

THE FERNS OF TURVEY

Considering that we are more east than west, and are, therefore, relatively dry - (believe it or not), we have a surprising number of ferns in and around Turvey. This is largely due to our being on the oolitic limestone belt which stretches from Dorset all the way up to Yorkshire. I have found eight species so far of the eleven or so which could be found in this part of Bedfordshire, with five of these actually occurring in the village itself. Of these, four occur on our walls, either on the limestone or in the mortar between bricks and the other at the base of a wall. The most obvious of these is perhaps Polypody which is common on the tops of many of Turvey's limestone walls, and in good condition - even now in March with rows of brown sori or spore cases on the undersides. It was interesting to note that during a recent hard frost the fronds of this fern curled right over lengthwise to bring the sori uppermost. Often accompanying Polypody is a much darker and less obvious fern called Wall-rue. This has small wedge-shaped leaflets and sori which are long and thin and often clustered together. It was once used as a remedy for rickets.

Less common but easily distinguished because the fronds are long and usually undivided, with sori long and thin in opposite pairs, is the Hartstongue Fern. We have this in our garden and there's a fine display of it on the north-facing entrance to the tunnel on the far side of Abbey park. Most of our ferns are similarly to be found on north or east facing surfaces where there is less chance of them becoming too dry. This is true for a beautiful little fern called Maidenhair Spleenwort growing on one of the Abbey walls, but less true for a near relative, the Black Spleenwort, which can be found on both north and south facing walls nearby. The former has a very distinctive configuration with rows of small leaflets opposite one another along thin, shiny black stalks. The latter, in contrast, could easily be confused, at a quick glance, with the basal leaves of other plants, such as Feverfew, which also grow on mortar, but a look on the underside should reveal the characteristic long dark spore cases.

The fern which grows at the base of a wall in the monks' monastery is appropriately enough the Male Fern. This is a much larger species than all those mentioned so far with fronds up to 90cm in length, which are broadest in the middle, and brown scales along the stalks. The rarest fern found to date, and the inspiration for this article is the Rustyback fern which only occurs in some half-a-dozen places in Bedfordshire, one of which is nearby and again on a wall. The undersides of the leaves are covered in scales which eventually become rusty-brown, hence its name. The last fern in my list is Bracken which occurs in the woods on the boulder clay to the north of Turvey but not, as far as I know, near the village itself. This is the fern which gives us bishops' croziers in spring and golden-brown, and some would say carcinogenic, vistas in autumn.

So. Look after those walls for they not only support a fine selection of ferns but a host of other living things too - not least being a great diversity of snails and their attendant Song Thrushes.

Br. John



The Snail.