

# Cowgate Cemetery November 2024

Deborah Gasking

*Following in the same theme as in the previous newsletter but focussing on plant life.*

## **Wild Clematis or *clematis vitalba***

Commonly known as 'old man's beard', and the lesser 'traveller's joy'.

This woody member of the buttercup family is often seen scrambling over hedgerows. Its seed clusters have a feathered appearance and are white-grey in colour. They are called achenes. It is the fruit which gives the plant its apt name: 'old man's beard'.

It is native to the south of England but has spread to most areas of the UK, except northern Scotland. This scrambling plant it is often found growing on top of hedgerows, bushes, scrub or trees; and favours chalky soil.

Traveller's Joy is considered an invasive weed and can form dense thickets blanketing trees and shrubs.

The flowers of this plant are visited by pollinating insects during the day, such as bees and hoverflies. Traveller's Joy is also a food plant for several moth species. Its seedheads also provide a food source for birds, such as goldfinches.



*Clematis Vitalba, old man's beard or traveller's joy*

Traveller's Joy has been used in various treatments as it is said to contain anti-inflammatory properties. Traditional recipes have used the plant to treat various ailments, including skin irritations and stress.

As this species is a woody plant, the stem was used in the past to make baskets. It is called Traveller's Joy because it adorns hedges and banks in the countryside with billows of beautiful feathery seed heads in the grey months leading up to Christmas.

## **Mythology and folklore**

The Latin Clematis is thought to derive from the Greek word for shoot, as it is a climbing plant. It was also suggested that Traveller's Joy did the devil's work as it would kill other plants by out-competing them. This is why it is viewed as an intrusive weed by many.

## **Hart's Tongue Fern or *asplenium scolopendrium***

Is named after the frond's similarity in shape to a deer's tongue.

This is the only native fern that hasn't got divided leaves. Spot it in damp, shady areas of woodland. Hart's Tongue fern is an evergreen with rosettes of leathery leaves. It can grow in large drifts among rocks and beneath trees and is widespread in UK woodlands.

The fronds are deep green, arching, strap-like glossy fronds with slightly wavy edges and a pointed tip, erect and up to 50cm long. The fronds aren't divided like most other ferns. Young specimens have a scaly rachis (stem) which is not usually visible on older, taller plants. It grows from rhizomes,



*Hart's Tongue Fern or asplenium scolopendrium*

branching, short and ascending, lying partly above and partly below the surface of the soil. Sora (where spores are stored) lie on the underside of the leaf in horizontal stripes. Spores are ripe around July to August.

Hart's Tongue fern is widespread in the UK, except in the far North. It's often featured on ancient-woodland-indicator plant lists as a species which can help identify old woodlands and ecological continuity. It avoids the most acidic substrates.

Not only is this plant exotic looking, but it is also incredibly useful. The fronds contain compounds that are used in medicines and cosmetics. Its uses range from astringents and cough medicines to treatment of high blood pressure and for healing wounds. Other medicinal uses include treatments for dysentery, diarrhoea and digestive problems.

It is grown as an ornamental plant and as ground cover in woodland shade.

### **Ragwort or *senecio jacobaea***

This is a native biennial which is a food source for a wide range of insects. It is not usually a significant problem in gardens, but its poisonous qualities can make it a serious weed of paddocks and gardens backing onto fields grazed by horses or cattle. It is found

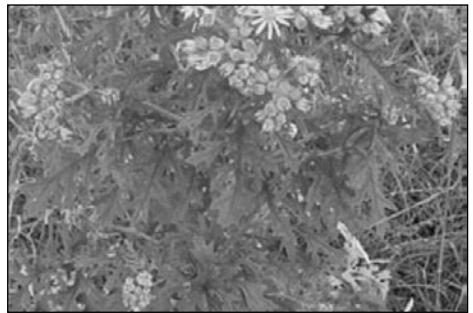
throughout the British Isles in grassland, verges, waste land and neglected or over-grazed pastures.

Ragworts are poisonous weeds. Their seeds are spread by wind and a single plant is capable of producing 50 – 60,000 seeds. It can become a major weed of waste or other uncultivated ground.

Ragwort is a tall erect plant growing to 90cm (3ft), bearing large flat-topped clusters of yellow daisy-like flowers from July to October. It has finely divided leaves with a basal rosette of deeply-cut, toothed leaves. The plant is usually a biennial but damage to the base of the plant can make the plant behave like a perennial (living indefinitely), as new rosettes are formed.

Ragwort is rarely a problem in gardens but may occur in pony paddocks, railway embankments and areas of unimproved pasture. Cattle and horses are particularly susceptible to poisoning.

Ragwort is covered by the Weeds Act 1959 (which specifies five injurious weeds including common ragwort) and the Ragwort Control Act 2003. For guidance, on good practice and the legal framework for land managers, consult the Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Ragwort.



*Ragwort or senecio jacobaea*