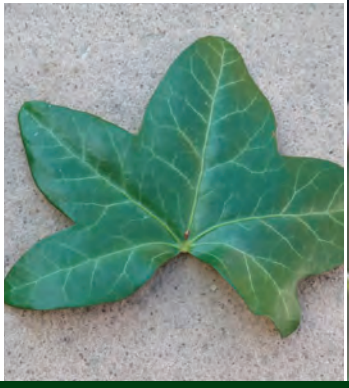
MIDDLETON HALL

RETIREMENT VILLAGE



# A GUIDE TO PLANT LIFE ON THE WALKS FOR ALL

## WINTER

MIDDLETON HALL
RETIREMENT VILLAGE

This booklet accompanies the Middleton Hall 'Walks for All' guide that is available from reception. It highlights the many unusual and noteworthy plants along the routes.

It is likely that the only walk used by most people in the winter will be the Red Walk ■ of half a mile.

Starting from Reception even if you have been on the walk previously you may wish to renew your acquaintance with the three, white trunked **Birch trees**. These are grouped a little to your left and on each trunk you will find narrow, horizontal marks which are the breathing pores of the tree.

On the opposite side of the road from the birches and to the right of the car park is a **Beech tree**. Its tangle of branches caused by either fungal damage or poor pruning is most easily seen in Autumn and Winter when the tree has shed most of its leaves. There may be a few dead leaves clinging to the lower branches.

**Breathing pores on Birch bark**

1

Please notice their colour as you will meet more young beeches en route.

Return to the main walk to proceed to Location 2.

If you pause opposite the patio doors to Middleton Grove's Reading Room and look at the lowest of the cast iron railings you will see the next plant. It is a yellow **lichen**, a non flowering plant.

Once you can recognise it you will find it everywhere: on old walls, tree branches and old roofs, including Middleton Hall's.

Continue walking to Location 2

Yellow lichen

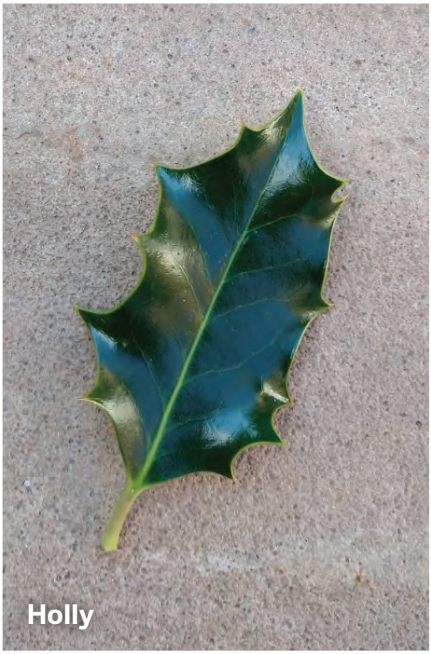
Bright green rosettes of **Primrose** leaves are visible over a large area and should produce an abundant show of flowers in the spring. These plants have greatly increased in number since the lower tree branches were removed in 2019 providing more light to plants at ground level.

Rosettes of Primrose leaves

You will find conkers from the **Horse Chestnut trees.** These are taken by squirrels and/ or taken by grandparents for grandchildren.

On your right, opposite the small light on the path and before you walk around the corner are three **Cherry trees** with silver grey bark. Looking closely at the bark you can see similar horizontal lines of breathing pores that you saw on the white birch trees.

2



Holly

A little further on your right is a clump of **Holly.**

The leaves below and at eye level are typical, dark green, prickly, holly leaves each with a wavy edge. If you look up two or three times your height, or if you walk to the far end of the clump of bushes and examine the leaves there, you will find they have very few prickles or none at all. Also the margin of each leaf is straight, not wavy. Holly produces prickly leaves when it first starts to grow as a sapling *and* as a defence mechanism if it is cut or grazed by animals such as deer. At Middleton Hall the gardeners cut back the branches to prevent them invading the path. Where a mature bush is undamaged it tends to produce simple leaves without prickles which don't look like holly leaves at all.

The next point of interest comes on the right before the big bend in the path. Around here are **three, young, Beech trees** recognisable by the fact that they still retain most of their copper coloured leaves.

It is a characteristic of both beech and hornbeam that when young or kept pruned, they retain their dead leaves throughout the winter. This makes them excellent plants for hedging as they give privacy and interest all year round. Beech has been used as hedging at Middleton Oaks and hornbeam has been planted at The Waterside.

## 3

As you continue the walk between points 3 and 4 the trunks of many of the trees have **Ivy** climbing up them. By observing the ivy leaves you will find that each leaf has between 3 and 5 lobes. These are the leaves of the ivy in its juvenile (or non-reproductive) stage.

Ivy

Approaching the Delivery Drive you can see an ivy plant on your left before crossing the Drive and another immediately you have crossed. The latter is possibly the easier plant to examine.

Like holly, ivy bears two types of leaves. The shape of the ivy leaf alters as the plant matures. Positioned away from the main part of the plant are branches, which at this time of year, end in clusters of berries. The leaves on each cluster have only one lobe – at the tip. You may be able to trace a gradation from the 5-lobed type to the single lobed leaf. Also these mature, reproductive branches lack the clinging roots which attach an ivy plant to a tree. This enables the reproductive flowering branches to lean away from the host tree (or in this case a small brick building) so the flowers are exposed and more readily accessible to pollinating insects, which is a considerable advantage to the plant in its ability to produce seeds.

If you took this walk in spring you may remember a sentence in the notes about trees in this part of the wood having narrow trunks and therefore being younger than those behind you.

This begs the question of how you determine the age of a tree. On the right hand side near to where you are standing are two, cut tree trunks. Taking your time you could count the number of rings in each trunk. Each ring is the growth that each tree has made in one year and counting the number of rings gives an accurate measure of how old a tree is. However the rings tell us more than the tree's age as they also indicate how good or bad the growing conditions have been within a particular year. In good conditions ie warm, sunny, with plenty of water the rings are widely spaced, in reverse conditions they are more tightly packed together. By looking at the cut tree stumps can you see any years that have been particularly good and which have been poor for growth?

Estimating the age of twigs is considerably easier. The gardeners have left you a pile of twigs near the sawn tree trunks. Try choosing a fairly straight twig, hopefully with a bud at its narrower end. Looking along its length you will notice little marks running around the twig's circumference positioned a little way from the end bud. This is the growth this twig made in its final year. Now look further back to find the next group of rings for the second year – and the third and so on. What is the age of your twig?

It would be very much appreciated if you returned your twig to the pile when you have finished with it.


**Winter Heliotrope**

There is one plant that manages to flower here in the winter, its name is **Winter Heliotrope**. Between December and March it bears low growing spikes of lilac flowers which are slightly scented.

It is both intriguing and puzzling that any plant should use its energy to bloom and produce scent when temperatures are at their lowest, daylight is short and there are few insects about. Unsurprisingly, it doesn't seem to produce seeds, yet in some years it must do, otherwise how did it get here? Mainly it reproduces by underground stems which result in the plant growing together in tight clumps.

Even if the plant is not in flower it is easy to recognise by its permanent, almost circular leaves, each with a notch where the leaf stalk joins the leaf blade.

Walking on you will find **Moss** growing on each side of the path where people do not tread. As with lichen, moss is another non-flowering plant.

5

Through the gate and into the allotments you may be fortunate enough to discover the small blue and white flowers of **Common Field Speedwell** - but only if the allotment holders have not been too vigilant and removed it when weeding.

Common Field Speedwell

Only the tall remnants of **Common Reed** and bedraggled **Bulrushes** remain in the ponds.

As you make your way towards Middleton Oaks there is a mature oak tree on your left side. If there are two adults in your party see if they can JUST touch each other's fingers when encircling the trunk. If they can, the tree is roughly 150 years old. Is this tree older or younger than that?

If you wish you can return to Reception to end your walk.

Bulrush

Explore our scenic grounds and discover the fascinating variety of flora and fauna

Circular routes to suit people of all mobilities, from 0.5 to 1.75 miles in length

All walks are easy to follow, with clear way markers

There are plentiful benches and picnic areas on which to sit and appreciate the surroundings

No stiles

Please ensure dogs are kept on their leads

Dog waste bins installed at intervals around the grounds

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Many thanks to Christine Wright for researching and editing this booklet which includes images from our photography group.

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