

Parish Grasslands Project

Issue 8

July 2004

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

31ST JULY
BBQ
COWSHILL FARM

19TH OCTOBER
TALK
MACKENZIE HALL

23RD NOVEMBER
AGM AND TALK
MACKENZIE HALL

Details on page 4

The Committee

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Grant News and Progress

Thanks to the grants we have received from the HLF, the Forest of Dean District Council and the AONB, we have started to implement our proposals.

Machinery

The Parish Grasslands Project and the Monmouthshire Meadows Group are now the proud owners of a Vithar 700 AR tractor. This is an Italian Alpine tractor which was specially imported. If you read the Forest and Wye Valley Review, you will have seen a picture of the "Meadow Muncher", as Bob Smythe describes it in his feature article.



The tractor is very powerful at 68 horsepower, and with four wheel drive and a low centre of gravity, able to work safely on steep slopes. It is very manoeuvrable since its articulation enables it to bend in the middle and so turn in its own length. This means it can get through places that other tractors cannot access. We have also bought a flail mower and a pasture topper. So far the tractor has done about 25 hours work with the flail mower mainly clearing bramble and bracken. The results are spectacular and everyone so far seems very pleased with the work carried out.

We have spent the first part of the HLF grant and have just received news that the second half of the grant is in the post. We now will buy the hay making equipment, a mower, a tedder and a baler. The orders have been placed, but there may be a delay in delivery since these also have to be imported. We hope to carry out all the work

that members have requested, but in some cases we have asked other contractors to help us out. Our machinery is especially useful to work on steep fields or where access is impossible with larger machinery. Any member who has put in an order for work to be carried out and has not yet had the work completed please give me a ring on 01594 530513 if you want an update on progress. We are of course totally dependent on the weather so our hay making may well fall behind if we are unlucky.

Enclosed with the newsletter is a machinery hire sheet. If you have work that you wish to have carried out in the autumn and winter please send it to Peter Chard, Bryn House, Hewelsfield, Lydney, GL15 6UR.

Display Boards

A small group has started work under the guidance of Andrew Nixon of the AONB to set up four boards illustrating the importance of flower rich meadows. Two will be on our side of the river and two on the Monmouthshire side.

Grasslands Booklet

George Peterken has started work on a 40 page booklet and has already produced a draft outline of the contents

Footpath Leaflet

Luke Wilson has already produced a detailed map showing the footpaths on the Hudnalls, and we are considering the text to be included on this information leaflet.

"How to guides"

Jaye Simpson has written a draft of the first of four booklets which will be published in the next twelve months.

We do not expect to complete these programmes until the end of next year, but copies of all these publications will be made available to members in due course.

Peter Chard

Improving your Meadows

Everyone would like meadows full of wildflowers, but what is the best way to achieve it?

Meadows may have been subjected to heavy grazing especially over a long period, especially by sheep in spring and early summer, others may have had fertiliser or herbicides applied to them or have been ploughed up and reseeded and some may simply have been neglected and become overgrown by bracken, bramble and scrub. It is certainly possible with appropriate management to increase the number of wildflower species in your meadows.

Reducing the fertility of the soil will significantly reduce the growth of dominant grasses and give the wildflowers an opportunity to establish themselves without the competition being overwhelming. You can achieve this by cutting the grass for hay and removing it, followed by light grazing of the aftermath. Over a period of years this will result in the return of many wildflower species that are endemic to the area.

What if you have a field that is full of bracken, brambles or even scrub? Continuous cutting over several years using a tractor and flail will reduce the growth of bracken and bramble, but the scrub will have to be tackled by hand unless you can find a chain flail strong enough for the job. Should such sites be ploughed up, cultivated and reseeded to produce a growth of wild flowers?



It is possible to find seedsmen such as Emorgate Seeds of Somerset who specialise in stocking an amazing variety of wildflower seeds, but it will cost you to follow that path. There will also be the question is it right to introduce new species to our area, or are we continuing the damage caused by the Victorians who introduced species such as Himalayan Balsam and Japanese Knotweed that grow so vigorously that they have taken over habitats eliminating native species. Emorgate Seeds argue that modern farming techniques have introduced grass strains that eliminate wildflowers through over vigorous competition. They say that the wildflower seeds they collect are home produced and that they collect ecotypes specific to the local area and that you can select your seeds according to the soil type of your own area. Does using direct seeding risk upsetting the ecological balance or has this been altered so much by human activity that the risk is negligible?

The alternative method is to expand the bank of wildflower seeds in our local area by strewing hay from flower rich meadows on our fields. The early attempts to do this were not very satisfactory and it was found that dried hay had already lost a significant number of seeds during production and storage. Using light grazing some time after spreading hay did result in an improvement

since the animals trod the seeds into the ground which increased the success of germination. More recently it has been found that the best results have come from hay cut relatively late after the seeds have set but most importantly transported and spread on the field being treated within 24 hours. If the cut is too early the seeds have not formed, and if it is too late you miss the seeds of early flowering plants which have already been shed, so it is most important to check and make the correct decision before cutting. The risk in using green hay is that if it is left in bales or in piles, it will rapidly heat up and the high temperatures will reduce seed viability. So it is vital to spread it as rapidly as possible after the hay is cut. Interestingly this method does seem to be a good way of distributing orchids which have very fine seed.

Strewing Green Hay

Receiver site: Record the species present before work starts. Carefully consider the management demands both mechanical and financial.

Source site: Choose a species rich site (the PGP can advise on this). You only require hay from an area **half the size** of the receiver site.

Preparing the receiver site: Remove existing vegetation by cutting. Do **not** cultivate (it releases fertility and activates the existing seed bank). Light chain harrow if necessary.

Extracting hay: Check on source site with manager and select date (after mid July). Cut, transport and spread on same day if possible.

Spreading hay: Unroll bales and hand spread with a pitchfork or garden fork. Use a forage harvester and muck spreader for large meadows. The hay does not need to be moved if the area of the source site is half that of the receiver site.

Initial management: Vegetation will develop during the autumn. Monitor the site and keep a record of the species. Make hay in late July and aftermath graze. Do not over winter animals.

Continuous management: Continue to use as a hay meadow with aftermath grazing. If unsuitable for hay use for light grazing except from April to August.

Sources

Where the wild things are by Stephen Anderton
Gardens Nov 2003

Creating wild flower meadows by Ian Trueman

Strewing green hay by Peter Millett

British Wildlife Oct 2003

For those already under Stewardship Schemes, DEFRA have advised us that they will provide a grant, currently £40 a hectare, to subsidise the use of green hay to improve pastures. If you wish to take this up, contact Chris Wedge at DEFRA.

Peter Chard

Rare Breeds (part I)

As with almost every subject, the more you look into it, the more complex it becomes and rare breed farm animals are no exception.

I suppose the first thing is to take some sort of view on evolution – or perhaps it may be easier to believe in ‘The Creation’ or some sort of alien intervention, rather than the life forms we have today, tracing their ancestry back to some slime in a puddle, multi – multi millions of years ago! What I am really asking is ‘is it pathetic to try and preserve livestock that we can perhaps only date back 200 to 700 years ago?’ After all, you can only preserve something that is dead, can’t you?



If we consider the wildlife in this country and worldwide is indeed worthy of our care and more attention is given to their protection and that of their habitat, then I would like to think that the maintenance and utilisation of rare breeds should be important to us all.

Rare breed stock is today, of course, championed by the Rare Breed Survival Trust ‘RBST’. This charity can be traced back to 1825, when the Zoological Society of London, Regents Park was founded. In 1925 the society moved surplus animals to Hall Farm, Whipsnade and, according to ‘Country Smallholding’, it was Solly Zuckerman, honorary secretary in 1955 who pointed to the indiscriminate slaughtering of livestock across Europe, during the Second World War, which would have catastrophic effect on our domestic breeds. Indeed Winston Churchill, fearing German invasion, considered White Park Cattle enough of a national treasure, that in

1940 he shipped a small herd to Texas.

On a more single-handed operation, it was Miss Miriam Milbourne who was largely responsible for hiding the few remaining Golden Guernsey goats in caves, when all livestock was being killed and eaten by the invading forces!

In 2002 even DEFRA came up with its UK Country Report on Farm Animal Genetic Resources, an 80 page document in which there are tables showing numbers of registered females of cattle, sheep, pigs, poultry and equines (oddly enough we are usually told that equines, except heavy horse are not farm animals!). Many of the numbers of our remaining domestic breeds make for dismal reading but all may not be lost in the race to produce the perfect carcass on legs, for as they say it’s all ‘in the genes’ and, for example, White Park cattle don’t get pneumonia and many rare breed pigs don’t develop the modern pig wasting disease PNWS.

The one thing that our experiences have shown here at Cowshill is the mentality of Rare Breed pigs, cattle and sheep is vastly different to the hybrids we have now given up trying to farm. If we ever did breed a better carcass, we certainly bred animals without a brain! Join me in the next newsletter for some facts and fancies about our Rare Breeds.

John Childs

Field Visits

The weather was not inviting, but the group who took advantage of the opportunity of a visit to Rodmore Mill were amply rewarded. We had a warm welcome from John and Julie Foulkes who showed us the rescue work that they had carried out on their barn and gave us an outline of the history of Rodmore Mill which dates back to the Civil War and was once owned by John Wynter who gave his name to Wynter’s Leap.

John and Julie have been in the Stewardship Scheme longer than anyone else in the PGP. Although they had initial doubts they feel that the scheme has been rewarding and has helped them rescue semi-natural grassland that had suffered from bracken encroachment, over the years, and restore them to good order. When they first came to Rodmore Mill the fields were in a derelict condition, but now are in good order and support their small flock of sheep. We admired the sturdy Austrian tractor that they used to control the bracken and marvelled at the slopes on the

valley fields that they tackled. We escaped the rain, just, and ended the visit with some welcome refreshments.

Our second visit was to Jane and David Marshall’s land at Abbey Passage Farm, Tintern, which they took on— with no house and in a neglected condition—ten years ago. Some 30 acres is in the Stewardship Scheme, and grants have helped to rebuild the derelict barn, coppice and replant hedgerows, maintain fences and control acres of bracken and scrub. The river meadows, which flood twice a year, are now cut for hay in July, and other fields are grazed by sheep, donkeys and horses. Weeds are controlled by spot weeding with chemicals— wayward tourists from Tintern are not so easy to deal with! Our thanks to Jane and David for inviting us and for the delicious cakes for tea.

New Plants on the Common

This summer we have been pleased to discover two highly distinctive species of flowering plant on the common. One was the herb paris, which grows in some



profusion in parts of the alder woods below Bailey Lane that I still think of as 'Fothergill's', but which is now in the charge of Carol and Brad Weaterton.

This has a simple stem, less than a foot high, with four leaves arranged in the cross, and a flower at the centre that eventually develops into a purple fruit. It is usually only found in dry ancient woods on limestone, so finding it in a wet wood draining from sandstone was a surprise, but perhaps these alder woods are indeed a genuine survival from the prehistoric common.

The other plant was the even stranger bird's nest orchid, which is also usually found in dry woods on limestone. In this case two plants were found in the core of the common in woodland belonging to Sally Secrett. This is one of the few leafless flowers in Britain, which depends entirely on a symbiosis with soil fungi for survival, and, as a



dark brown flower seen against the dark leaf litter, is very easy to miss.

George Peterken

Autumn Talks

19th October, Mackenzie Hall, 7.30pm

Chris Wedge, defra RDS officer, will outline the new Environmental Stewardship Scheme which will replace the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. Also, Charlotte Pagendum, English Nature Officer for the Forest of Dean and Wye Valley, will talk on how English Nature is engaged in local wildlife conservation issues.

23rd November, Mackenzie Hall, 7.30pm

The Annual General Meeting will be followed by an illustrated talk by Andy Purcell, professional wildlife photographer, on wildlife in the Wye Valley.

Barbeque

Our BBQ this year will be a month earlier, 31st July, and will again be hosted by John and Susan Childs. Tickets on the gate, a complimentary drink with your ticket and eats to be from local farms, so we are hoping for a good turnout. Bring friends and neighbours, and please let me know you are coming by Sunday 25th July.

When?	Saturday 31st July, 7pm
Where?	Cowshill Farm, Hewelsfield
How much?	Tickets £7
Contact?	John Josephi 01594 530598

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.