearly different, being much softer in texture and, more importantly, having an underside which is whitish and ribbed, almost gill-like as opposed to the smooth ochre undersurface of the *Stereum*. Both here and at Burnham Beeches recently it was growing on fallen Birch.

Right, a colony of *Plicatura crispa* fruiting today on fallen Birch, the insert showing its typical wrinkled surface underneath. (NF)

Neil, who also found the *Plicatura*, handed me a dark reddish brown mushroom, one of a cluster on fallen wood, which I didn't recognise and took home to work on. This keyed out to ***Psathyrella laevissima*** (Slender Stump Brittlestem), a species not often recorded and very similar to the much more common *P. piluliformis* but with distinctive microscopic characters. We have just one previous county record though I suspect it is not that rare but just not often recognised.



Left, the unusual pleurocystidia (cells found on the flat gill surface) with a small spike on the tip which are typical of *Psathyrella laevissima*, a rather non-descript brown mushroom. The image shows the cells magnified by x 400. (PC)

See the detailed list for more information on what we found. Many thanks for coming, everyone. Thanks also to Neil Fletcher and Derek Schafer for their photos.