

Spiders in St Michael's Churchyard

In May 2021 we had a visit from Francis Farr-Cox, a local expert on spiders. The aim of the visit was to demonstrate methods of surveying spiders.

The session started with a walk along the retaining wall on Church Lane with an electric toothbrush in hand. Francis was looking for cracks in the masonry that could harbour the **green fanged tubeweb** spider. The toothbrush, a very gentle electric one, was held against a number of webs in the wall to mimic the effect of prey landing in the web. No spiders emerged so we learned our first lesson. Web silk is strong and persistent and often outlives the spider. However, we did manage to tempt out one splendid specimen of a **false widow spider** on the wall by the church steps.



Using an electric toothbrush False widow spider tempted out False widow spider close up

As we went round looking for webs, a common misconception that spiders are more common in the autumn was corrected. This is not the case, and June is probably the best month to survey spiders when most species will have reached maturity. However, it is true that you may see webs more frequently in the autumn because dew makes them more visible. These autumn spiders tend to be the ones that we see in our houses and gardens, and, rather boringly, they are called **house spiders** and **garden spiders**.

The next technique for hunting for spiders is a little bit more dramatic and noisy, a battery-operated leaf sweeper that sucks debris from grass into the nozzle that has some old stocking stretched across its mouth. After switching it on and thumping the ground hard about a dozen times the contents of the stocking are emptied onto a white plastic sheet and examined carefully with a magnifier. This reveals small **money spiders**, and all sorts of small insects. It makes one realise that birds pecking on a lawn are actually are eating something when they peck away. We simply don't realise that there is so much wildlife lurking in a lawn. We sampled a number of different types of grassland, and it was clear that rough uncut grass produced more living material than close mown grass.



Modified leaf blower-sucker

Sucking up specimens

Debris under the magnifier

Francis also demonstrated other techniques for dislodging spiders and insects. Sweep nets may be used to dislodge spiders and insects from rough grassland and “bush beating” can be carried out on hedges and shrubs. With the latter method an upturned umbrella is the simplest method to catch what is dislodged. All spiders caught by these methods are examined through a magnifier. If they can't be identified in the field they are sucked up into a tube and stored for identification later.

We learned an enormous amount during this series of demonstrations and tips about how to survey spiders. There is much more to learn and we were introduced to a 500-page guide on British Spiders, which will be our bible for identification in the future. The other aspect of his visit that will be useful to us is that it will give us a head start when we organise events for children and older visitors in the future.