

Parish Grasslands Project

Issue 3

October 2002

Chairman's Report

I am glad to report that this has been a very active year in the life of the Parish Grasslands Project. A year in which much of what we planned at last year's AGM has started to be put into practice.

We have also had the satisfaction of finding the Project featured within the management plan of the Wye Valley AONB, and have heard report of a sister project starting up on the Welsh bank of the Wye.

Milestones of our progress this year can be summarised as follows:

Countryside Agency Grant: This has largely enabled us, with George Peterken as our professional, to complete the record of flora within the project area. It is hoped that maps of our area will be available, courtesy of the Wye Valley AONB, by February of next year.

Countryside Stewardship: Eight members have signed up for this scheme. There were fears that conditions would prove too stringent to be workable, and thus, to test this concern, your committee have met with landowners currently within Stewardship – John and Julie Foulkes from Clanna kindly visited us to tell us of their practical experience – and also with DEFRA officers to air our concerns. The results of these meetings were reassuring.

Field Meetings: As proposed, we have held three field meetings this summer, two during the early flowering period, starting from Mackenzie Hall and from Peter Chard's, and one in September at Tyersal, courtesy of Jane Morgan. At each of these meetings we were introduced to grasses, flowers and weeds we knew by sight without being able to name them, and the collective expertise of the membership enabled most of us to end the day with a little more knowledge of what lies at our feet.

Species Records: This is probably the only daunting aspect of the year's activity. "How to fill them in without a botanist's training?" is the question I ask myself. The answer is less daunting than the question. "Every little helps!" in other words, just put down everything you do recognise, and pass on to

Peter Chard! A few of us were lucky enough to be visited by Jeremy Doe of Glos Wildlife Management, and from him we have received comprehensive inventories for selected fields. They make surprising reading both on account of the number of different species and of the comparative rarity of a few of these.

Machinery for Pasture Management: Peter Chard and a small group are exploring the possibility of liaising with a Green Machinery Ring which may hire small equipment and possibly operators for specific small acreage tasks. More of this at the AGM.

Allied Interests: Other aspects which have been highlighted during our field meetings include stone walls, their history and significance as well as their vulnerability, old orchard restoration and also the practicalities of combining horse ownership with Stewardship membership. Watch this space!

Members' Views: We are keen to hear your views on Project activities. Have we got the mix right? Would you like more indoor meets with speakers? How do you rate the field meetings?

Future Meetings: Our AGM will be on Tuesday 12th November at 7.30pm in the Mackenzie Hall. After a brisk business session we shall be welcoming James Marsden who will give us a talk about old orchards and their restoration. An indoor meet is planned for 11th February 2003. Rachel Simpson of the Countryside Agency in Surrey will be speaking to us about the practicalities of grazing horses on old and potentially vulnerable pastures.

Conclusion: I would like to thank our Committee for their dedicated and enthusiastic support of all our schemes and ideas over the past year, with especial thanks going to Sally Secrett, our editor/printer for her excellent work in producing our Newsletter. Lastly, a big thank you to all our hosts/hostesses for their hospitality and for allowing us to trample at will among their surprisingly rich and interesting flora.

John Josephi

OLD
ORCHARDS
AND THEIR
RESTORATION

MACKENZIE HALL
TUESDAY 12TH
NOVEMBER
7.30PM
FOLLOWING THE
AGM

The Committee

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How Hay became Silage and what's Haylage ?

Several members have commented on the problems of finding someone to make hay in their small fields , and as a result some fields have been left uncut. With the advent of Stewardship arrangements some people are contracted to have their fields cut for hay, and it is likely that

problems will increase.

Haymaking is dependent on good weather but even with sunshine it is often not possible to gather in hay until after midday if there has been a heavy dew. If we acquire our own machinery suitable to use in small fields we will all be clamouring for

its use when the weather is sunny.

So what are we to do? John Childs has a practical solution to our problems. What do you think?

Peter Chard

Ah... haymaking – does this bring to mind a Constable painting or working in a brook of sweat, struggling to make and collect it before the next storm of rain; whichever, fodder and its storage have changed.

Change has mostly been created by the use of artificial manure – fertiliser – Nitrogen, Phosphate and Potash.

Until about the early 60s farmers decided in the spring which fields were to be grazed and which were to be mown for hay – the only added fertiliser was likely to be farmyard manure and so the crops were likely to have been light and often cut quite late.

With the arrival of Nitra-Chalk, applied in the spring, crops started to grow earlier and were heavier. Hay was more difficult to make.

Soon the chemical companies saw a



huge market. A 33% Nitrogen fertiliser was developed, together with Tetraploid rye grass (a vigorous wide leaf grass). Bumper crops followed. Fingerbar mowers would not cut it, hay turners would not turn it and it was too heavy a crop for the baler to take, even if you could get it dry enough – silage was then born out of necessity.

Drum mowers that did not block were invented and a whole range of harvesters appeared that could cut and throw the crop into trailers to be carted to the

clamp where, with just the right amount of compaction, the ensiled crop fermented to produce that familiar odour!

In more recent times, with the advent of round balers and polythene (clingfilm), silage could be made in a bale as well as in a clamp, although at a much higher price.

This brings me then on to haylage. As the name suggest, this is a cross between hay and silage. Perhaps the original concept was developed in circular tower silos, where the crop could be sealed when the tower was full. Today, in this country, much of the haylage is made in round bales, plastic wrapped, the same as silage.

The advantage is clear – it is more digestible than hay, because it is moist and of course it can be made in almost every conceivable condition of weather and from all types of grass. The down side is the cost and what to do with all that plastic wrap!

What about hay now? Well as a second or third cut perhaps, in a late sunny slot – and it is still “ah.... the smell”!

John Childs

Stone Walls

The recent removal of sections of ancient stone walling on Hewelsfield Common has given rise to concern over the conservation of the stone walls which form an integral part of our landscape. Nick Russell, the Assistant County Archaeologist, has told us that a field officer has been appointed for the Forest of Dean and that they want him to work with the Grasslands Project in carrying out a detailed survey of the stone walls in the two parishes. Once this is carried out we will know what the needs are for both conservation and restoration. Nick says he believes that funding will be available for this survey. It will probably involve colouring outline

maps showing the position of the walls and the state they are in. A colour coding that is yet to be worked out should make it relatively simple to record. The results would be fed into a database and the whole area shown on computer generated maps. This information would be invaluable if any is required in future to conserve these stone walls.

We would be interested to learn members' views on this proposed survey and whether they would be prepared to survey their own property. It is hoped that a survey can be carried out during the winter.

Peter Chard

Spring Meeting

On Tuesday 11th February we have Rachel Simpson who works jointly for the Countryside Agency and Surrey County Council coming to talk to us. Rachel is an expert on the management of pasture used for horses and will be giving us advice on how to retain biodiversity in pastures used for horses. There are a number of local landowners who seem reluctant to join our organisation since they believe that biodiversity and grazing by horses cannot be reconciled. Please put this date in your diary, talk to your neighbours about this meeting, and try and get them to come along.

LATE FLOWERS

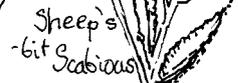
This year the grassland flowers are hanging on and on as a result of the dry weather. Last autumn they were pretty mushy by this time! The difficulty for the flower spotter, though, is in distinguishing the remaining summer flowers from the autumn ones.

Scabious is a late summer flower and gardeners might recognise it as a relation to *Knautia*. Commonly called 'Bachelor's Buttons' it is a tall, hairy perennial of grasslands. However, it is less common around here than *Sheep's-bit Scabious* which, in spite of its name is a *Campanula* and an annual so no relation, and *Devil's-bit Scabious* from the *Dipsacaceae* family!

What's in name?

Quite a lot, it would seem.

Devil's-bit Scabious



Before moving on, *Devil's-bit* is, apparently, short of root stock since the devil bit it off, although I must admit to not having dug it up and measured it. More helpfully, you should find the leaves smoother than *Sheep's-bit* and the flower head more rounded. They are all a soft, lilac-blue.

Also in the *Campanula* or Bellflower family is the *Harebell*, a lovely, delicate, nodding blue flower which follows the haymaking in September. It is fairly rare just around here but there is a delightful patch near the Freewood

below Hewelsfield Common

in the neglected fields alongside Bailey Lane.

It is, alas, being gradually encroached on by the bracken and is likely to disappear within a year or two.

Great Hairy Willow-herb



Rosebay Willowherb



After cheering us up with their stately rosy-pink spires of flowers, the Willow Herb group are busy irritating us once more with their dispersal of fluffy seeds.

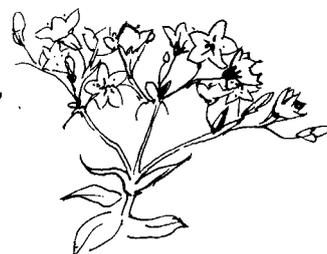
One benefit of last year's rains was that these were largely washed away.

Broad-leaved Willow-herb



Another pink survivor this month is the annual *Common Centaury*, with its crown of flowers emerging from a rosette of leaves on a stalk which varies in length from nothing to a few centimetres long, depending on the surrounding grass height. In Greek mythology the centaurs used it as a medicine.

Centaury



CW.

Reports on Field Visits

Our May visit started at Bryn House at the top of Hewelsfield Common, and gave an example of how not to manage grasslands. The grasses found at the bottom of a steep slope indicated a relatively high fertility level whereas higher up the predominance of sweet vernal grass and a variety of flowers including pignut, tormentil and the mountain pea, *Lathyrus montana*, showed the diversity of the flora where the fertility had been reduced. These fields had been grazed by sheep several years ago and then by donkeys, but had not been grazed for over a year and bracken had proliferated resulting in an abundance of bluebells along the slopes.

We then moved down the hill to Brook Farm and enjoyed the sight of an abundance of spotted orchids and yellow rattle in fields that are regularly cut for hay and the aftermath grazed in the autumn, showing us how effective management results in fields producing a fascinating mix of flowers.

We ended the afternoon at Sylvan House on the lower part of St Briavels Common which has a number of small fields rich in spotted orchids, twayblades, green veined orchids and a wide variety of grassland flora. These fields have been cut for hay, but they have an extremely narrow access and it has been increasingly difficult to get hay making carried out. The fields have low stonewalls which pose a problem in introducing animals for grazing.

The visit to three different sites gave us not only a taste of the variety that we have within a relatively small area but also served to remind us of the different management problems we face and that there is no single answer to how we manage our fields.



Peter Chard

On the 15th September fourteen members met at Jane Morgan's house after a brief but invigorating tour of the lanes and tracks of the Hudnalls area. We were shown several small paddocks, each of which is managed as the slope, drainage and access of the site dictate. The largest field, which is grazed solely by horses and is never topped, seemed to be in remarkably tidy condition, although areas of impeded drainage showed signs of reverting to Alder woodland and the headlands showed signs of bracken and bramble encroachment. Jane's treatment of bramble with SBK seems to have worked in all fields, but she has to accept the need for repeats annually. Lesser Celandine, Self Heal and Centaury were among the many wildflowers identified in Jeremy Doe's survey.

We discussed the huge Tyersal field boundary walls, and were told that these drybuilt walls in the Valley are possibly at risk from builders who buy the stone. This prompted discussion of the need to record and possibly find some way to protect walls within the Project area.

The strange fungi found in these fields were discussed, and in addition, George Peterken told us that Orchids, which have been outstanding this year, take four years to colonise a site, their success depending upon a fungal food source within the soil. So simply collecting the microscopic seed and scattering it is unlikely to do any good. Oops!

We inspected Jane's wildflower meadow, planted to the rarer type of flower, and finally viewed the hand held jungle buster with which she has single-handedly controlled all her acreage during the past year.

Finally we gathered in Jane's kitchen for a very welcome cup of tea and home-made biscuits before venturing once more upon the uncharted wasteland that is the Hudnalls.

John Josephi

Secretary's Plea on Field Visits and Record Keeping

The Committee would welcome some feedback on members' views of field visits. Is a spring and autumn visit the best pattern or would members prefer more or fewer field visits? Please make your views known.

The daunting species list that we requested members to complete is due for return at the AGM on Nov 12th. Even if like me you have only partially completed it because it was so difficult, please let me have it. Any record is useful. If you can't make the AGM either post it to me or leave it in my letter box as you pass by. We are building up impressive records and every little helps.

Peter Chard

The AGM will take place in the Mackenzie Hall, Brockweir on Tuesday 12th November starting at 7.30pm.

After the AGM James Marsden will be giving a talk about old orchards and their restoration. James is Head of Policy in the headquarters of English Nature, but he lives in Herefordshire and on this occasion he will be an orchard enthusiast and maker of cider and perry.

The aim of this Project is to conserve and enhance the landscape of the parishes of St Briavels, Hewelsfield & Brockweir by maintaining and managing the semi-natural grasslands and associated features.