

Montgomeryshire Canal and Berriew Walks, 22/09/24
Organisers: Maureen Preen, Debbie Freeman, Philippa Young



Inspired by David Perrot's booklet *Walks in and around Welshpool and Newtown*, I chose the Berriew walk for our September field trip. This gave the more adventurous members a chance to go through the village, up fields, down lanes and tracks towards Brithdir, while others walked the Montgomery Canal towpath, hoping that we might meet at the Brithdir Nature Reserve.

So, on crossing the Berriew aquaduct, the first bird to be listed was a Little Egret, and looking down into the River Rhiw, where the map describes 'ford', I note that *John Denton's Towpath Guide* calls the feature 'paved riverbed to minimise damage by scour'.



At Brithdir aqueduct, we admired a contorted ancient willow with a creeper winding up through the branches, which no one could identify in the field. John Denton describes the cast iron handrail as 'stout enough to deter a horse from going over, and with a middle rail to prevent smaller animals from falling though'. We admired wreathes of Black Briony berries, looked at the remains of a Motte & Bailey, and met up with the top-walking group at the Nature Reserve, noting how well-kept it is, with heaps of the awfully invasive Water Soldier having been dragged out onto the bank. Where Alder trees had been thinned, the bright orange wood shone out. I know it to be a great natural dye, but learned from a fellow member that it is used for clogmaking, because it is so easy to carve, being a soft wood.

The 'top-walking' group were rewarded by misty views across the rainy valley. Then over a crest we spied a mixed flock of housemartins and swallows swooping around mature oak trees and above hedgerows. More than fifty birds were gathering before migration (retrospectively counted on a photo). Higher up, we debated the identification of a large bird of prey - buzzard or something more exotic? - but distance and treetops prevented any certainty. Crossing the stream at Brithdir, we also found alder. Small bushes had their leaves turned to lace, the meal of many alder beetles (*Agelastica alni*).



At the Horseshoe Inn, where horses used for towing the canal boats were changed, were a warehouse & smithy in 1885. The *Towpath Guide* refers to the most intact remains today being the lime kilns 'not only preserved, but incorporating a BBQ and bar in their structure'. This was written in 1984, and even those modern innovations are no longer to be seen.

With two groups now heading back to Berriew along the towpath, Philippa up ahead texted about birds she spotted. 'Look out for cormorant - or shag'. We saw it and were able to say this was a cormorant, as shags don't go far inland. A 'white throat' was another of her messages and this confirmed the identification.

Everyone reconvened at the Talbot Inn for a tea which was much praised by members. Certainly the Inn was busy, so the locals agreed.

This walk introduced several members to an area they did not know, and some were revisiting after many years, thus making the planning and recce'ing all worthwhile.