

The Hollies, Soulton Road, Wem 17/8/24

Organisers: Lizzie Beare and Liz Wilson

Climate change has altered weather patterns so much in the last few years, warmer winters, wetter springs and unpredictable summers that one wonders what each day will bring. Luckily it was dry, although overcast for our visit to The Hollies. Peter Aspin who has worked this farm for some 40 years practises silvopastoral agroforestry which is a system of land-use whereby trees, perennial ground cover crops and cattle are produced on the same piece of land. He regards his organic farm as an experiment to try to find a better way to farm in the light of the changing climate. In 2023 when we had heat-waves farmers were unable to graze their animals outdoors by day as the traditional fields had little or no shade. Peter's solution divides his land into 20 metre wide "alleys" divided by lines of trees running north to south. This not only provides shade for the cattle but creates air flows which cool the temperature of the grazing alleys. Trees are chosen from a huge variety of native and foreign species but mainly small-leaved to provide light shade without inhibiting the growth of grazing beneath, this is further achieved by removing the lower branches as they grow. The trunks are protected by electric fencing placed in such a way that the overhanging branches are grazed by cattle enhancing their diet. The animals are moved frequently to avoid poaching of the land, to allow the land to rest and recover, to give them a variety of different trees to browse and of course to manure the ground. Wherever they are on the land they have access via electric fenced pathways to a central point for water and indoor shelter. Among the many trees being trialled: for their nut and seed-bearing qualities are different varieties of Walnuts, Hazels and Pines; Chinese Yellow Wood, Siberian Elm and Hickory for their timber qualities and Monkey Puzzle – for its remarkable wind resistance. The cattle particularly like to browse the Robinia.

In the microwood which is kept dynamic by regular pruning or coppicing we saw amongst others Alder Buckthorn which hosts the Brimstone butterfly caterpillar, Indian Bean Tree and a small Foxglove tree which had the most enormous leaves. It can grow into a tall branched tree bearing the foxglove-like flowers in spring or be coppiced for extra large leaves at expense of flowers. The forest garden was full of nut and fruit-bearing trees like Walnuts, Hazels and Figs under-planted with redcurrants, blackcurrants and raspberries. Where the fruit bushes received more sun they fruited at the more usual times but where they were under the shade of trees the fruit matured more slowly and was very sweet, even the redcurrants. The added advantage of growing fruit this way is that the birds are wary of foraging under trees for fear of predators from above. Perhaps the most astonishing specimen was a Sichuan Pepper tree loaded with fruit.

As well as the above there is a more traditional orchard with some fine apples plums and pears, a bonsai garden where we ate our picnic lunch amongst the small trees or seated in one of the wooden structures. Peter obviously has a great affinity with trees and an enviable talent for growing and nurturing them. It was a fascinating and thought-provoking day. Afterwards we had a very good tea, with freshly made sandwiches, scones with jam and butter and two choices of cake and plenty of tea constantly refreshed by the attentive staff at the Wem Town Hall.

Report by Lizzie Beare