

Parish Grasslands Project

Issue 11

September 2005

Dates for the Diary:

Tuesday 25 October
Tuesday 22 November

Mackenzie Hall: 7.30pm

for details see below

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Making Hay, or was it Haylage?

Well, we certainly had a good run with the weather in July, and John and Robert Childs got through an amazing amount of work, cutting over 30 fields and making more than 45 acres of hay in 2 weeks. We learned a great deal in the process which we hope we can apply in another year. The number of requests for the machinery has grown enormously and if it continues to increase at this rate we shall find difficulty in meeting the demand. We have subcontracted work this year and shall try to do this in future where fields are not too steep or difficult to access. Our equipment used in haymaking consists of an Alpine tractor, a Massey Ferguson 135 tractor, a front mounted mower, a turner and rower up, a baler wrapper and a trailer. This is a substantial amount of machinery to maintain, to transport to and fro in the Wye Valley and to operate in the relatively short period of time when the weather is suitable for haymaking.

Our members on both sides of the Wye must realise that John is a working farmer with a farm to run, animals to feed and all sorts of

calls on his time. John does give haymaking priority when the weather is good, but decisions have to be made day by day and he cannot work to a predicted timetable, so we all need to be patient and await our turn. Robert cannot drive on



the roads at present, but next year will be able to drive a tractor on the roads. If John or Rob leave machinery overnight on your land, they may need transport back to Cowshill, or to be collected next day.

Forthcoming Meetings

Tuesday 25th October, Mackenzie Hall, 7.30pm—meeting about **Bats on the Common**. David Priddis will give a general introduction to the topic, to include the different types of species, habits and preferred habitats of bats on the Common. Members will be able to gain an understanding of the requirements of these interesting creatures, and hopefully include this new knowledge in their land management plan. The other speaker will be Tessa Knight, a researcher at Bristol University, who has been studying the Lesser Horseshoe Bat. This is a nationally rare species that happens to use at least one of the barns on the Common, and Tessa has been tracking where they go at night, so we will be able to see whose fields they use for feeding.

Tuesday 22nd November, Mackenzie Hall, 7.30pm—**Annual General Meeting**. This will be an opportunity for members to discuss the progress and direction of the whole project, and in particular to voice views on the management operations this summer and suggest improvements. We have not invited an outside speaker, but we hope to persuade several members each to speak for 5 minutes or so about their fields, and what they use them for.

This is where members can help out and save valuable time. John and Rob also appreciate the cups of tea as they make their way from place to place. We do try to organise the work in geographical clusters to cut down on travelling time and make the working time as efficient as possible. This means that it is **vital** that you return the hire forms as rapidly as possible to give us time to organise a programme. Asking for additional work which you have not booked in advance also creates a problem and slows everything up, so you may be disadvantaging someone else down the line.

We now have a Massey-Ferguson 135, a second small tractor which has proved invaluable as a back up, especially where haylage is made. The Alpine tractor performs very well with the mower and the work is done at speed which reduces the cost to you. Hay has to be turned at least once before it dries, but haylage can be baled the next day. The most costly operation is rowing up, baling and carting the hay or haylage. These three operations require 3 tractors and at least 4 people to drive and to load and unload the bales. Again this is where you can offer assistance. Using the wrapper is a simple operation which can be carried out by two volunteers. This year John loaned us one of his tractors and/or his Range Rover to cart the bales from the field. If the carting is left to John and Rob then they are unable to continue cutting, turning and baling and so the process is slowed up when we have many fields which are scattered over the Wye Valley. This year the carting has often been done by volunteer labour, and our thanks to all those who have joined in to help. If you do not need your hay, the best thing to do is give it away on the condition that it is collected from your field. HAPPA are

very pleased to receive hay and to collect it (ring Emily on 01291 6893781).

The cheapest option for you is to have your hay baled and either left on the field, or wrapped in plastic to keep it waterproof, which of course increases the cost. If you have good quality grass then it can be baled and wrapped after 24 hours to make haylage.. Again help in rolling the bales together is needed to enable wrapping to proceed quickly and efficiently. We await reports on the quality of the haylage that we have made this year. It is best to store the bales under cover since birds and animals can peck or gnaw through the seal and haylage can go rotten.

We are very fortunate that John is a very skilled engineer and has carried out a number of repairs on the tractors and on the equipment, and his skill has prevented any serious delays and made us miss good haymaking weather. In the light of this report, we shall be re-evaluating costs and the charges that we make for the hire of the machinery. Fuel costs have also risen and we must make this project sustainable for the future.

I hope that all the members who have hired the machinery are satisfied with the work and that it has helped you to pursue the aims that we all agreed in the Land Management Agreements.

Peter Chard

Rent-a-Cow

From the first moment the ramp of the trailer went down in my field and 3 large horned Gloucester cows ambled down under the horrified eyes of my two curious donkeys, I knew that "Rent-a-Cow" was for me. Eeyore and Bonny literally screamed in fright and ran off up the field where they stood looking outraged at the invasion as we steered the cows across the field and into the large sector outside the electric fence. The donkeys retreated to their shelter in a huff, and the cows who had been carrying out sterling work for the Forestry Commission on Tidenham Chase grazing down the Park, looked at the expanse of grass and got down to work.

It is magic to wake up in the morning and go and look for the cows who have hidden themselves away in the corner of the field, and to find three horned heads gazing at you over the long grass with a placid but curious gaze. When they lumber to their feet you realise what beautiful animals they are with deep red-brown coats and the white stripe down their backs and tails. They are very gentle and friendly animals and even Eeyore can now accept them on the other side of the fence without doing more than put his ears back and look a bit malevolent!

The effect they have had on a field which has produced rather a lot of bracken this year, is terrific. They have



trampled a great deal of the bracken, but they have eaten an amazing amount of grass and after less than 2 weeks the change in appearance is marked, and the clumps of coarse grass are disappearing apace.

The only thing I need to do is to keep a water butt filled up, and during the week we were away in France, John kept the water level up. It is amazing how much water these large cattle require.

I discovered yesterday that one of the cows has a swollen udder and is troubled with masses of flies. All I needed to do was to lift the telephone and let John know and he came, and the problem was sorted. My memories of keeping sheep on the field 15 years ago made me appreciate that no longer was there a need for agonised decisions, "do I need to call the vet or can I treat it myself, and how much will it cost?"

Oh well, that's what the rent bit is for!

If we are to get the best out of our flower meadows I firmly believe that a mixed pattern of grazing is essential, and to combine it with the pleasure of watching these handsome animals on my own field is well worth while the expenditure.

Peter Chard

Fields at Rosemesne, Lower Meend, St Briavels

We moved into Rosemesne just over two years ago having had no experience of managing grassland, but plenty with ducks, hens and geese. The land is approximately five acres in total, about half of which is grassland, divided by one metre high post and wire fencing into four paddocks for animal rotation. We inherited three Jacob ewes, one of which died of old age shortly after we took over – our first introduction to sheep management! We also inherited a cockerel and 17 hens sharing an orchard and two of the paddocks with the sheep. Within six months the 17 hens had been reduced to 4, due to raids by a still unseen fox all during the day. The land is steep and cannot be cut by a conventional mower/tractor, so we have to either have animals to graze it or use the Project's Alpine mower. However, the latter has, until recently, not been an option as there was no wide gate access to the fields – this has now been remedied, but at a cost.

Since taking over the land we have been considering how best to manage it. It is wonderful to see the animals grazing but also to have wild grasses and flowers – this can be a conflict. The main problem comes when bracken, dock, thistle and nettle start to take a foothold - this precedes the brambles and small trees or shrubs. We are lucky that our predecessor had got the fields into a good state many years ago with a lot of hard work. Apparently the paddock area was originally two large fields with their extremities very badly affected by bracken in particular, so he put pigs in to "rotavate" the ground. He then reseeded the grass and occasionally spread fresh meadow grass cuttings from another source which has helped a few wild flowers to establish; this summer I counted six common orchids on the slopes. Having now been here for two years we are beginning to get a feel of how best to use the land that suits our requirements. The fox problem was resolved by putting up an electric fence which has been successful for long enough to give us the confidence to restock with new and more interesting hens and four ducks complete with pond. Clearly two aging ewes are unable to keep the grass down; this has meant that they need little hay in the winter, but that the grass developed a "thatch" which needed to be cleared to get virile and variable new grass and flowers each successive year. This year we have been a little more adventurous with the animals. In spring we took on six two year old Norfolk Horn sheep to help a friend out who had little grass. This was a mixed blessing as over some weeks they got rid of the thatch, but within days had formed an escape committee to test every loose bit of fencing and to remove the bark, and thus kill, some saplings that the previous owner had planted. Then came the problem of shearing and the relatively new DEFRA

requirement of movement orders since foot and mouth. It would seem that shearers will only shear a large number of sheep at one location and do not want to visit endless smallholdings to have to set up and then shear only a handful of sheep. This means one has to move the sheep to another farm and leave them there for a few days and send in a movement form. The owner of the Norfolk Horn therefore took the sheep back to join his main flock of 30 or 40 and has kept them. Since then we are currently employing another temporary option to help near neighbours who are reseeding their paddock: we now have a Shetland pony! He has an amazing appetite and likes the longer grass that the sheep tend to ignore. Although the boundaries are only sheep fences, because the pony is fairly small they seem to work fine.

In order to keep the bracken, etc., under control I have purchased a long handled scythe and I walk the paddocks every six to eight weeks cutting down anything insidious. This takes two or three hours, which is about the same as with the brush cutter, but is much more pleasant and environmentally friendly and seems to be keeping everything under control. We have not been lucky with our sheep and they have proved to be a constant aggravation with sores and lameness that need attention every few days. Whilst we would love to have animals grazing which is a natural and long standing solution to the management of grasslands in our location, it is not a painless answer.



Over the last fifty years our land has seen sheep, goats, pigs, orchards and cattle; apparently in the nineteen fifties there were potatoes grown on the slopes which accounts for remnants of terracing in certain areas. When the land was cleared and cultivated a few hundred years ago it was the basis of the owner, or often tenant's livelihood; now there are few who live this way and cultivation or animal husbandry is more of a hobby, or perhaps as in our case, a way of maintaining an environment and look to the countryside. For us the best solution to managing our grassland will probably be to continue to "borrow" or even rent grazing livestock (without the responsibility and cost of looking after them when they become sick), combined with the occasional use of the Alpine mower.

Tony and Jane Eggar

Open Day

One of the conditions laid down by the Heritage Lottery as part of the grant that enabled us to obtain machinery was that we open sites to the general public and demonstrate the improvements made to the meadows. On June 5th six sites in the Wye Valley were opened to the public to show the variety of flowering plants and the various methods of grassland management.

Sites open to the public on 5 June were:

The Croft Meadow, Trellech, where a boggy patch harbours king cups, ragged robins and southern marsh orchids. A meadow at Whitelye, with a superb display of spotted orchids. Four fields at New Grove Meadows, Trellech, two of them amongst the best wildflower meadows in Britain. Bryn House, Brockweir Road, Hewelsfield, a large wildflower meadow and a small meadow being reclaimed from scrub. Five fields at Harthill Cottage, Sandy Lane, Hewelsfield Common with a wide variety of wildflowers and grasses (machinery on display). A grassland and woodland site at Hadley and Hollyside Farm on Brockweir Common.

Over 150 people visited the meadows and made very positive comments to the members of the Parish Grasslands Project and Monmouthshire Meadows Group who were manning the sites and giving guided tours, helping to identify flowers, and explaining management methods. The members of the working group from the MM and the PGP who put in the hard work of preparing and then running the six sites felt that their efforts were well rewarded and that since many visitors said they would return next year, hope that we can run an Open Day in 2006. If you are prepared to open your field(s) on one day next year, from 11am to 4pm, please let a committee member know as soon as possible so that we can start planning the event.

Grazing Animals Project

The Grazing Animals Project was formed in 1997 to aid the development of conservation grazing throughout the UK; it is a partnership project drawing representatives from both the nature conservation, agricultural and livestock sectors.



Benefits of Becoming a Member of GAP

- * Free membership - giving access to free services, advice and information Tel: (01636) 670095
- * 'GAP News' - a free quarterly newsletter for members
- * Field meetings - organised across the country in response to local demand
- * Free advertising service for goods, services and grazing: www.ecolots.co.uk
- * Training Courses – 'Lookers' and 'Stock Husbandry' courses run throughout the year at various venues (LANTRA accreditation)
- * GAP Publications/information leaflets (available from the GAP office or as PDF on www.grazinganimalsproject.org)
- * Practical land management solutions: www.fact-group.org
- * FACT Publications (available as hard copy from GAP office or as PDF on www.fact-group.org)
- * CONTAK – The on-line machinery ring: www.contak.org.uk

Contacts:

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Visit to Yewtree Farm

Given the massive thunderstorm that overwhelmed us at 2pm on 21st May, it was amazing that 8 intrepid members managed to reach Yewtree Farm and found shelter in one of Keith Orchard's lovely stone barns. Keith has done a wonderful job in restoring the farmhouse and the barns from a very dilapidated state to pristine condition whilst retaining the traditional stonework and roofing. Keith made us welcome in his large barn which is full of large stainless steel tanks that store his cider. While the rain poured down Keith took us through the process of cider making and how he has learned and developed further the art of cider making. There were plenty of

questions and all of us marvelled at the energy and enthusiasm that Keith has put into his project. When the rain eventually stopped we had a tour of the fields and discovered a variety of flowers which Keith hopes to enhance with careful management. When he bought the property the fields were submerged under bramble and bracken most of which he has brought under control. The orchards were a dense mass of overcrowded and neglected fruit trees, and Keith has cleared most of the trees and planted new cider apple and perry pear varieties which will not come into full fruit until they are 20 years old. He has also grafted and budded varieties that he has discovered both on and

around his fields. If anyone has a variety of cider apple or perry pear on their property Keith would be very interested to learn about it and you may find you have one of the old varieties that are very sought after, so give him a ring on 01291 689536.

Our thanks go to Keith for making us so welcome, giving us so much fascinating information and sending us away very happy with a drink of delicious Orchard's cider. Perhaps we can prevail on Keith to invite us again and try and choose a day with better weather.

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.