

# Parish Grasslands Project

Issue 5

May 2003

*Next meeting:*

**Saturday  
24th May**

**Field meeting at  
Firtree Cottage,  
Cockshoot Hill,  
starting at 2pm.**

## The Committee

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## Chairman's Roundup

Now that the Project's third season of field meetings is already underway, it may be a good moment to take stock of progress to date and of prospects for the future.

We have had an active winter programme of indoor meetings starting with an inspiring talk on old orchards by James Marsden, progressing to horse pasture management by Rachel Simpson and most recently a presentation on our drybuilt stone walls by a triumvirate of specialists. I am sure that many of us have gained something from these meetings which we can put into practice on our own pastures. Please contact either Peter Chard or me if you want to take further action on any specific front.

**Walls** are the hot topic at present, and it appears that our local History Society are prepared to help with the surveying during next autumn and winter, but of course a walk round your own acres with a map may provide surprises pleasant or otherwise.

**Wildflower Charting:** A new and simpler plant list has now been produced for recording of a rather shorter list of plants for us to have another attempt, and of course *now is the month* for us to be out with dog and stick, beating the bounds and peering into the undergrowth. Two copies are enclosed with this newsletter. It does give us important information if everyone can complete a sheet and return it to Peter Chard in the autumn. The second sheet is for your own records.

**Countryside Stewardship:** Our Spring field meeting programme has commenced with an afternoon with Andy and Zoe Rowlands who showed us how the DEFRA grants tie in

with the fencing and hedge planting that they have carried out themselves. It was here that we viewed old boundaries, reservoirs and a sheep dip that had long remained hidden. We now have 11 owners within the Scheme, totalling approximately 100 acres, so if you like the look of what our fellow members are doing there is nothing to stop you entering the Scheme yourself.

**The Machinery Ring:** Our sub-committee has spent much time exploring specifications, costs, grants and user demand (the latter currently standing at 95 acres) and it now looks as though grant aid towards a trailer may speed up the movement of the contractor between jobs. If our applications for grant aid are successful we may start up in the autumn; however, this will probably not be operational until 2004.

**The Future:** Closest to us at present is the second field meeting which will take place at Firtree Cottage, Cockshoot Hill with Roger Gaunt starting at 2pm on Saturday 24th May. Later in the Summer we hope to arrange a social evening (probably a Barbecue) where we can all talk at once without feeling guilty about not paying our respects to some obscure botanical specimen! Later again (November) we will arrange an indoor meeting with a guest speaker to which you will be urged to bring a friend as part of a recruiting drive. We surely all have neighbours/local friends who should be members?

Let's hope we all have an instructive, enjoyable and profitable summer in and around the two parishes.

John Josephi

# Orchards and Countryside Stewardship

Gloucestershire is a nationally important county for orchards, particularly plums and pears. Traditional orchards are a feature of the Gloucestershire landscape. They are important for cultural and historic reasons and help maintain the traditional mosaic of landscape types and different habitats. Once there would have been an orchard close to virtually every farm to provide fruit and shelter for young lambs and calves but the majority of England's 'old' orchards have been lost to neglect, grubbing up and development. 75% of Gloucestershire's 'old' orchards have been lost in the last 50 years.

Up to 7,000 tree fruit varieties are recorded in Britain alone, including apples, pears, plums and cherries. Old

apple orchards may have contained up to 200 varieties; nowadays a modern commercial orchard is unlikely to have more than nine varieties. Many old fruit varieties are rare and may have been local to a particular region or county or even to a specific village.

The importance of maintaining diversity of fruit varieties in orchards is now recognised for a number of reasons:

- maintenance of a large gene bank - old varieties are often resistant to specific pests and diseases and provide an important genetic resource that cannot be replaced;
- preserving a valuable cultural heritage;
- often successful pollinators;
- ensure continuity of crop throughout the season;
- tolerance to a wider range of environmental factors.

## Wildlife

Old orchards may have occupied the same site for hundreds of years, often escaping agricultural "improvements" and offer a refuge

for many kinds of wildlife. They are important for wildlife because:

- The short-lived trees produce lots of decaying wood, good habitat for hole-nesting birds and for insects.
- The fruit provides a source of food for birds and insects in the autumn and winter.
- The blossom is a good source of nectar for bumblebees, butterflies and insects.
- They often have associated habitats such as hedges and ponds and unimproved grassland which can support wild daffodils, cowslips and orchids and are important for overall biodiversity.



## Biodiversity Action Plan

Traditional orchards can be an important habitat for many animals and birds including dormice, hares, greater horseshoe bats, great crested newts, barn owls, woodpeckers,

bullfinches, tree sparrows and song thrushes, rare insects such as noble chafer and stag beetle, and plants such as mistletoe. Many of these species are rare and protected and traditional orchards are identified as a priority habitat in the Gloucestershire Biodiversity Action Plan. BAP targets are to:

- ❖ Prevent further loss of old orchards and where appropriate restore, enhance or expand them through favourable management.
- ❖ Increase the knowledge and understanding of the importance of old orchards throughout Gloucestershire amongst landowners and the public.
- ❖ Develop and instigate a marketing strategy for traditional fruit varieties within the county, thus enhancing the long term viability of old orchards.

## Countryside Stewardship

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) is keen to encourage landowners to restore old orchards and meet these

targets. It operates the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, which offers payments to farmers and land managers to improve the natural beauty and diversity of the countryside.

The scheme funds the restoration of traditional apple, pear, cherry, plum or damson, cider or perry orchards, characterised by widely spaced standard fruit trees of old and local varieties, normally at a spacing of less than 150 trees/hectare. The scheme does not fund modern orchards consisting of closely spaced dwarf varieties.

Under the scheme the agreement holder enters a 10 year agreement during which time they agree a schedule of work to manage the orchard for cultural, historic and wildlife objectives and where appropriate plant new trees of local varieties.

The payments are split into two types; land management payments (mentioned below) and capital item payments. Capital payments are for one-off work including orchard tree pruning, planting maiden and standard trees and tree tubes and enclosures.

Additional payments for livestock management such as fencing and water supply may also be available.

Land management payments are paid annually a year in arrears (i.e. for an agreement starting in October 2003 the first payment will be made in October 2004). They are intended for the ongoing management of the trees and the grassland underneath. Where the orchard has more than 50% of the existing trees remaining then the payment is £250/ha, to take into account annual pruning costs and other tree maintenance work. Where fewer trees remain the annual grant is usually £85/ha.

## Management plans

Because of the individual requirements of orchards, before you begin to carry out any work it is a good idea to produce a management

plan which should:

- Identify the varieties of fruit tree present in the orchard and any history associated with it.
- Highlight any special wildlife or other interest. Conservation of standing and fallen dead wood is of particular importance and it is important that any pruning work is carried out sensitively and does not lead to the removal of this important habitat.
- Detail tree restoration and tree replanting work giving type of rootstock, varieties, numbers, timing and location. It is not necessary or even beneficial to restock the whole of the orchard straight away. As part of a Countryside Stewardship agreement trees can be restored and planted gradually over the course of the agreement as time and money

allow. In some cases it may be necessary to order trees from nurseries a year or more in advance, particularly if specific varieties are to be grafted to order. All work should be carried out by skilled labour and should follow traditional practice.

- Describe how the grass beneath the trees is to be managed. This will depend on the diversity of the sward, the species present and the past and existing management. Generally Countryside Stewardship prescriptions are to graze extensively with sheep or cattle where appropriate or take a late hay cut and graze the aftermaths.
- Describe any existing public access and any proposals for increased public enjoyment by new access or opening the orchard for special use such as fruit picking. There are additional payments for new

public access and educational access under Countryside Stewardship.

A management plan will be required as part of the Countryside Stewardship agreement in all but the most straightforward of cases. This should be discussed with your Countryside Stewardship advisor before undertaking any work; where this requires expert advice a payment of £300 may be available to employ a professional to produce a detailed plan.

Chris Wedge

## Horse Pasture Management

A horse can produce up to 20 kgs of muck a day or 9 tonnes a year! This we learned in February from Rachel Simpson of the Horse Pasture Management Project who came to talk to us about her work. The Project, based in Surrey, seeks to improve the management of horse paddocks and thus reduce the negative effects of 'horsiculture' - fields looking like dust bowls in summer and quagmires in winter, white enamel baths used as water troughs, damaged and neglected trees and hedges - and worst of all in Rachel's opinion - yards of WHITE electric tape flapping in the breeze. (Apparently electric tape is available in green or brown and horses can see it just as well!)



The key to good grassland management is to rotate the grazing and not to overgraze. Keeping the grass height to 2 - 3 inches will let it grow plenty of leaves so that it can make its own nutrients from sunlight and protect it from damage from horses hooves. Allow the grass to recover by sectioning off parts of the field with (green or brown) electric tape; resting for 6 months from autumn through to mid-summer will also break the life cycle of most internal parasites. (It is also a good idea to follow horses with sheep or cattle which will also break the worm cycle.) In winter, Rachel thought it better to poach a small area in order to rest the major part. If you want to encourage wild flowers, then keep the horses off the pasture until the

wildflowers have set seed, do not use artificial fertiliser or weedkiller - remember a weed is only a plant in the wrong place - but do remove poisonous plants like ragwort. Invasive weeds such as docks, thistles and nettles can be cut regularly to stop them spreading. Do not give supplementary feeding in the field. Protect trees and hedges, and if possible leave a 1 - 2 metre wide strip of rough grass on the field margins to provide a wildlife haven. And as for all that muck, well Rachel's advice was to pick it up - but opinions differ!

In fact it is also possible to improve grassland which has suffered through neglect, perhaps now overtaken by bracken and brambles. Native ponies at very low stocking densities are being used in land management projects in the Mendip, Quantock and Blackdown Hills for conservation grazing. As browsers as well as grazers, they prevent woody species such as ash and birch encroaching, but do not touch the wildflowers.

With the decline in dairy farming locally, more horses are occupying our fields, so if we want to keep our old meadows and pastures and the wildlife and wildflowers within them as well as our quality landscape, we would be well advised to follow the guidelines of the Horse Pasture Management Project. More details on [www.surreycc.gov.uk/horsepastureproject](http://www.surreycc.gov.uk/horsepastureproject)

Sally Secrett

## How Supermarkets affect Wildlife

How can this be, you ask with a sigh?

Well, it all started six or seven years ago, when at Cowshill we were fattening to Bacon, 4,000 pigs a year and along comes the latest wonder 'Farm Assurance'. We are told that traceability of a product, in our case Bacon, Ham and Pork, was imperative as was a high level 'Code of Practice'. This was demanded by the supermarkets and therefore, of course, the supplying slaughterhouses. If you wanted to sell pigs, compliance was the only option. Your reward would be a higher price and obviously your stock would be preferred to Imported.

So then, the 'Code of Practice':

*Size of pen:* Pigs must not be crowded (as people are in inner cities).

*Drinkers:* 10 pigs to a drinker, able to supply one pint per minute (how does your 'Local' shape up?)

*Environmental Enrichment:* Meaning lots of straw and balls to play with (no gang warfare in the piggery).

*Transport:* Lorries must also comply (we must not have pigs packed in like people on trains).

*Veterinary:* Quarterly vet inspections for the whole herd (no NHS eighteen month waiting lists here).

*Records:* Paper, paper and more paper (well the paperwork is more important than the stock isn't it?)

**On a serious note though, I believe most farms really do care. Livestock should be treated with respect. Yet 'Farm Assurance' must progress and so the 'Code of Practice' moves on to...**

*Vermin:* Rats and mice. We are told there are more rats than people (and that is just counting those

with four legs) but not in the piggery. A poison plan should be in place. Who then cares for the Barn Owl who chooses a sick rat for supper during his nightly visit?

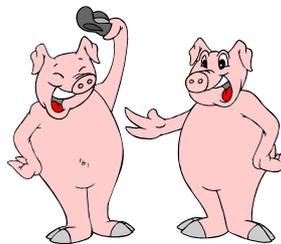
And now to the 'Meal House'... This should be shut off from the resident birds but what about the pheasants and songbirds, sparrows and tits that rely on a free breakfast and supper? Are you the person that would deny this feed? Do you think its 'droppings' may contaminate your bacon butty?

Finally, *fallen stock*... That's an animal that has died, to you and me. That is on the farm rather than the slaughterhouse. Now it must be burnt, buried or sent to kennels. On no account must a carcass be allowed to rot naturally in a manure midden. On this farm we have three resident buzzards and four ravens (yes, ravens) – do you think they eat grain or carrion?

So, there you 'have it', as they say, 'Farm Assurance' schemes are working at complete cross purposes with the countryside birdlife. As for the supermarkets – do we get paid extra? We do not. They answer: 'We can buy cheaper abroad', in which case, do you think these regulations are complied with elsewhere? Yet if we the British do not comply, our pigs will not even be considered.

So the next time, when shopping, you see the little 'Red Tractor' – spare a thought for the Barn Owl at Cowshill...

John Childs



**Reminder: The next field meeting is on Saturday, 24th May, 2pm, at Firtree Cottage, Cockshoot Hill.**

*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.*