



Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland  
Annual Exhibition Meeting 2020

Botany for the Visually Impaired

## AN EXPERIENCE OF NATURE FOR THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED



Collecting

Exploring Woodland

Touch



Feel

Smell

Sensing

This is a local project to help connect visually impaired people with nature.

This project is funded by The Heritage Lottery Fund and formulated by the Tees Valley Wildlife Trust.

Participating individuals have:

- Retinitis Pigmentosa
- Diabetic Retinopathy
- Stroke
- Macular Degeneration
- Glaucoma
- Cataract

Falgunee Sarker



### Sensing the Wild Podcast Links

Thanks to Leigh Nicholson from GFI and Louise Marsh from the BSBI for providing these links

TunedIn. <https://tunein.com/podcasts/Health--Wellness-Podcasts/Sensing-The-Wild-p1330669/>

Google. <https://podcasts.google.com/?feed=aHR0cHM6Ly9hbmNob3UzMm0vcy8xZThjMmI0OC9wb2RjYXN0L3Jzcw%3D%3D>

Breaker. <https://www.breaker.audio/sensing-the-wild>

Spotify. <https://open.spotify.com/show/5FT8314nAXu48ZoM5gEx4T>

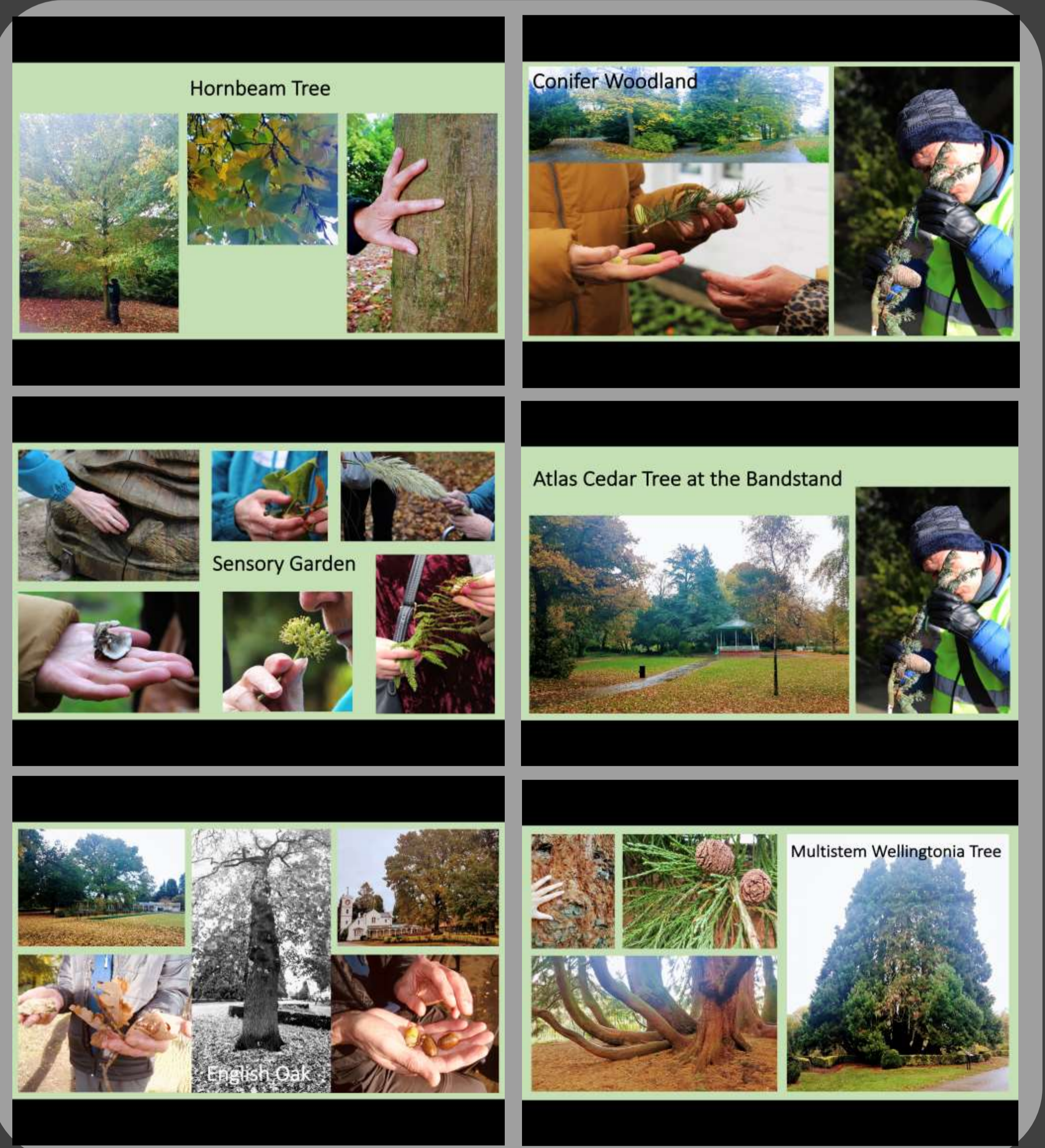
Google Alexa speaker:- Say the following words..... "Alexa play Sensing the Wild podcast"

PocketCasts. <https://pca.st/681mj9n9>

Anchor. <http://anchor.fm/toffee DOE>

Apple podcasts. <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/sensing-the-wild/id1517312777>

BSBI Blogspot. <https://bsbipublicity.blogspot.com/2020/06/a-virtual-walk-through-trees.html>



Hornbeam Tree

Conifer Woodland

Atlas Cedar Tree at the Bandstand

Multistem Wellingtonia Tree

Sensory Garden

English Oak

This talk is about the work I have been involved in, helping the visually impaired to appreciate botany. It aims to start a discussion about:-

- I. How we can help, make the natural world, more accessible to the visually impaired.
- II. What we can do as BSBI members, to make, the study of botany and fieldwork more accessible, to those with visual impairment, and other disabilities.

The Sensing the Wild project was helped by the Tees Valley Wildlife Trust, working with a social enterprise organisation, called Going for Independence, to connect blind and partially sighted people with nature. It was funded by, the Heritage National Lottery Fund.

We, take nature for granted, but visually impaired people cannot. Some, due to primary sight loss at birth, have never seen the flora that we know and love. Others may feel they have, lost the ability to enjoy it, after suffering from acquired visual impairment, later in life. We took, a group of visually impaired people, out for a guided walk, with some one-to-one support. Training was given, showing us how to make the wild spaces more accessible, and how to assist a blind, or partially sighted person. We explored the local parks and woodlands, touching and feeling the texture of, and smelling leaves, trees, bark, seeds, cones and wild flowers, each with their unique perfume. Also listening, to the different sounds made by each tree, as the leaves changed, and fell. Samples were collected as a take home memory.

I hope that my words today, have inspired each of you, to go away and think about, how you can make your own niche in botany accessible to people with a disability, including sensory loss.

Botany is for everyone - so there is no reason why, the visually impaired cannot identify plants, trees and flowers, as well as get pleasure and fulfilment from this. We, as members of the BSBI, owe it to the general public, with or without disability, to make our specialist area of study accessible to others. In fact, working with the visually impaired, has taught me a lot. They have forced me to consider, many aspects of sensory identification, such as the smell of similar, but distinctly different species, and of course the visually impaired are much more tuned in, to using their other senses, more effectively, than we do.

Consider, the simple example, of selecting species for, an educational, biodiversity garden.

To teach the visually impaired to identify dandelions, I would choose, three distinctly different dandelions for them to start with. Ideally they would feel and smell different, with different leaves, stems and flowers. These core principles, could apply to, any other, native, wild plant, species.

To enable, independent access to the educational garden, the path would require touch sensitive way markers, to find botanical specimens, without assistance. This is similar to the way that stair railings are marked, so the last three steps, are clearly indicated.

I might create a dedicated audible training guide for my selected three plant species, which can be heard on a mobile phone app, or carried, as a lanyard mounted audio guide. Our BSBI members, could add to these, creating a library of audible resources.

### Educational and Inclusivity Buddy Systems

Educational and inclusivity buddy systems might need to be established, to encourage the visually impaired to take part in field work and access educational programs.

Talking guides and mobile phone apps would all help.

We might also have to consult with others, such as the Royal National Institute for the Blind, to find out the best forums to publicise this accessibility work.

We will also need to access training ourselves to ensure that we know how to help the visually impaired to learn safely.



The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) could work with the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB), to make these changes to their existing gardens and consider visually impaired people, including the use of Braille, when planting new areas.

The BSBI can signal how suitable its outdoor events are, for people who have difficulty in walking on steep paths or uneven ground. They can also look at suitable accessibility adjustments at indoor events, such as hearing loops, wheelchair use and provision for guide dogs.



There are so many things we can do to make botany accessible for everyone

However, the most important thing is we have to want to do it!

Botany can be for Everyone  
Let us work together to make it more accessible for the visually impaired.

