

Where the Rock Changes

Alpine plant communities across the calcschist and gneiss of the Vanoise and Mont Cenis



A flowering meadow below the cliffs between Val d'Isère and Tignes, 30 June.

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TOUR	Alpine Garden Society, <i>Val d'Isère & Mont Cenis</i> , with Vira Natura, led by Oli Cheney
DATES	29 June to 4 July 2026
AWARD	Merlin Trust – AGS Travel Award

Summary

From 29 June to 4 July 2026 I joined the Alpine Garden Society's tour of Val d'Isère and Mont Cenis, travelling overland by rail from Scotland. Over four field days we walked from pine woodland to a 3,000 m summit and recorded more than a hundred plants on either side of the boundary between lime-rich calcschist and acid gneiss.

The trip was to inform the redevelopment of the Rock Garden at Threave, where I am the Walled Gardener. I came home with one principle above all: to show alpine plants in the communities they actually grow in, grouped by the conditions they share, so that the planting itself does the teaching.

Acknowledgements

My first thanks go to Brian Cunningham, my former Head Gardener at Scone Palace. Brian told me about this award, encouraged me to apply and stood as one of my referees. Without his encouragement I would not have applied at all.

I am grateful to Michael Lawrie, Head Gardener and Head of School at Threave, for his reference and for his continued support of my development. My thanks also go to the Scottish Rock Garden Club. It was through the SRGC, its members and its Exploration Award to the Picos de Europa that I began to develop the skills to do this kind of fieldwork at all.

In the field, I owe a great deal to Oli Cheney of Vira Natura, who led the tour. Oli gave us his time and his years of experience in finding alpine plants, the kind of experience that only comes from spending a long time out in the mountains. I would also like to thank the rest of the group (Julia, Bethan, Rosie and Theo) for being such good company and for their infectious enthusiasm for alpine plants. Travelling with people who are equally passionate makes all the difference. Thanks, too, to Theo Grove for the photograph of me at work on the scree.

Finally, I thank the Merlin Trust and its Trustees, and the Alpine Garden Society. The Trust exists to support people at the start of their careers in horticulture and botany, and I am proud to be part of that legacy.

About me

I came to horticulture sideways. I trained as a painter, graduating in Fine Art Painting from Wimbledon College of Art in 2016, and then worked in marketing and events in London before the pull of plants won out. I took an HNC in Horticulture at SRUC Oatridge in 2022–23 while working as an Assistant Grower at The Free Company in Balerno, and then worked as a Horticultural Assistant at Scone Palace.

In March 2025 I joined the Threave School of Heritage Gardening, the National Trust for Scotland's training garden in Dumfries & Galloway, as a trainee. I am now the Walled Gardener at Threave, where I help to supervise the trainees on their weekly rotation through the area I manage and get to share my enthusiasm for plants every day. Alongside this I completed the RHS Level 3 Certificate in Horticultural Investigation with distinction, for a study of Threave's Rock Garden as a teaching environment, and I am working towards the RHS Master of Horticulture.

My specialist interest is alpine plants and their ecology. I am a member of the Scottish Rock Garden Club, and its Exploration Award took me to the Picos de Europa in June 2026, a fortnight before this tour. This was my second application to the Merlin Trust; the first, in 2024, was unsuccessful, which made this award all the more valued.



Getting down to the plants' level on the scree, 1 July. Photo: Theo Grove.

Why the Vanoise and Mont Cenis?

The Rock Garden at Threave is at the start of a redevelopment. The ambition is not only to restore its structure but to turn it into an ecologically informed, educational display of alpine and montane flora, used by the School's trainees and by visitors. To plant it with any authenticity, I needed to see

how alpine plants actually grow in their natural communities: which plants share a scree, what changes at the edge of a snowbed, and how the rock beneath decides what lives on top.

Few places teach that last lesson better than the country around Val d'Isère and Mont Cenis. Here the calcschists and limestones of the *schistes lustrés* meet bands of older, acid gneiss, and the flora changes with the rock, sometimes within a single slope. Lime-loving and lime-hating plants trade places as you walk.

The area also has a long horticultural history. In 1910, on the advice of the botanist H.S. Thompson, Reginald Farrer began his summer tour of the Alps here. He took the train from Paris to Modane, the station I would leave from at the end of my own week, and a motor up to the pass, where he stayed at the Hotel de la Poste (Avery, 2022). Of the flowers around the hotel he wrote:

For wealth of gorgeousness I have never yet seen anything to equal the display.

Farrer (1911), quoted in Avery (2022)

He described the tour in *Among the Hills* (1911), and his friend E.A. Bowles knew these passes too. Much has changed since. Mont Cenis was then in Italy, passing to France only in 1947, and the lake has since been enlarged, so that much of the plateau Farrer walked now lies under water. Two plants that carry Mont Cenis in their names, *Campanula cenisia* and *Viola cenisia*, still grow on its screes.

The AGS has run tours here for years, and our leader, Oli Cheney, first came on one of them as a Merlin himself, which made joining that line feel all the more fitting. Alpine and rock gardeners have been coming to these mountains for generations, and I had come to think of the journey as something of a rite of passage. Farrer and his contemporaries shaped so much of how we still grow alpinists that I wanted to see their plants and landscapes with my own eyes.

What I set out to do

When I applied in January 2026, I set myself four aims. The first, and the reason for going at all, was to inform the redevelopment of Threave's Rock Garden: to see alpine plants in their own communities, on scree, turf, snowbed, cliff and meadow, and to come home with ideas for what to grow, how to arrange it and how to explain it to the people who visit.

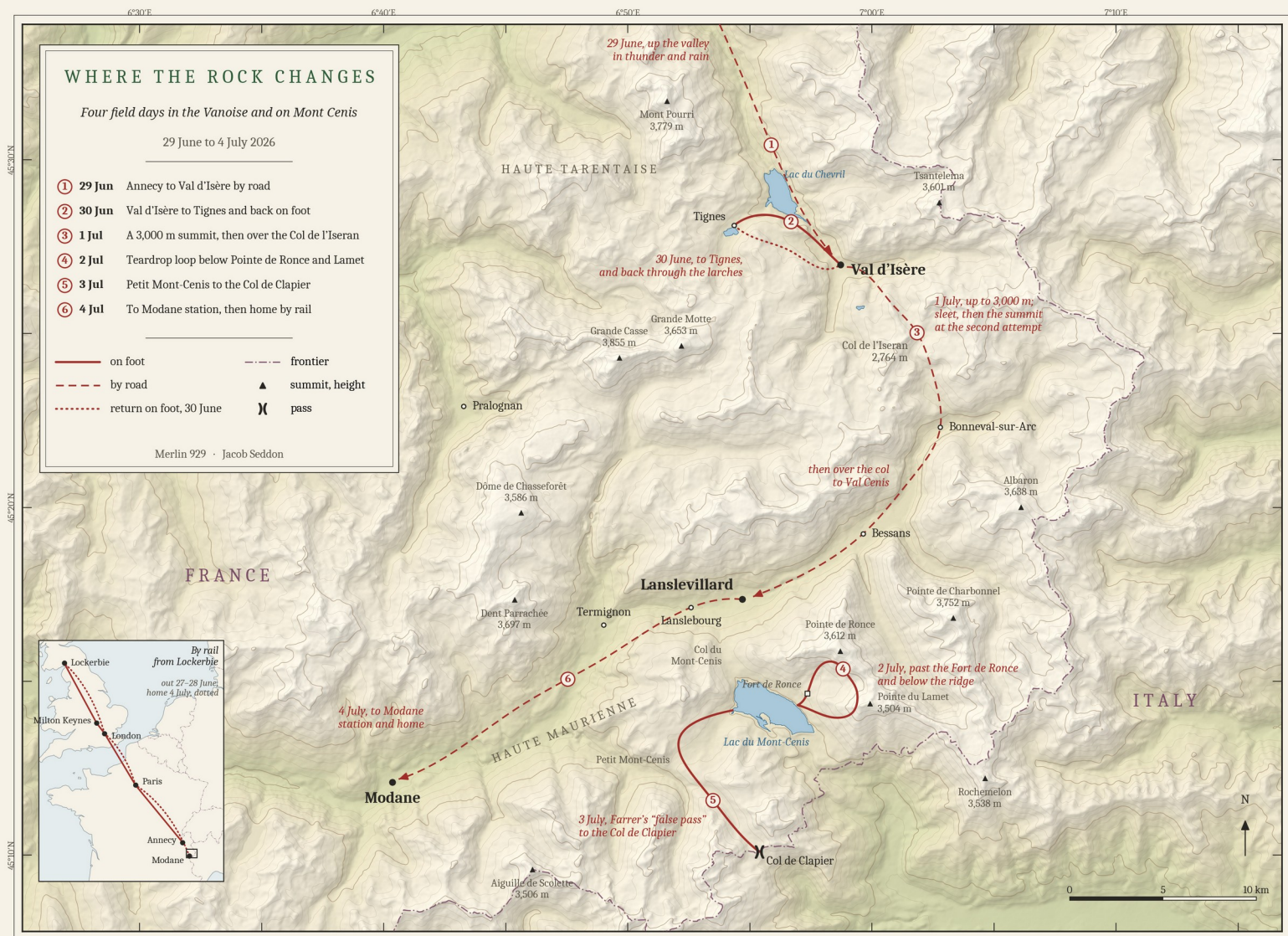
The second was to sharpen my identification and my understanding of alpine ecology, learning from an expert guide and from AGS members who had been doing this for years. I wanted to close the gap between what I knew from books and what I could actually do on a hillside.

The third was to share what I learned, through this report, through colleagues and trainees at Threave, and through talks and photographs for societies such as the SRGC. The last was more personal. I want to become a Head Gardener and to teach, and I hoped the trip would give me some of the knowledge and confidence that role demands.

The route

I travelled overland by rail in both directions. The tour itself ran from 29 June to 4 July: an arrival day, four field days based first at Val d'Isère and then at Val Cenis, and a day's travel home. The map on the following page shows the shape of each day.

DATE	DAY	ROUTE	GROUND COVERED	OVERNIGHT
27 Jun	Travel	Lockerbie to London by rail, via Milton Keynes	A stop for the Japanese Garden Society conference	London, with friends
28 Jun	Travel	London to Annecy by rail, via Paris	Eurostar and onward trains	Annecy, hostel
29 Jun	Arrival	Annecy to Val d'Isère by road	Roadside plants on the way up, in a thunderstorm	Victoria Lodge, Val d'Isère
30 Jun	Field day 1	Val d'Isère to Tignes and back on foot	Rock outcrops, pine woodland, cliffs, meadows and a late snow patch; the longest walk of the week	Victoria Lodge
1 Jul	Field day 2	A peak above Val d'Isère, then over the Col de l'Iseran to Val Cenis	Altitude transect from grazed banks to a summit at 3,000 m	Les Balcons, Lanslevillard
2 Jul	Field day 3	The Mont Cenis lake basin	Lakeside turf, scree, late snowbeds and shady limestone cliffs	Les Balcons
3 Jul	Field day 4	Petit Mont-Cenis to the Col de Clapier on the Italian border	Pasture, Farrer's 'false pass', turf to the col at 2,477 m, lakeside meadows	Les Balcons
4 Jul	Travel	Modane to Lockerbie by rail, via Paris and London	One long day on the train	Home



Routes are drawn schematically to show the shape of each day. Plant sites are not shown.

Relief: Terrain Tiles on AWS Open Data (SRTM and other sources). Frontier, places, summits and lakes: © OpenStreetMap contributors. Inset: Natural Earth.

The route of the tour, 29 June to 4 July 2026, with the rail journey from Lockerbie inset.

Arrival

There is a particular restlessness that takes hold of me before a trip like this: the pull of the unfound, the want of plants and places I have never set eyes on. This time I set off carrying something I had not had a few months earlier. Only a fortnight before, in the Picos de Europa, a thing I had been circling for years finally settled. I had long known the books and could put a name to a plant from a key. What I had not fully trusted was my own eye on unfamiliar ground: the confidence to stand on a moving slope, read the habitat and go hunting for what *ought* to be there. The Picos gave me that, or began to, and I came home wanting a great deal more of it.

The journey started with flat green fields sliding past a train window somewhere between London and the Channel, the kind of view that usually makes you stop looking. I caught myself looking anyway, out of an old habit of composing the view. Paris came and went in a change of trains, sweltering in the heat that had settled over much of Europe, and by the afternoon I was in Annecy, where I let myself arrive slowly: a swim in that astonishing lake, more cheese than was strictly defensible, and the simple pleasure of taking in a new place.



Annecy on the evening of 28 June: the Palais de l'Isle, the day before the tour began.

The group picked me up at Annecy on 29 June, on its way from Geneva. We set off in fine weather, but as we drove up the long valley towards Val d'Isère it turned to rain and thunder, which only worsened after we arrived. What stays with me is the road, winding endlessly upward, and then the town itself. Val d'Isère is a ski resort, and out of season it was almost deserted. A couple of shops were open but closed early; there was barely any foot traffic, only the occasional car passing through. All that infrastructure built for winter crowds stood empty, and the effect was eerie. Walking back from one of those few open shops that evening, I was hammered by rain. The thunder came back again and again through the week, which is no surprise at that altitude.

It was not lost on me that I had come, at a strange moment, to look for cold-loving plants. I had felt it for myself passing through Paris: much of Europe was labouring under record-breaking heat, and the

flora I was travelling to find lives exactly where warming bites hardest. Burning anything to go and see something so fragile is a contradiction, and I have not resolved it. I chose the slow way, overland by rail, and would choose it again, for the journey as much as anything. It cost nearly four times the price of a flight to Geneva, though, and when the lower-carbon option is also by far the dearer one, the incentives are the wrong way round.

I bring an old painter's habit to a slope: the instinct to read it as colour and relationship before I read it as a list. I was expecting an extraordinary palette, from the impossible sky-blue of *Eritrichium nanum* on the highest acid ridges and the cool slate of *Campanula cenisia* lying flat to its scree to the buff reverse of the petals of *Dianthus pavonius*. That first evening there was little daylight left for plants. Still, keen eyes picked out the first two of the trip on the way in: *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* (common spotted orchid) holding its own on a verge, and a *Campanula*, tucked into the rock, that we never pinned to species. Small, ordinary plants, but the first of a week that was full of them. The next morning we set off on foot for Tignes.

The ground beneath

The week's route crossed and recrossed a geological seam. On one side lie the *schistes lustrés*, the 'shining schists': calcschists and limestones that weather to lime-rich soils. On the other lie bands of older siliceous gneiss, which give acid ground. Plants respond to that difference long before a walker notices it. Lime-lovers such as *Dryas octopetala* and *Leontopodium* (edelweiss) give way to acid specialists such as *Eritrichium nanum* as the rock changes, sometimes within a few metres.

Each evening I logged GPS points and notes, aiming to read the mountain the way the plants do. I have kept coordinates and exact locations out of this report, as several of these plants are rare and easily disturbed. Anyone with a research or conservation need for them is welcome to get in touch, and I will share them where appropriate.



Dryas octopetala (mountain avens), one of the lime-lovers, 30 June.



A handful of the weathered schist that passes for soil on the scree, 1 July.

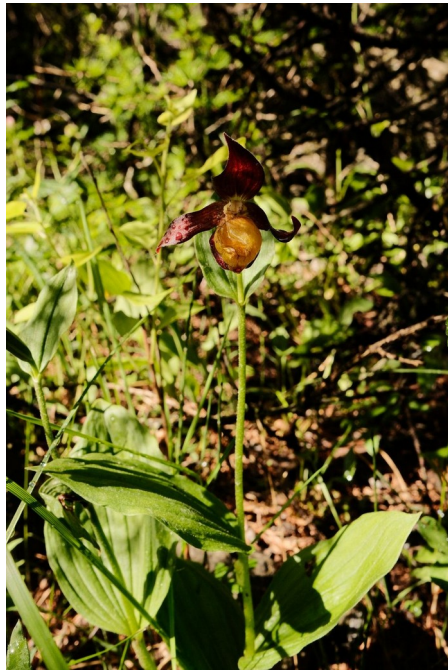
The week

Appendix 1 lists every plant named in the account below, grouped by day and by the habitat they shared; Appendix 2 gives a wider list of everything recorded on the tour.

30 JUNE

Val d'Isère to Tignes and back

The longest walk of the week began on a rock outcrop in the town and climbed through rocky pine woodland, past cliffs and meadows, to a late snow patch. The season was running early. In the woodland were *Pyrola rotundifolia*, *Orthilia secunda* and *Paris quadrifolia*, with orchids including *Pseudorchis albida*, *Epipactis atrorubens* and *Neottia ovata*. *Cypripedium calceolus* (lady's slipper) was probably a week or so past its best, yet at the snow patch *Soldanella alpina*, *Ranunculus pyrenaicus* and *Crocus albiflorus* were only just coming out: the snow had turned the clock back. Seeing crocuses, which I would expect in late February or March, flowering at the end of June was wonderful, and threw my brain a wobble.



Cypripedium calceolus (lady's slipper), 30 June.



Crocus albiflorus just opening at the late snow patch, 30 June.

On the cliffs, *Saxifraga diapensioides* and *S. caesia* grew side by side, a chance to compare two close relatives on the same rock. Tucked in under the cliffs was a fine form of *Leontopodium*. In the woodland beyond, *Clematis alpina* trailed from the rocks, and down by the lake *Campanula cochleariifolia* grew in the crevices.

One sour note: a newly cut track for a bridge near the lake ran straight through species-rich ground, and the *Neotinea ustulata* (burnt orchid) that Oli had recorded there before could not be refound. We did find it later, further along the trail, though not where Oli had known it.



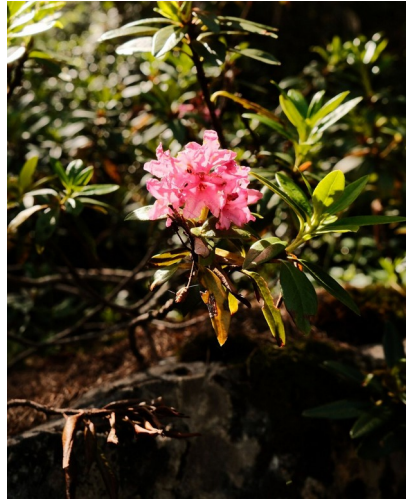
Saxifraga diapensioides, 30 June.



Saxifraga caesia, photographed on the same cliffs twenty minutes later, 30 June.



Campanula cochleariifolia in a rock crevice, 30 June.



Rhododendron ferrugineum (alpenrose), a lime-hater, a short walk from the lime-loving saxifrages, 30 June.



Neotinea ustulata (burnt orchid), already going over, further along the trail, 30 June.

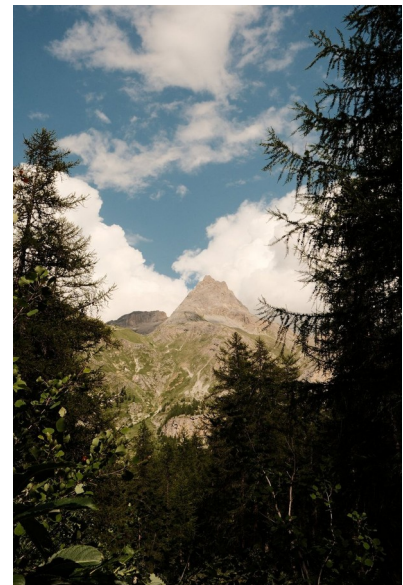
The moment I will remember was a *Lilium martagon*, an exceptional plant. I had seen *L. martagon* in the wild before, in the Picos, but what stayed with me was Theo's reaction. His delight summed up how the whole group felt, then and for the rest of the trip: grown adults behaving like children on a treasure hunt, with pure joy at finding a beautiful plant. With thunder and lightning threatening, the group chose to return to Val d'Isère by a less exposed route through the larch woods. It was a wise decision, even though the weather turned out kinder than expected.



Pseudorchis albida (small-white orchid) among *Rhododendron ferrugineum* on the woodland route back, 30 June.



Lilium martagon in the larch woodland on the way back, 30 June.



Larix decidua (larch) frames the view on the way back to Val d'Isère, 30 June.

1 JULY

A peak above Val d'Isère, then on to Val Cenis

This day was a deliberate altitude transect, from grazed banks and damp verges up through high-alpine scree to a summit at 3,000 m. Low down, *Allium sphaerocephalon* grew in thousands, with *Rhodiola rosea* and *Scutellaria alpina* on the same bank, and on a *Clematis* I spotted a *Cuscuta* (dodder) twining through its host. Higher up came *Gentiana burseri* and *Campanula barbata*. *Pyrola minor* grew in open turf, a useful contrast with *P. rotundifolia* in the previous day's woodland, and the tiny *Androsace obtusifolia* turned up nearby.



Allium sphaerocephalon in its thousands on the grazed banks low on the transect, 1 July.



A *Gymnadenia* (fragrant orchid) visited by a copper butterfly, 1 July.



Sempervivum montanum (mountain houseleek) in flower early on the climb, 1 July.



Gentiana burseri on the way up, 1 July.

Oli made us work. Rather than being told names, we keyed plants out as a group from Grey-Wilson and Blamey's guide. It is good for a rough identification, and I checked the names against current

sources afterwards. The high scree gave us plenty to work on: *Androsace alpina*, *Ranunculus glacialis*, *Geum reptans* and *Petrocallis pyrenaica*, including a white form. We found *Campanula cenisia* both lying flat against the scree and wedged into crevices in the rock, and it was a real treat to see. These tough little plants astound me at every turn: they shrug off brutally hostile conditions with such grace, and look wonderful doing it. Bethan spotted *Androsace pubescens*, a week past flowering, and on the way down the snowmelt flushes held *Primula farinosa*, *Anemone baldensis* and *Pulsatilla alpina*.



Silene acaulis (moss campion) pressed against the rock high on the scree, 1 July.



Ranunculus glacialis (glacier crowfoot) on the high scree, 1 July.



Campanula cenisia in a rock crevice, its buds still furred, 1 July.



Primula farinosa (bird's-eye primrose) in a snowmelt flush, 1 July.

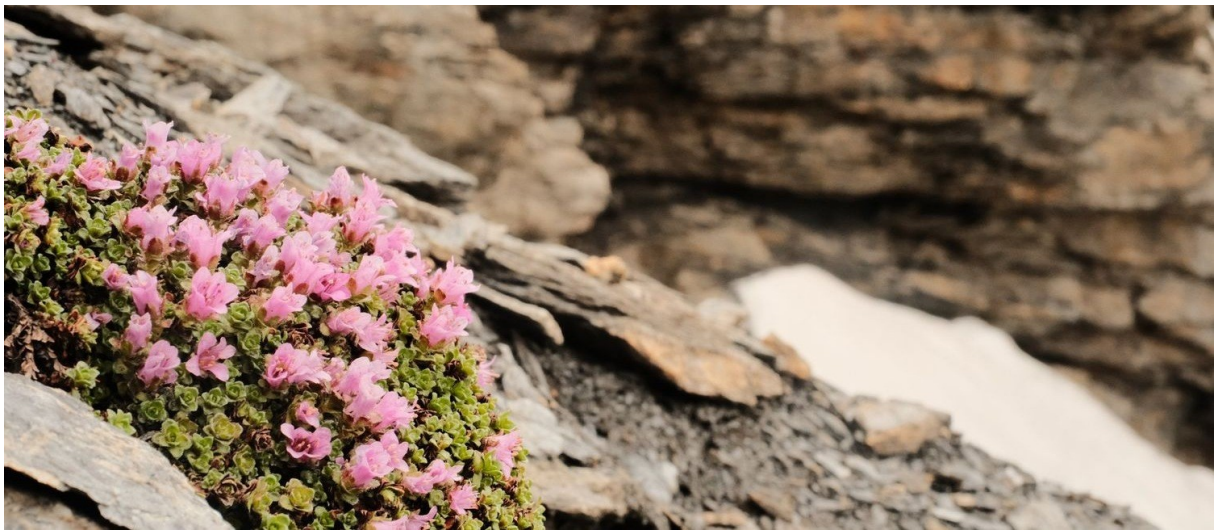
A sleet storm drove us back before we reached the top. When it cleared we went up again and made the summit at the second attempt. Standing at exactly 3,000 m, we could feel the excitement of the climb rippling through the group, more than enough to block out the bitter wind and rain that kept sweeping across us. That afternoon we crossed the Col de l'Iseran to Val Cenis.



Hoods up as the sleet storm came in near the summit, 1 July.

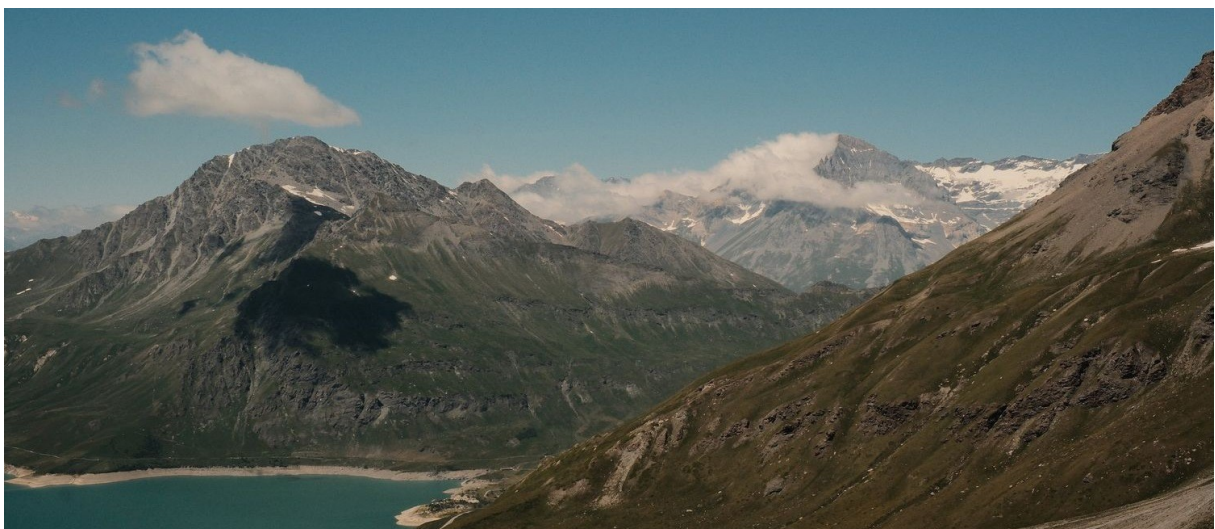


Back on the ridge once it had cleared, 1 July.



Saxifraga oppositifolia (purple saxifrage) beside a lingering snow patch, 1 July.

2 JULY
Mont Cenis

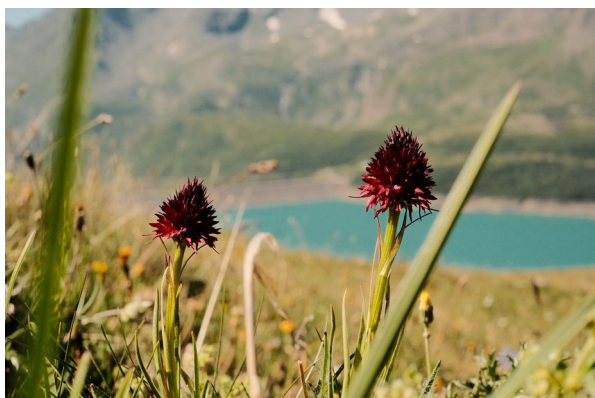


The Mont Cenis lake basin, 2 July.

We worked both sides of the lake basin at Mont Cenis: lakeside turf, scree shoulders, late snowbeds and, on the far side, shady limestone cliffs. *Dianthus pavonius* grew in many forms, alongside *Centaurea uniflora*, *Aster alpinus* (including a semi-double form) and two orchids, *Nigritella* and *Dactylorhiza viridis* (black vanilla and frog orchids). I picked out *Senecio incanus*, its silvery leaves standing out against the turf. Around the snowbeds grew three dwarf willows, *Salix reticulata*, *S. serpyllifolia* and *S. herbacea*, with *Viola cenisia*, *Saxifraga oppositifolia* and *Noccaea rotundifolia* (formerly *Thlaspi rotundifolium*) on the scree.

The dwarf willows gave me an immense appreciation of how resilient these plants are. Over the years the creeping willows build up little pockets for other species to cosy into, and that is something I want to emulate on the Rock Garden at Threave.

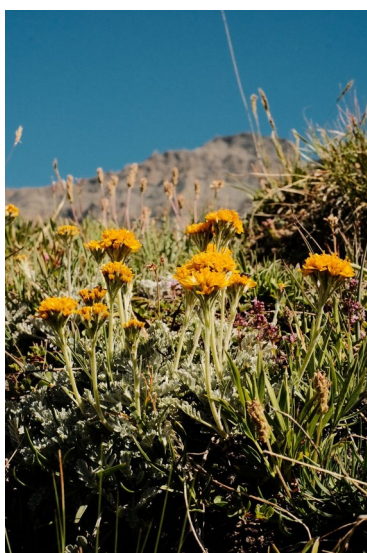
Mont Cenis was also where we saw most clearly what cattle can do. Some pastures had been grazed bare; others, plainly well managed, were full of life. The difference lay entirely in how the land was managed.



Nigritella (black vanilla orchid) above the lake, 2 July.



More *Nigritella* among feathery seedheads, 2 July.



Senecio incanus in full flower, with *Thymus* (wild thyme), 2 July.



A trumpet gentian (*Gentiana* sp.) with the lake behind, 2 July.



Campanula sp. among *Thymus*, 2 July.



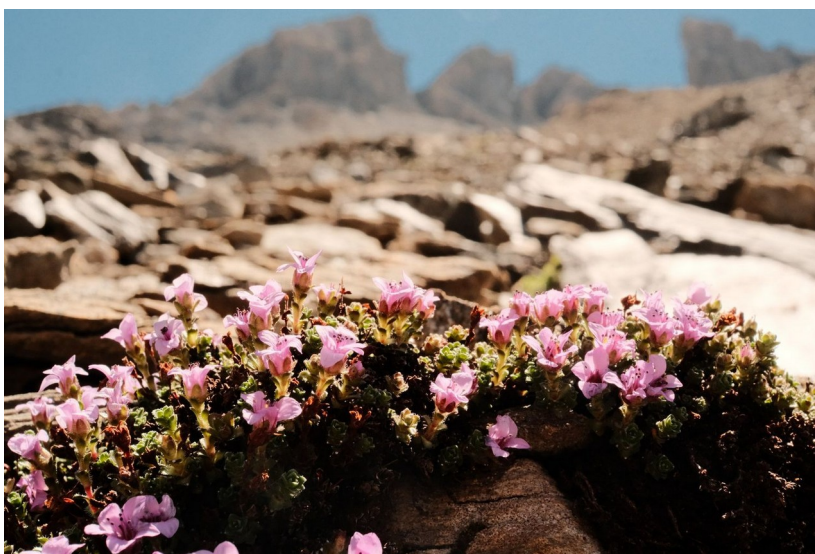
Dryas octopetala lit from behind, its flowers already turning to seed, 2 July.



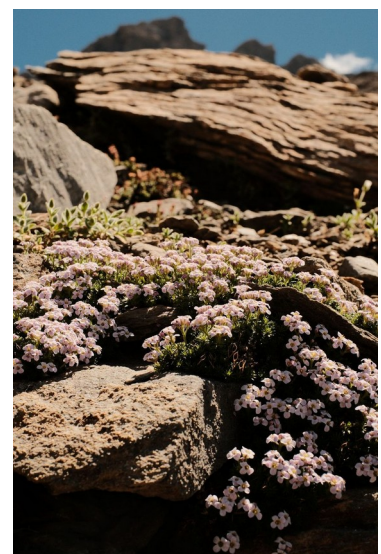
Gentiana verna among dwarf willows, 2 July.



Noccaea rotundifolia pushing up between the stones of the scree, 2 July.



Saxifraga oppositifolia below the crags, beside the last of the snow, 2 July.



Petrocallis pyrenaica, a lime-lover, spilling over the rocks, 2 July.



The scree shoulders below the crags, 2 July.



Rosie on the path down towards the lake, 2 July.

Partway round, *Leontopodium* and *Campanula alpestris* appeared abruptly along a clear line. It looked very much like the rock changing beneath us, exactly the effect this trip set out to see.



Campanula alpestris, one of the two plants that marked the line, 2 July.



Campanula alpestris with *Scutellaria alpina* (alpine skullcap), 2 July.



Linaria alpina (alpine toadflax) on the scree, 2 July.



Dianthus pavonius with *Helianthemum* (rock-rose) above the lake, 2 July.

The day ended with an hour-long search for *Saxifraga valdensis*, here close to the northern limit of its range. The plant is named for the Valdesi, the persecuted Waldensian Protestants who found refuge in these mountains, and in 1910 Farrer went looking for it further south, above Bobbio Pellice (Avery, 2022).

It was a proper reward. We were scrambling up rock faces and very steep scree in the hope of a glimpse, and at the end of a long day our legs were feeling it. The plant kept eluding us until, just as we were giving up and getting ready to head down the mountain, we gave it one last push. Up in a little gully we found a happy, healthy community of *S. valdensis*, just hanging out and looking incredible.



Searching the cliffs for *Saxifraga valdensis*, 2 July. Look for the figure in red, halfway up, for scale.



Saxifraga valdensis, found at last, 2 July.



A second cushion of *Saxifraga valdensis* among pale stones and lichen-crust rock, 2 July.

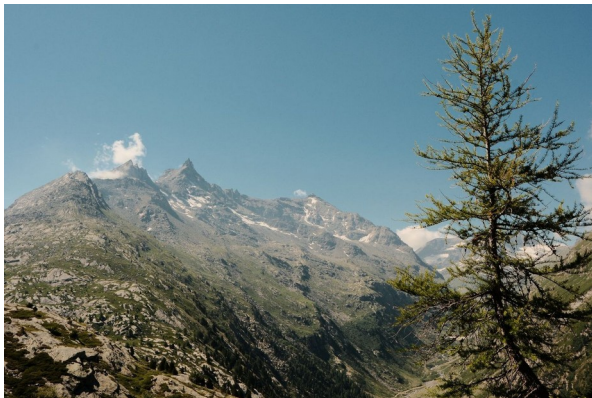


A third cushion from the same community, 2 July.

3 JULY

Petit Mont-Cenis to the Col de Clapier

Our last field day climbed through pasture to Farrer's 'false pass', past a still-frozen lake and on through turf to the Col de Clapier on the Italian border, at 2,477 m. Julia, head gardener at Bowles's own garden, read from Farrer's and Bowles's plant lists of a century ago as we went, so we could set what we found against what they recorded. *Gentiana nivalis* flowered in the pasture, and two plants from Julia's list turned up there too: *Saponaria lutea* and *Primula pedemontana*, the primula long past flowering. Beyond the frozen lake *Ranunculus glacialis* grew by the million, here in a pinker form.



Morning on the walk up from Petit Mont-Cenis, 3 July.



Cynanchica aristata (formerly *Asperula aristata*) trailing over the rock, 3 July.

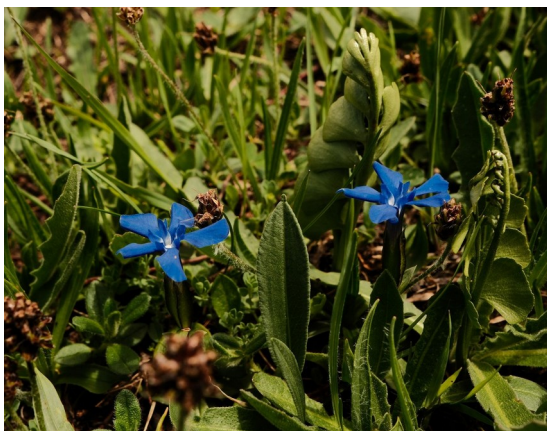
Gentiana verna had been everywhere all week, time and again with *Botrychium lunaria* (moonwort) unfurling beside it, a pairing that had become a favourite of mine. That made the white ones stand out all the more. As Theo and I stepped back from photographing violas and ordinary blue *G. verna*, I noticed a little patch of white gentians. I had to grab Theo's shoulder and all but shove him aside, because his foot was heading straight for them.



A yellow *Viola*, one of those Theo and I were photographing moments before the white gentians caught my eye, 3 July.



A white *Gentiana verna* among the blue, 3 July.



Gentiana verna with *Botrychium lunaria* (moonwort) unfurling behind it. Photographed on 30 June; the pairing turned up all week.



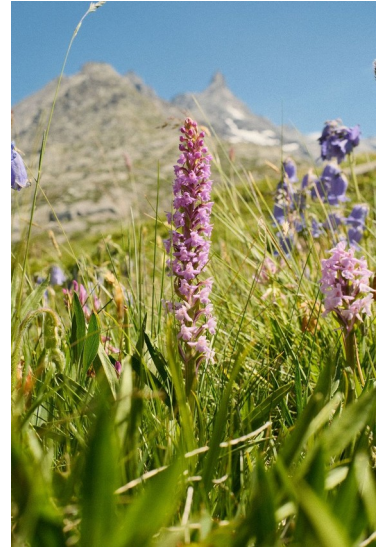
A chamois watching us from the rocks, 3 July.

At the col, Julia found *Eritrichium nanum*, the king of the Alps. This is the very pass where Farrer found it in 1910. Thompson had refused to tell him where it grew, so he asked the Swiss nurseryman Henry Correvon, who sent him here. In print Farrer disguised the pass as ‘Kirschenjoch’ to keep collectors away, while himself collecting rare alpine in bulk for his nursery in Yorkshire, *Eritrichium* among them (Avery, 2022). The older guides give its lower limit as around 2,500 m and newer ones nearer 2,200 m, a useful reminder to treat guidebook altitudes as approximate. Theo found a faded *Primula latifolia* there too, another from Julia’s list. On the way down, *Saxifraga diapensioides* grew again on the calcareous rocks, and *Gentianella campestris* turned up nearby.

The Col de Clapier is also one of the passes long put forward for Hannibal’s crossing of the Alps with his elephants in 218 BC, though his route is still debated. I remember texting my dad that this was one of the best ‘pilgrimages’ I had ever done. I said it jokingly, but to have walked that route, in Farrer’s footsteps and perhaps Hannibal’s, was very special.



Eritrichium nanum, the king of the Alps, 3 July.



Gymnadenia odoratissima (short-spurred fragrant orchid) with *Campanula barbata* (bearded bellflower) on the way down, 3 July.



The same slope: *Gymnadenia odoratissima* and *Campanula barbata* among *Juniperus* (juniper), 3 July.

Theo found a family of chamois living in the old fort, we cooled off with a dip in a stream on the way down, and we finished in the meadows above the lake, full of *Campanula spicata* and *C. rhomboidalis*, where *Astrantia major*, my last find of the trip, closed the week. Each day had produced plants seen on no other day, a reminder of how local many alpine plants are.



Astrantia major in the final meadow, 3 July.



Scabiosa sp. (scabious) in the same meadow at the end of the day, 3 July.

4 JULY

Home

Oli and the group dropped me at Modane station, where I caught the 08:30 train and made the long way home in a single day: Modane to Paris, Paris to London and on to Lockerbie, alone with a phone full of photographs and a head full of plants.

Reflections

I think the most important thing I saw, and the thing I most want to get across to the trainees, is how harsh conditions stop any one plant from taking over. The soil is poor, the snow lies for months and the summer is short, so grasses never get the upper hand the way they do lower down, and that leaves room for everything else. Seeing that in person was invaluable. The plants blend together seamlessly: cushions, mats and tiny shrubs, each leaving the others just enough space to flourish. Once you understand how that is allowed to happen, you look at every bit of turf differently.

Snow sets the calendar as well. On a single day we had *Cypripedium calceolus* past its best and, a short climb away, *Crocus albiflorus* only just opening at a snow patch. A garden can only hint at that, but it has changed how I think about when, and where, alpine plants are at their best.

Grazing was the other big lesson. Some grazing is needed to keep coarse grasses and scrub in check, and done well it supports local farmers and their traditions while keeping the pastures rich. The well-managed pastures were some of the richest ground we walked all week. Get it wrong, though, and it shows straight away. The overgrazed pastures, in the Picos and most of all at Mont Cenis, had been stripped bare by cattle. It made it very clear to me how fragile these ecosystems are.

Then there is the climate. These plants already grow near the tops of their mountains, and as it warms they are pushed higher, with less and less ground left to them. Having sweltered through Paris on the way out, I did not need persuading. The new bridge track at Tignes, cut straight through species-rich ground, was a reminder that the threats are local too.

Keying plants out as a group was hard work and exactly what I needed. The confidence that started in the Picos kept growing through the week, and by the end I was finding plants for myself, like the white *Gentiana verna*.

Most of all, I will remember the people. Watching the group light up at every find, from Theo's *Lilium martagon* to my last *Astrantia*, showed me how quickly enthusiasm spreads. That is what I want to pass on to the trainees.



Oli Cheney, who led the tour, on the ridge above Val d'Isère, 1 July.



Theo Grove at work above Val d'Isère, 1 July.

Taking it home to Threave

Farrer did not just write about these mountains; he went home and tried to recreate them. In his rock garden at Ingleborough Hall, the family home at Clapham in Yorkshire, he trialled below-ground

irrigation and naturalistic ‘moraine gardens’ (planted scree with water fed in underneath) to grow the plants he had seen in the hills (Pullen, 2016). Standing on those screes I could see exactly what he was trying to copy. Some of these plants need very particular conditions: sharp drainage at the surface and water moving below it. I want to take what he learned and trialled and bring it to Threave.

The biggest change is in how I want us to display plants on the Rock Garden. In the mountains nothing grows on its own. Plants grow as communities, shaped by their scree or turf, by snowmelt and by the rock underneath. I want Threave’s Rock Garden to show that, with plants grouped by the conditions they actually share rather than dotted about as single specimens. That way the groupings do the teaching for us, for trainees and visitors alike.

The dwarf willows at Mont Genis showed me one place to start. I want the new planting to work the way they do, with low, creeping plants building up pockets that others then settle into.

For the trainees, the one thing I most want them to understand is that a hard life is what keeps a community diverse. Poor soil and harsh conditions hold the strongest plants back and give everything else a chance, which is why a rock garden needs to be kept lean and why grass is the thing to watch. In a way, looking after it is like managing those pastures: it needs the right amount of pressure, neither too little nor too much.

For my own career, the timing could not have been better. I had taken on the Walled Gardener’s role only three months earlier, and the field skills, confidence and enthusiasm I came home with go straight into my weekly work with the trainees and volunteers, and towards becoming a Head Gardener.

Sharing what I learned

This report is the first step. It will be published on the Merlin Trust’s website, and I am sending a copy to the Alpine Garden Society. In December I am giving a talk to the trainees at Threave, which feels like the right first audience, since they will be working on the Rock Garden alongside me. I hope to follow it with a talk for the Scottish Rock Garden Club, as I proposed in my application.

Looking back

I set out with four aims, and the week measured up well against them.

1	Inform the Rock Garden redevelopment	MET
	I saw alpine communities on scree, turf, snowbed, cliff and meadow, on lime-rich rock and acid, and came home with one principle above all for the Rock Garden: show plants in the company they keep.	
2	Sharpen my identification and understanding of alpine ecology	MET
	The gap between what I knew from books and what I could do on a hillside is much narrower than it was.	
3	Share what I learned	BEGUN
	This report and the December talk to Threave's trainees are the first steps.	
4	Build towards becoming a Head Gardener	UNDER WAY
	The trip came just as I had taken on the Walled Gardener's role and the trainees who come with it.	

I went to see how these plants really live so that I could do them justice at Threave, and I came home with far more than I expected. My thanks again to the Merlin Trust and the Alpine Garden Society for making it possible.

Costs

The trip cost about £1,780–1,805 in total. The £1,500 award was spent in full and I covered the balance of about £280–305 myself, so there is no surplus to return. Euro costs are converted at about €1.17 to the pound; approximate figures are marked c.

ITEM	COST (£)	SUPPLIER	FUNDED BY
AGS tour, land only	1,150	AGS / Vira Natura	Award
Single supplement (no room-share available)	175	AGS / Vira Natura	Award
Interrail pass, 4 travel days (all rail, both ways)	184	Interrail	Award £175, personal £9
Eurostar seat reservation, outward	c. 33	Eurostar	Personal
Eurostar seat reservation, return	c. 33	Eurostar	Personal
Seat reservation, Paris to Annecy (€8)	c. 7	SNCF	Personal
Seat reservation, Modane to Paris (€12)	c. 10	Rail operator	Personal
Hostel, Annecy, 1 night	c. 30	Hostel	Personal
Travel insurance	c. 28	Insurer	Personal
Food, 6 days (c. €25–30 a day; no meals included on the tour)	c. 130–155	Various	Personal
Total	c. 1,780–1,805		Award £1,500; personal c. £280–305

The London night was spent with friends at no cost. A return flight to Geneva would have cost about £70; the rail pass and seat reservations came to about £267, nearly four times as much.

References

- Avery, G. (2022) ‘Reginald Farrer in the Alps 1899–1917’. Paper presented to the European Botanical and Horticultural Libraries Group, Meise Botanic Garden, Belgium, 20 October 2022. Available at: https://ebhl.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/2022_12_Avery_EBHL_Farrer_in_the_Alps.pdf (Accessed: 5 October 2026).
- Farrer, R. (1911) *Among the Hills: A Book of Joy in High Places*. London: Headley Brothers.
- Grey-Wilson, C. and Blamey, M. (1979) *The Alpine Flowers of Britain and Europe*. London: Collins.
- Pullen, R. (2016) *Reginald Farrer’s Rock Garden, Clapham, North Yorkshire: Analytical Survey and Assessment*. Research Report Series 7/2016. Portsmouth: Historic England.

Appendix 1: Plants named in this report

These are the plants named in the report, grouped by day and by the habitat they shared. It is not a complete record of what the group found, and sites are given only in general terms. In the field we used Grey-Wilson and Blamey (1979) for a first, rough identification and checked names against current sources afterwards. Current names are used throughout; Appendix 2 gives older synonyms where they differ.

DATE	SITE	HABITAT	PLANTS
29 Jun	Road up to Val d'Isère	Verges and roadside rock	<i>Campanula</i> sp., <i>Dactylorhiza fuchsii</i>
30 Jun	Val d'Isère to Tignes	Pine and larch woodland	<i>Cypripedium calceolus</i> (past its best), <i>Epipactis atrorubens</i> , <i>Larix decidua</i> , <i>Lilium martagon</i> , <i>Neottia ovata</i> , <i>Orthilia secunda</i> , <i>Paris quadrifolia</i> , <i>Pseudorchis albida</i> , <i>Pyrola rotundifolia</i>
		Cliffs and meadows	<i>Botrychium lunaria</i> , <i>Campanula cochleariifolia</i> , <i>Clematis alpina</i> , <i>Dryas octopetala</i> , <i>Gentiana verna</i> , <i>Leontopodium</i> (cliff form), <i>Neotinea ustulata</i> , <i>Rhododendron ferrugineum</i> , <i>Saxifraga caesia</i> , <i>S. diapensioides</i>
		Late snow patch	<i>Crocus albiflorus</i> , <i>Ranunculus pyrenaicus</i> , <i>Soldanella alpina</i>
1 Jul	Peak above Val d'Isère	Grazed banks and damp verges	<i>Allium sphaerocephalon</i> , <i>Cuscuta</i> sp. (on <i>Clematis</i>), <i>Gymnadenia</i> sp., <i>Rhodiola rosea</i> , <i>Scutellaria alpina</i> , <i>Sempervivum montanum</i>
		Higher slopes and open turf	<i>Androsace obtusifolia</i> , <i>Campanula barbata</i> , <i>Gentiana burseri</i> , <i>Pyrola minor</i>
		High scree to 3,000 m	<i>Androsace alpina</i> , <i>A. pubescens</i> (past flowering), <i>Campanula cenisia</i> , <i>Geum reptans</i> , <i>Petrocallis pyrenaica</i> (including a white form), <i>Ranunculus glacialis</i> , <i>Saxifraga oppositifolia</i> , <i>Silene acaulis</i>
		Snowmelt flushes	<i>Anemone baldensis</i> , <i>Primula farinosa</i> , <i>Pulsatilla alpina</i>
2 Jul	Mont Cenis lake basin	Turf around the basin	<i>Aster alpinus</i> (including a semi-double form), <i>Campanula</i> sp., <i>Centaurea uniflora</i> , <i>Dactylorhiza viridis</i> , <i>Dianthus pavonius</i> (many forms), <i>Dryas octopetala</i> , <i>Gentiana</i> sp. (trumpet gentian), <i>Helianthemum</i> sp., <i>Nigritella</i> sp., <i>Senecio incanus</i> , <i>Thymus</i> sp.
		Late snowbeds	<i>Gentiana verna</i> , <i>Salix herbacea</i> , <i>S. reticulata</i> , <i>S. serpyllifolia</i>
		Scree	<i>Linaria alpina</i> , <i>Noccaea rotundifolia</i> , <i>Petrocallis pyrenaica</i> , <i>Saxifraga oppositifolia</i> , <i>Scutellaria alpina</i> , <i>Viola cenisia</i>
		Along the apparent change of rock	<i>Campanula alpestris</i> , <i>Leontopodium</i>
		Shady limestone cliffs	<i>Saxifraga valdensis</i>

DATE	SITE	HABITAT	PLANTS
3 Jul	Petit Mont-Cenis to the Col de Clapier	Pasture and turf on the ascent	<i>Botrychium lunaria</i> , <i>Campanula barbata</i> , <i>Cynanchica aristata</i> , <i>Gentiana nivalis</i> , <i>G. verna</i> (including a patch of white plants), <i>Gymnadenia odoratissima</i> , <i>Juniperus</i> sp., <i>Primula pedemontana</i> , <i>Ranunculus glacialis</i> (a pinker form), <i>Saponaria lutea</i> , <i>Viola</i> sp.
	Col de Clapier, 2,477 m	At the col	<i>Eritrichium nanum</i> , <i>Primula latifolia</i>
	On the way down	Calcareous rocks	<i>Gentianella campestris</i> , <i>Saxifraga diapensioides</i>
	Petit Mont-Cenis	Meadows above the lake	<i>Astrantia major</i> , <i>Campanula rhomboidalis</i> , <i>C. spicata</i> , <i>Scabiosa</i> sp.

Appendix 2: Plants recorded on the tour

A wider list of the plants recorded across the tour, compiled from my own notes and photographs and the group's records. It is still not a complete flora of the area. Where only a genus was recorded, it is given as such. Names in brackets are older synonyms that readers may meet in field guides.

PLANT	SEEN	PLANT	SEEN
<i>Allium sphaerocephalon</i>	1 Jul	<i>Larix decidua</i>	30 Jun
<i>Allium</i> spp. (two further species)	1 Jul	<i>Leontopodium nivale</i> subsp. <i>alpinum</i> (<i>L. alpinum</i>), edelweiss; a cliff form on 30 Jun	30 Jun, 2 Jul
<i>Androsace alpina</i>	1 Jul	<i>Lilium martagon</i>	30 Jun, 3 Jul
<i>Androsace obtusifolia</i>	1 Jul	<i>Linaria alpina</i>	2 Jul
<i>Androsace pubescens</i> (past flowering)	1 Jul	<i>Linaria vulgaris</i>	1 Jul
<i>Anemone baldensis</i>	1 Jul	<i>Linum</i> sp. (a blue flax)	30 Jun
<i>Artemisia genipi</i>	2 Jul	<i>Micranthes stellaris</i> (<i>Saxifraga stellaris</i>)	30 Jun
<i>Aster alpinus</i> (a semi-double form on 2 Jul)	1, 2 Jul	<i>Neotinea ustulata</i> (<i>Orchis ustulata</i>)	30 Jun
<i>Astrantia major</i>	3 Jul	<i>Neottia ovata</i> (<i>Listera ovata</i>)	30 Jun, 1 Jul
<i>Bartsia alpina</i>	1 Jul	<i>Nigritella</i> sp., black vanilla orchid	2, 3 Jul
<i>Botrychium lunaria</i> (beside <i>Gentiana verna</i> through the week)	30 Jun, 3 Jul	<i>Noccaea rotundifolia</i> (<i>Thlaspi rotundifolium</i>)	2 Jul
<i>Bupleurum</i> sp.	1 Jul	<i>Orthilia secunda</i> (<i>Pyrola secunda</i>)	30 Jun
<i>Campanula alpestris</i>	2 Jul	<i>Paris quadrifolia</i>	30 Jun
<i>Campanula barbata</i>	1, 3 Jul	<i>Petrocallis pyrenaica</i> (a white form on 1 Jul)	1, 2 Jul
<i>Campanula cenisia</i>	1, 2 Jul	<i>Phyteuma ovatum</i>	30 Jun
<i>Campanula cochleariifolia</i>	30 Jun	<i>Pinguicula</i> sp.	30 Jun
<i>Campanula rhomboidalis</i>	3 Jul	<i>Polygonatum verticillatum</i>	30 Jun
<i>Campanula spicata</i>	3 Jul	<i>Primula farinosa</i>	1 Jul
<i>Campanula</i> sp. (bellflowers not keyed to species)	29, 30 Jun, 2 Jul	<i>Primula latifolia</i>	3 Jul
<i>Centaurea uniflora</i>	2 Jul	<i>Primula pedemontana</i>	3 Jul
<i>Centaurea</i> sp.	3 Jul	<i>Pseudorchis albida</i>	30 Jun
<i>Chamaenerion angustifolium</i> (<i>Epilobium angustifolium</i>)	3 Jul	<i>Pulsatilla alpina</i>	1 Jul
<i>Clematis alpina</i>	30 Jun	<i>Pulsatilla vernalis</i> (just finished)	30 Jun
<i>Crocus albiflorus</i>	30 Jun	<i>Pyrola minor</i>	1 Jul
<i>Cuscuta</i> sp. (on <i>Clematis</i>)	1 Jul	<i>Pyrola rotundifolia</i>	30 Jun
<i>Cynanchica aristata</i> (<i>Asperula aristata</i>)	3 Jul	<i>Ranunculus glacialis</i> (a pinker form on 3 Jul)	1, 3 Jul
<i>Cypripedium calceolus</i>	30 Jun	<i>Ranunculus pyrenaicus</i>	30 Jun, 1 Jul
<i>Dactylorhiza fuchsii</i>	29 Jun	<i>Rhodiola rosea</i>	30 Jun, 1 Jul
<i>Dactylorhiza majalis</i>	1 Jul	<i>Rhododendron ferrugineum</i>	30 Jun
<i>Dactylorhiza viridis</i> (<i>Coeloglossum viride</i>), frog orchid	1, 2 Jul	<i>Salix herbacea</i>	2 Jul
<i>Daphne mezereum</i>	30 Jun	<i>Salix reticulata</i>	2 Jul

PLANT	SEEN	PLANT	SEEN
<i>Dianthus pavonius</i>	2 Jul	<i>Salix serpyllifolia</i>	2 Jul
<i>Dianthus sylvestris</i>	1 Jul	<i>Salix</i> spp. (at least three further dwarf willows)	2 Jul
<i>Dianthus</i> sp.	30 Jun, 3 Jul	<i>Saponaria lutea</i>	3 Jul
<i>Dryas octopetala</i>	30 Jun, 2 Jul	<i>Saxifraga androsacea</i>	1 Jul
<i>Epilobium</i> sp.	1 Jul	<i>Saxifraga caesia</i>	30 Jun
<i>Epipactis atrorubens</i>	30 Jun	<i>Saxifraga diapensioides</i>	30 Jun, 3 Jul
<i>Erigeron uniflorus</i>	1 Jul	<i>Saxifraga exarata</i>	1 Jul
<i>Eritrichium nanum</i>	3 Jul	<i>Saxifraga oppositifolia</i>	1, 2 Jul
<i>Gagea</i> sp.	30 Jun	<i>Saxifraga paniculata</i>	1 Jul
<i>Gentiana burseri</i>	1 Jul	<i>Saxifraga valdensis</i>	2 Jul
<i>Gentiana lutea</i>	1 Jul	<i>Scabiosa</i> sp.	3 Jul
<i>Gentiana nivalis</i>	3 Jul	<i>Scutellaria alpina</i>	1, 2 Jul
<i>Gentiana schleicheri</i>	1 Jul	<i>Sempervivum montanum</i>	1 Jul
<i>Gentiana verna</i> (a white form on 3 Jul)	30 Jun, 2, 3 Jul	<i>Sempervivum</i> sp.	30 Jun, 1, 2 Jul
<i>Gentiana</i> sp. (trumpet gentians not keyed to species)	1, 2 Jul	<i>Senecio incanus</i>	2 Jul
<i>Gentianella campestris</i>	3 Jul	<i>Silene acaulis</i>	1 Jul
<i>Geranium</i> sp.	30 Jun	<i>Silene nutans</i>	30 Jun
<i>Geum reptans</i>	1 Jul	<i>Siler montanum</i>	30 Jun, 1 Jul
<i>Gymnadenia conopsea</i>	30 Jun	<i>Soldanella alpina</i>	30 Jun
<i>Gymnadenia densiflora</i>	30 Jun	<i>Thalictrum</i> sp.	30 Jun
<i>Gymnadenia odoratissima</i>	30 Jun, 3 Jul	<i>Thymus</i> sp.	30 Jun, 2 Jul
<i>Gymnadenia</i> sp. (fragrant orchids not keyed to species)	1, 2, 3 Jul	<i>Trollius europaeus</i>	30 Jun
<i>Gypsophila repens</i>	30 Jun	<i>Verbascum</i> sp.	1 Jul
<i>Helianthemum</i> sp.	2, 3 Jul	<i>Viola cenisia</i>	2 Jul
<i>Juniperus</i> sp.	3 Jul	<i>Viola</i> sp. (violet, yellow and white forms)	3 Jul