

# Parish Grasslands Project

Issue 6

October 2003

## NOTICE OF AGM

**OUR AGM  
WILL BE HELD  
AT THE  
MACKENZIE  
HALL  
ON TUESDAY  
4TH NOVEMBER  
AT  
7.30PM**

### The Committee

#### *Chairman:*

John Josephi  
Tel: 01594 530598

#### *Secretary:*

Peter Chard  
Tel: 01594 530513

#### *Treasurer:*

Andy Rowlands  
Tel: 01594 530741

#### *Committee Members:*

John Childs 530046  
Jane Morgan 530215  
George Peterken 530452  
Carol Wilson 530039

#### *Newsletter:*

Sally Secrett 530539

## Chairman's Message: Whither the Grasslands?

It is now a little over two years since George Peterken approached members of our committee with the proposal that within our two parishes the numerous small-field landowners should be invited to participate in a project designed to identify and protect the ancient and possibly rare plant communities found within those small fields. The guiding principles of the project were to maximise the benefits of ownership through shared experience, outside advice and expertise, grant aid and possibly co-operative effort to overcome the difficulties that prevent us from managing our fields as we would wish.

We have had a very active two years, and my impression is that we have achieved much of what was originally proposed, as well as getting a lot of fun out of it. Additionally, we have become a significant element within the Wye Valley AONB and have seen the formation of a similar group on the Welsh bank of the Wye.

There are two objectives still to be addressed, one of them being the continuing aim to introduce as many of our neighbouring owners to the project as possible, so please invite any likely new neighbours to our meetings. The other is the need to make contract labour available

to members in a form that is timely, cost effective and convenient. Our machinery sub-committee have spent a lot of time and effort researching and devising a formal bid for funding to achieve this end, but have been told we must resubmit our bid in order to satisfy certain formal requirements.

So you see, we are not yet established. We need the tools to finish the job, and without them the project could lose its impetus. A working locally based contractor with specialist machinery would enable the membership to manage their fields as they would wish, making our project a template for other small locally based conservation groups.

This is my view of where we stand. You may disagree! But I am putting this on the front page because I think the moment has come to decide where we go from here. George Peterken has plenty of ideas still to be explored. We want to know what **you** want from the Project, so please come to our AGM and tell us just that.

I look forward to seeing you at the Mackenzie Hall on 4th November.

John Josephi

**T**he AGM will be on Tuesday 4th November, 7.30pm, at the Mackenzie Hall. In addition to the formal business, we will be able to discuss the somewhat mixed progress on our aim to put together a machinery ring that would form the basis of a management service, and we can up-date participants in the Stewardship Scheme. Once the meeting has been completed, we will have a talk by Simon Barker, who is the Nature Conservation advisor for the National Trust, West Midlands Region. He is a Lepidopterist who last year surveyed the Dean area for the Forestry Commission and Butterfly Conservation. Although he concentrated on the local rarities, Dingy Skipper, Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary, Grayling and Wood White, he will also talk about the common species, noticeable local grassland butterflies, such as the Marbled White, and something about local moths. So, lots of fine pictures, and some useful information on how grassland management can help our butterflies and moths. Make a note now to come.

## Organic or Gimmick?

In recent years we have seen continual governmental persuasion for British farmers to go 'organic'. To many of us this is bordering on the bazaar – since the war agriculture has been encouraged to grow bigger and better in every aspect and commodity, aided by every technological, chemical and genetic advance imaginable. Nowhere in the world has so much been produced by so few. This of course is too logical to continue, the buying power of the super-stores looks to a now global market – to countries where labour costs are a fraction of our own, where tariffs, levies and subsidies turn costs and prices to Spam.

Is it then the fashion to go organic? This of course is a return to 1950s style farming – no fertilizer, no sprays and no antibiotics – but is this fair? Do we see the accountant give up his calculator for an abacus? We do not. Do we see the salesperson swap his car for a pony and trap? We do not. Do we see office workers abandon their computers for pencil and paper? We do not.

So what is organic – 'pertaining to an organ or to organs

of animals and plants, pertaining to objects that have organs, hence to the animal or vegetable world exhibiting animal or vegetable life' – says Blackies English Dictionary of the 1960s – thus we have managed to elaborate somewhat on that in 40 years.

If part of the ethos of 'organic' food is freshness, then this must be good but supermarket shelves laden with 'organic' veg from the cheapest places in the world? How can they be serious?! What about the pollution from all those miles of transportation? Surely what we really want is traditional, locally prepared produce; freshly cut and prepared food. If organic is not to be a gimmick the only place that it is available is from your own garden or next best, from your local grower or farm shop.

And so, the next time you are at the Garden Centre will you pass by the path clearers and rose fertilizers and head perhaps to the dried pellet chicken manure – but were they fed grain that had been fertilized and sprayed?

John Childs

## Plant Surveys

The botanical find of 2003 was Dyers' Greenweed (*alias Genista tinctoria*), which looks like a miniature broom, with dense clusters of yellow pea-like flowers on short, shrubby growth in somewhat overgrown turf. When the Chepstow botanist, W.A.Shoolbred, wrote his local Flora in 1920, it was "not uncommon in rough meadows" and was specifically recorded at Hewelsfield, but it is now rare. It turned up in Peter and Ann Chard's field, a nice reward for all the hard work they have put into the project. I think he has collected some seed, so others may have a chance to establish it.



Finding populations of uncommon species is one of the benefits of recording. Since the start of the Parish Grassland Project we have encouraged members to record plants on their properties, and many of us have had the benefit of specialist survey skills of the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust. At an early stage, Ann Lawson and friends also collected lists from various fields, and I have kept my eyes open while walking locally. The result is that we now know a good deal about which plant species are where, and whose fields are richest.

Plants lists are simple enough to compile, but only if one can identify the species. They can be used for:

1. Compiling 'league tables' of fields from the richest to the poorest. It is always useful to know which are the 'best' fields, and which have the most scope for improvement.
2. Characterising individual fields ecologically. For example, plants can tell us which fields are strongly acid, and which have more fertile soils.
3. Mapping species over the whole common. For example, all the harebell records seem to come from the top levels, where the soils seem to be driest.
4. Monitoring changes, ie, detecting when species disappear or colonise.

Last year we produced a recording sheet with a short list of species, concentrating on those species that were both informative and readily identifiable. We cut out the grasses and common species, because they were too difficult to identify and/or would tell us little about the particular character of individual fields. We also hoped that they might be more encouraging for those who do not devote all their waking hours to botany.

At the time of writing, I don't know what Peter Chard has had back, but even before this summer we already had many lists and records. During this winter, I

hope to sort through what we have, and perhaps come up with a preliminary league table. My bet is that the richest property will prove to be Liz Rush's fields at Sylvan House, appropriately enough, for they seem to be the core inspiration of Flora Klickmann's "flower patch" books, of local fame. Liz is the guardian of the only green-veined orchids on the common, also has twayblade orchids in other fields, and much else besides. More on

this in a later Newsletter, but, if you want your fields to be up with the Manchester Uniteds and Arsenal's of this world, and not down amongst the Accrington Stanleys, this is the time to send in your records!

George Peterken

## Marketing Meat from Conservation Grazing on the Woolhope Dome

The Woolhope Dome is a geological formation of Silurian Limestones, Shales and Sandstone that covers about 15,000 acres in mid-eastern Herefordshire. The variation in rock types and associated soil types has led to a vast array of wildlife in the area, from acid to base rich grassland communities along with many ancient woodland sites and traditional orchards rich in flora and fauna.

In recent times the economic significance of these habitats has decreased for the landowners, leading to a reduction in the management and in some cases the destruction of important wildlife. The Woolhope Dome Project has been working for the past 3 years to safeguard these areas by improving their financial returns and thus their value to the landowners, safeguarding them for the future.

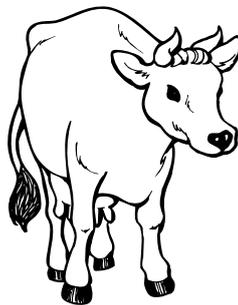
The project is core funded by English Nature, the Forestry Commission, Herefordshire Nature Trust and the Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. We have recently received a grant from the Herefordshire Rivers Leader + program to implement a grazing scheme and machinery ring for the grassland in the area and to initiate a marketing strategy to promote orchard, woodland and grassland produce.

During the last 3 years the process has been one of consultation, training and awareness building in the area, along with the collection of important information about the wildlife in the area. Over this period approximately 150 acres of "priority" grassland has been identified and audited as to its needs for management. This included an assessment of its fencing and water supply requirements. The new grant will pay for fencing and water supply along with a management grant for the grazing or mowing of these selected grasslands in an appropriate manner. The payment is to the grazier whether or not he/she owns the land and can be combined with Countryside Stewardship Scheme payments.

All of this should ensure the management of these grasslands over the next two years but not into the distant future. Grants will not last forever and so we were faced with the problem of how we could safeguard the long-term future of the important habitats in the area.

Grass and hay have fed large herbivores for millennia and so

the obvious answer to economic viability is to sell those large herbivores. The conditions of the grazing payment require a lower intensity farming system that is obviously less profitable for farmers. To counter this there had to be a premium on the meat price. We considered setting up our own branded product but found the costs and expertise needed prohibitive. Instead of this we have been linking producers to the Traditional Breeds Meat Marketing Scheme and encouraging farmers to change over their stock to rare or traditional breeds (another condition of the grazing payment is that rare breeds are used). In a month we will have Longhorn cattle on the Dome and Wiltshire Horn sheep arriving in the spring to graze important grassland sites and this is all thanks to local farmers involved in the project.



The rare breeds do well on unimproved pasture and will eat the coarser vegetation to control scrub and weeds. The farmers/graziers can get a £0.20p/kg premium for their meat and this makes it financially viable.

I think one of the most important aspects of the system is the involvement of farmers and graziers in the process. We had considered purchasing our own grazing animals and employing a shepherd but looking back I think, that for our situation, we have the right scenario. The local farmers are involved in hands on management of priority grasslands and see the benefits of their actions on the ground. They also see the benefits of the meat premiums and have shown great interest in using traditional breeds on a larger scale on their own, improved, grasslands. This will in turn lead to larger areas of land, in many cases adjacent to the priority grasslands, managed in a sensitive way and more importantly, still profitable.

The funding will not last forever and so it shouldn't! It will be the local people who will manage these areas in the future as they have done for the last few hundred years and still be able to make a good profit.

If you would like to know where to get local, traditional breed meat or other local produce such as cider or charcoal please get in touch with Rob Havard on : 01432 356 872. Or email rhavard@herefordwt.cix.co.uk

## Spring Field Visits

Our first field visit of the year was to Zoe and Andy Rowlands at Harthill Cottage, Hewelsfield, where they graze three horses and numerous (Shetland) sheep on 18 acres. Before the rain set in, we walked the fields and looked at what could have been an old dipping pond. Zoe and Andy have joined the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and, as well as receiving the annual management payment, have been able to claim grants for a new hedgerow and fencing, water troughs and gates. Their view is that although the Stewardship Scheme might seem rather onerous in terms of rules and regulations, in reality it is useful in that it provides welcome financial assistance. Management of the land this year has involved cross-grazing of the sheep and horses, but in the future they would hope to make hay using the small machinery the Project hopes to acquire.

Our second field visit was to Firtree Cottage, Cockshoot Hill, by kind permission of Roger Gaunt. Here there are three fields, two of which are grazed continuously and the other from early September to Easter allowing flora to develop through the summer. Roger used to have two donkeys, but one died last autumn and there is now a pony from HAPPA as company for the remaining donkey. The pony eats more and grazes more closely than the donkey, and in a year's time it might be interesting to compare the difference. The first field we looked at had a patch of Japanese Knotweed which Roger had been advised to keep cutting off. There

was also ragwort, but apparently that is not a problem unless cut and dried (as in hay). The up-side is that Roger had a fly-past from a Cinnabar moth, the caterpillars of which use ragwort. The second field had a fascinating collection of stone gate posts, probably quarried on site as a stone mason had once lived at the cottage. The third field (ungrazed) had more Common Twayblade than the other two and also Adders Tongue Fern. Bracken was a problem throughout and a 7HP rotary grass cutter had been acquired (and was demonstrated) which would be used to keep cutting the bracken to try and get it under control.

Austyn Williams, born at nearby Rock Cottage and the 'fundri' on the Hudnalls, recalled how the fields had been used in the past and after walking Roger's fields, we went out on to The Rocks to be shown the seed field, the hay field and the pasture field. When Austyn was a boy the commoners were well nigh self-sufficient and dependent on their land. One difference nowadays is that the bracken is generally much worse than it used to be, but the field boundaries of drystone walls, some incorporating enormous boulders, remain on the whole intact.

We are grateful to our hosts for allowing us to tramp over their land - and for refreshments provided.

Sally Secrett

## Machinery Moving Slowly

The machinery sub committee has, over the course of the summer, applied to the Heritage Lottery Fund for the bulk of the funding for the specialist machinery needed to care for the local meadows. Unfortunately this first application has been turned down with some concerns raised over the project's ability to ensure individuals who enjoy the use of the machinery maintain their fields in a manner which reflects the aims of the Parish Grasslands Project. We are in discussion with the Lottery and hope to resolve this situation over the coming weeks.

The Heritage Lottery were, however, very complimentary about the scheme and suggested that we try to enhance further and request the funding for some of our educational initiatives, but made it clear that our application was quite unusual and asked for our patience while they try to resolve the issues. A second (bigger) application, when it comes will be made in conjunction with the Monmouthshire Meadows Project. On a more positive note funding has been pledged from both the Wye Valley AONB and the Forest of Dean District Council.

The machinery we are hoping to buy is aimed at meeting the needs of the members whose fields are often small, difficult to

access and extremely steep. A highly manoeuvrable tractor with a low centre of gravity has been identified and attachments including a 'Bracken Basher' are also seen as necessary. There will also be the machinery to make small bale hay/haylage as well as a flail mower for field edges and hedges.

We will keep you informed and let you know how we have progressed at the AGM in November.

Andy Rowlands

**Annual subscriptions are now due!**  
Please send your £5 per household to me, Andy Rowlands, Treasurer, Harthill Cottage, Hewelsfield, Lydney GL15 6TZ, or pay me at the AGM on 4th November.

*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.*