

Parish Grasslands Project

Issue 4

January 2003

Next meetings:

- Tuesday 11th February:
Rachel Simpson of the Horse Pasture Management Project will talk on pasture and environmental management, grazing agreements, stabling, buildings and fencing.
- Tuesday 11th March:
Stone Walls on the Hudnalls

Mackenzie Hall
7.30pm

The Committee

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Secretary's Report

The Committee has been busy during the autumn with the following results:

Leaflet for Tourists

Part of the grant we received from the Countryside Agency for the creation of a data base of semi-natural grasslands was to produce a leaflet containing information for visitors to the area. Thanks to George Peterken who wrote the texts and supplied the photographs, we are in the final stage of production of 3,000 leaflets that will go to tourist offices, hotels and other outlets in the Wye Valley. We should have leaflets available at our next meeting. The committee would welcome volunteers to help us distribute these leaflets to the outlets.

Stone Walls

You will recall the concern expressed at the removal of stone walls in Hewelsfield last summer. We have met the AONB Officer, Andrew Nixon, and John Hoyle, the Archaeological Field Officer for the Forest of Dean, who have asked us to organise a joint meeting with the Local History and Brockweir Environmental Groups. They wish to carry out a survey of the stonewalls in our parishes. The article on stone walls in this newsletter explains the variety of forms that exist. We hope to give each form a code and to record it on a map of field boundaries. This information can then be assembled as a database and later be transferred to a map of the area that will show the

distribution. The meeting will be on March 11th at the Mackenzie Hall and all this will be explained in detail then. John Hoyle can produce a map of your immediate surroundings showing field boundaries printed on a single sheet of A3. To do this he requires an OS grid reference number for your property. If you would like a map of your property showing field boundaries, please send me your grid reference by Feb 28th and I will ask John to bring the maps to the meeting.

Machinery Ring

A subcommittee has been actively pursuing the idea of purchasing a set of machinery to meet the needs of working small fields to enhance flower rich pastures. The idea is that this machinery would be available for hire with a skilled operative. John Childs, Andy Rowlands, Mike Davis and I have investigated other areas that have set up and successfully operated this type of scheme. The committee has approved the work that we have carried out and asked us together with Jim Swanson to investigate grant funding for this scheme. We will publish further details at a later stage.

Library

We have acquired a number of useful publications as listed on page 3. If you would like to borrow them, please let me know and I will sign them out to you.

Peter Chard

Spring Field Visits

Saturday 26th April Harthill Cottage, Sandy Lane, Hewelsfield
by kind permission of Andy and Zoe Rowlands. 2pm
Saturday 24th May Firtree Cottage, Cockshoot Hill, Coldharbour, St
Briavels by kind permission of Roger Gaunt. 2pm

Stone Walls on the Common

Walls are part of the local landscape, and they are also functional field boundaries – or they were when they were built. Today, we are concerned about their future, partly because many are in a poor condition and cannot do their job as stock-proof boundaries, but also because some have recently been removed, ie, the walls have been treated as quarries for building stone. If we are serious about maintaining good management of the fields, we should be equally concerned about the condition of the field boundaries.

Most walls were formed with the original settlement of the Common, ie, they must be about 200 years old, though they have been patched up many times since. They are not the only form of field boundary: hedges are at least as common, and we also have a curious hybrid boundary type that appears to be a hedge, but contains a low wall or an irregular row of stones.

The only reference I know to the construction of the walls comes from William Creswick's Where I was bred. On page 24 he notes that *“the clearing of land comprised the removal of very large stones and to the wonderment of how this was performed it is interesting to know that the very large rocks that formed the boundary fence were rolled down the hill to the lower level, so that as it (sic.) well known on the Common that the boundary fence is that of the land on the higher ground.”*

The walls round our fields bear this out. Those that run along the contour are massive, containing huge stones that could not possibly be moved by any individual. Some are so thick that, were they more smooth and

stable, a car could be driven along the top. When they collapse, it is clear that they consist of a well-built dry stone skin of largish stones, and a core of smaller rubble. In one case, the upside is a beautifully constructed wall, but the downside face is extremely rough, confirming William Creswick's point that the upside owner built the wall, and the downside faced onto the remnants of the wooded Common.

The walls running up and down the slope are generally much thinner. A few are no more than a stone thick, and clearly these were meant solely as a barrier. Most, however, are thicker than they need to be to form a wall, so one is forced to conclude that most walls were essentially stone dumps, formed into lines and faced as walls. Clearing the fields of stones was just as important as forming walls to restrain stock. This deduction is reinforced by another kind of 'wall'. We have massive, wide piles of stone that are clearly dumps, but have also been neatly faced as a wall around part of their margin.

The other interesting wall feature is the trees. Both thick and thin walls contain trees that were clearly there before the wall was built. Some are lime, beech and oak trees, with massive butts hidden in the wall, supporting numerous heavy trunks. These trees are relicts of the pre-19th century wooded Common, and until the early 20th century they must have been pollarded regularly. Today, as the branches have grown into great trees, usually weighed down by ivy, the ancient butts have

expanded and have become more rotten at the core, and the walls are being prized apart. Clearly the original squatters did not bother to clear the trees, but just incorporated them in the walls. Narrow walls, originally built up to a tree on one side, continue as thicker walls on the other, perhaps built by different people. Where such trees have since died, we have a gap in the wall.



These walls are part of local history, but they need to be maintained if they are also to be useful. The Grassland Project has begun to enquire about

possible financial support for restoration and maintenance, but in order to make any progress at all we will certainly need to know how many walls we have, what condition they are in, and which we most need to maintain, historically and functionally. Accordingly, we have been thinking in terms of two types of survey. One would be to ask individual owners to make a fairly straightforward map and notes of their field boundaries, in the hope that enough people would respond to enable us to quantify what we have. The other would be a more detailed sample survey, carried out by a single surveyor, which would record features that would be of interest to the County archaeologists. Put together with an assessment of their significance as historical and landscape features, we hope to develop a convincing case for support.

An equivalent stone walls project is already up and running on the Welsh side.

George Peterken

A Summary of Grazing Characteristics taken from the Breed Profiles Handbook



	Impact on Vegetation	Dunging Behaviour	Impact on Trees/Shrubs
Cattle	Non selective grazers. Remove long coarse grass to average height, but do not selectively eat flower heads, maintaining herb diversity. Trample bracken and low	Avoid grazing close to dung pats and create mosaic form.	Remove leaves and twigs by tearing action which is highly damaging.
Horses	Selective grazers, create mosaic, of benefit to some species, invertebrates, small mammals and birds of prey. Produce bare patches which can result in	Some equines dung in selective areas which become enriched, while other areas retain low fertility and may be botanically	Slow down shrub encroachment by browsing seedlings and nutritionally rich tips.
Sheep	Selective grazers take flowering heads and buds, can be problematic for species rich swards. Avoid aromatic plants and produce very tight sward if over grazed. Little damage to ground unless	Spread dung widely, but some concentration in "loafing" or resting areas.	Some breeds such as Hebridean sheep are excellent at curbing or removing shrubs dependent on palatability.
Donkeys	Non selective, graze on wide range of grasses including coarse species, sedges and rushes. Create bare spots to roll on,	Dung in selected areas causing localised enrichment and leaving large areas of low fertility with	Spend 20% of time browsing leaves, twigs and strip bark.
Pigs	Rooting behaviour destroys sward, but can be useful since pigs eat bracken rhizomes in Autumn. At low density pigs can clear overgrown land and create bare patches. Some species (Kunikuni) do	Random dunging unless at areas of supplementary feeding.	Eat leaves and strip bark, can chew roots and destroy shrubs.
Goats	Graze and browse, but more highly selective than sheep targeting on seed heads of particular species. Will climb in	Similar to sheep, dung well spread except in resting places.	Very effective browsers and can control invading shrubs. Will strip bark in Winter and kill small

Library

The Breed Profiles Handbook

Information on a wide range of grazing animals. Details on grazing habits and effect on vegetation.

Practical Solutions Handbook

Information on environmental machinery to manage a variety of habitats.

Grazing Animals Project GAP

Details of a number of schemes throughout the country.

GAP News

A newsletter with contributions from members.

The Lowland Grassland

Detailed information on different types of semi-natural grassland

Management Handbook

and methods of management.

Sustainable Wye Valley Livestock Feasibility Study

Machinery Ring Information Pack

Enact (managing land for wildlife)

Various copies of English Nature magazine

The Soil Code

DEFRA publication

Code for the protection of Air

DEFRA publication

Code for the protection of Water

DEFRA publication

Green Code, Yellow Code

Control of Use of Pesticides DEFRA

Best Farming Practices

Profiting from a Good Environment DEFRA

The Countryside Stewardship Scheme

Information and how to apply DEFRA

A summary of different grazing habits taken from the Breed Profile is published above and a summary of Lowland Grass Management will be published in the summer newsletter. Will members wishing to borrow any of these documents please ring Peter Chard on 01594 530513.

Old Orchards

Our AGM on November 12th was one of the most fascinating AGM's I have ever attended. I am not saying that because of the wonderful (free) cider tasting at the end, either! It is because we were treated to an exhilarating and eye-opening account from James Marsden from Gregg's Pit Orchard, Much Marcle, about how to bring back an old orchard, and what rewards this can bring with it.

Rewards? Well, it's only four acres, but the way he told it, obviously it felt like a small kingdom to him! He had researched orchards a long way back -- as long ago in Europe as 5000BC and as far away in origin as the Tien Shan mountains in China -- and felt huge satisfaction in being involved in something so ancient. He was also sharing in the difficult process of protecting endangered species in his trees. He mentioned a Worcestershire orchard which had been managed a decade longer than his and which had "a list of beetles which included five Red Data Book species (among which was the Noble Chafer) and seven nationally notable species." He was clearly proud of his achievements.

What does it have to do with us?
Well, not all our fields were just

grass. This area also had orchards. Dick Townshend used to have quite a few trees, and some are still there. Just look out for that glorious flush of white pear blossom in April/May and you'll probably be looking at a solitary old king of the orchard, from a time when many people made a little of their own to drink. Some of our trees are 'one-offs', with no name, but some may be from known varieties such as Clipper Dick, Bloody Bastard, Blakeney Red (also called Lightening Pear 'goes straight through' or Circus Pear 'once round and out' and so on). There are in fact about 100 Gloucestershire varieties, with about 200 names!

Maybe you have seen some old fruit trees around the neighbourhood, or better still have some on your land, and want them named or maybe even want to graft some fresh stock. Well, there are ways to find out about them. Each autumn at the Malvern Three Counties Show there is the chance to identify these old fruits and receive advice. They hold several collections of old cider trees. There are local organisations which share information and activities and also some local cider is already being made by Wye Valley Cider. Another product of old orchards is the mistletoe. James told us that

because his orchard is so healthy he has enough spare to take to market each year, and big bunches can go for a good price. However, the pleasure of keeping such special places alive and healthy is really what The Parish Grasslands wants to do, and to build a bank of knowledge. So please tell us if you know anything about our local orchards or want to join us in saving them.

Carol Wilson

Local varieties of Perry Pears

- Moorcroft (English Bicknor, Lydbrook Mitcheldean and Ruardean)
- Nailer (common in the Forest of Dean)
- Red Longdon (Lydbrook and Mitcheldean)
- Red Pear (Ruardean)
- Tumper (English Bicknor and St Briavels)
- Blakeney Red (widespread in the Forest of Dean)

Field Records

I have now started the lists of flowers and grasses recorded by members on those over complicated species list. They are proving to be fascinating and show differences between St Briavels and Hewelsfield. A big thank you to those who gave me their lists. If any of you have still got lists, even if they



are only partially completed, please let me have them to add to the record. George and I intend to edit the list for next year and try and make it more simple.

Peter Chard

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.