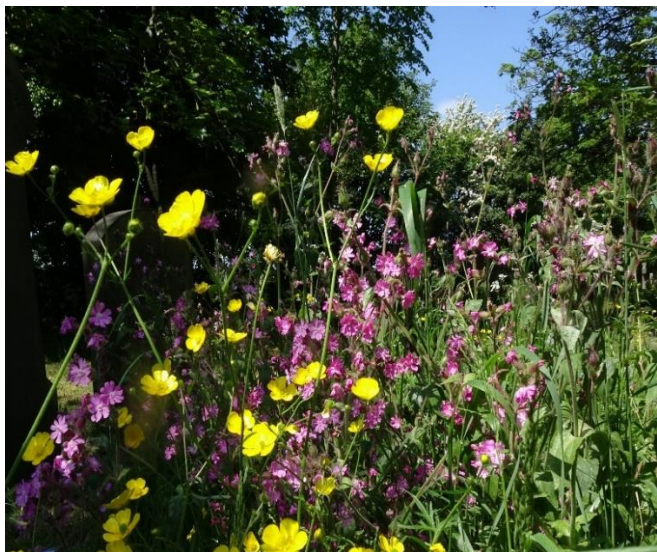


## St Matthew's Churchyard, Lightcliffe

### Wildlife snapshot May/June 2023



May saw an abundance of buttercups, red campion, cow parsley and hawthorn blossom lighting up the churchyard.



The focus of this report is on two rather unglamorous species which nevertheless form an important part of the food chain and attract more beautiful creatures.

First of all, **grasses**. Two of the most abundant grasses in May/June in the lower part of the churchyard are Cocksfoot and Meadow foxtail. Areas of long grass are important for insects and small mammals so our uncut meadow is providing important habitat and food.



The photo on the left shows the **Meadow foxtail** grass (*Alopecurus pratensis*). It is one of the first grasses to flower in spring with tall, graceful, cylindrical flower heads which look like a fox's brush. I also inadvertently photographed a **Lacewing** (*Chrysoperia carnea*) on the lower right of the grass head! More on this insect later.

The photo on the right shows **Cocksfoot** grass (*Dactylis glomerata*). This common grass is important for wildlife: the caterpillars of butterflies such as Speckled Wood, Gatekeeper and Meadow Brown use it as a food plant, the seeds are eaten by finches, honeybees take its pollen, bumblebees build their nests amongst the long stalks and mice and voles take advantage of the cover, nesting in holes at ground level.



The second unglamorous species is the **Aphid!**



**Woolly beech aphid** (*Phyllaphis fagi*)



**Sycamore aphid** (*Drepanosiphum platanoidis*)

In May, the undersides of the large beech tree were decorated with white fluff secreted by **Woolly beech aphids** to protect themselves. Sycamore trees can support millions of aphids which are an important part of the food chain, eaten by many predators such as lacewing and hoverfly larvae, ladybirds, other beetles and spiders. Aphids secrete honeydew, which makes leaves (and, annoyingly, cars!) very sticky. This sweet liquid is food for other insects such as butterflies, including speckled woods and hoverflies. Interestingly, **Sycamore aphids** like their personal space and actively ensure their legs and antennae do not touch another aphid! See photo above. Check this out next time you are passing under a Sycamore tree!

## Species that rely on tall grasses and aphids.

Here are some of the creatures that are about in the churchyard at the moment:



**Speckled wood** (*Parage aegeria*). These butterflies prefer tall grasses in shady areas with sunlit glades. Females only mate once in their lifetime so they are very choosy! Males, on the other hand, mate several times and fiercely defend their territories. When a rival male appears, a battle ensues with the two males

spiralling round each other - you can see this happening now in the churchyard. The warmer the male, the longer it can endure in the battle and therefore the more likely it is to win, so a male will spend time basking in the sun to ensure it is in peak condition. Speckled wood butterflies feed on aphid honeydew.



**Ladybirds** (this one landed on my finger!) and their alien-like larvae both feed on aphids.

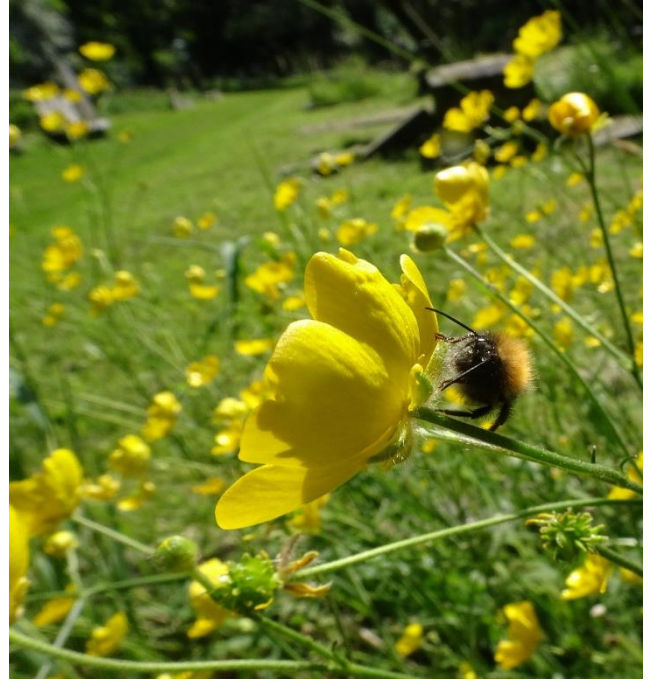


**Lacewing** (*Chrysoperia carnea*). Photo by Graham Calow

The **Lacewing** is also a fantastic insect for aphid control. These delicate insects have an intricate, lacy pattern of veins in their translucent wings. Their larvae are also voracious predators of aphids. Both the adults and larvae suck the juices out of the aphids and in some species, the larvae then stick the dried-out skins onto their own backs to act as camouflage!

Bees and hoverflies have been enjoying the swathes of tall buttercups

On the left, a **Whitetailed bumblebee** approaching a buttercup in the uncut section of the churchyard and on the right a **Tree bumblebee**



This is a female **Marmalade hoverfly**. (*Episyrphus balteatus*) They are one of the few hoverflies that have been given a common name due to the orange colouring. They have two black moustache-like patterns on their abdomen which are unique to this species. They mimic wasps in order to ward off predators but they are harmless insects that only ingest nectar. They have short tongues and feed on a variety of open flowers and the honeydew produced by the aphids. However, whilst the adult hoverflies are harmless, their larvae devour aphids: a single larva can eat up to 300 per day - truly a gardener's friend! Apparently, females can smell aphid colonies and deliberately lay their eggs in the middle of the colony.

**Marjorie Middleton June 2023**