

Parish Grasslands Project

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Soay Sheep—how to solve the problem of long established bracken & brambles

How do you solve the problem of long established bracken & brambles? Having exhausted all the usual remedies to no avail a friend recommended using Soay sheep which had been used successfully for this purpose elsewhere. So as a last resort and with certain scepticism I bought a small breeding flock and released them onto 6 acres of rough ground.

Standard stock fencing had been put in place prior to this, and despite many scaremongering stories from others, it has effectively contained them ever since. A daily routine of giving food at the troughs brings them running into the pen which facilitates handling when necessary for the purpose of sorting, tagging and worming. If this is done on a warm day in the summer when they are rooing (self-shedding their fleeces) – the fleeces can be pulled off by hand and used for a variety of purposes from spinning to felt making. The colours are an interesting blend of fawn and chocolate to near black. Little else is needed in their husbandry, they lamb easily and are best left alone to nature. It is interesting to observe their flock behaviour throughout the year as they closely resemble the behaviour patterns of deer. In appearance they are very like little deer with the two tone colours and angled horns. They have made a very appealing attraction to parks and amenity land and managers of such sites have

bought breeding and non-breeding stock from me, as the stock is hardy and easily managed. The quality of the meat is game-like and quite unique without being too strong. It is low in fat and dense in texture. Over a period of five years to my



surprise the six acres of rough ground was transformed into an interesting landscape devoid of bracken and brambles which were reduced to hedge lines while the adjacent land remained bordered by engulfing scrub and

bracken on the other side of the fence. How was this happening when we learn that bracken is toxic? It was only by careful observation that the sheep were discovered nibbling the emerging shoots in the spring, dropping them from their mouths and eating the surrounding grass. By doing this on an annual basis the bracken eradication has come about making a useful habitat for the sheep and other livestock. The Soays nibbled off the emerging bracken shoots

Visitors are always welcome please call 01694 751287.

Jane Kerswell
(sheep farmer, South Shropshire)

The Committee

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Dates for your Diary

Sunday 4th June:

Open Day (see page 4)

July (date to be arranged):

Evening meeting at Poor's Allotment. We will try to see/hear nightjars at dusk, which means that we must select the right evening at short notice. Anyone who wants to be notified should leave their phone number with George Peterken

Saturday 29th July:

BBQ at Cowhill Farm

Tuesday 7th November:

Meeting at the Mackenzie Hall—the speaker will be Dr Johnny Birks of the Vincent Wildlife Trust

Looking after the fields at Tyersall

We moved to the Wye Valley in October 1971 from Cornwall, together with my old heavy hunter, who had been given to me rather than go for hounds' meat. We had only seen the house and not all the land once before moving and were thrilled to be the owners of 15 acres, but we were blissfully unaware of the time and expense required to keep the jungle at bay. In fact, we could hardly struggle from field to field through the brambles and bracken when we arrived, and the fields were yellow with ragwort. The 8 acres of fields were bounded by walls containing many large oaks, some beech and a few limes.

We spent several weeks attacking brambles and bracken with hooks before we realised that some equipment was necessary. Furthermore, since the walls meant nothing to our old horse, which was used to hurdling Cornish banks, we needed new fencing. We first bought a chain saw and motor mower, then an old allen scythe for the field margins. Next year we spread a lot of basic slag and the children were paid to pull ragwort. Thereafter we acquired a T20 Fergie tractor, a 2-furrow plough and some harrows, and gradually all but the top field were ploughed and reseeded with a meadow mixture of rye grass, creeping red fescue, timothy and a small amount of white clover. Top Field has numerous land drains taking the overflow from various springs in the hill above. By the way, rocks grow: if you plough them more than once huge boulders will emerge.

Having made a reasonable pasture we bought a suckler cow with calf and I went off to Gloucester market for two more to put on her. Over the next few years we bred some good beef animals and the bought-in calves did very well. The cow was content to feed her calves ad infinitum and would not dry up, so we had difficulty getting her to come into season. We even borrowed a bulling heifer to get her in the mood.

Meanwhile, hay had to be made. Initially this was done entirely by hand apart from cutting with a finger mower, and we carted it to the barn with a borrowed flat bed trailer. Next we bought a vicon acrobat, a wuffler and a very old small (the gates all being narrow) bailer, but still had to jack the bailer up and over parts of the wall on the approach to the property. Haymaking was always done in the last week of June in those days and, with trees surrounding the fields, it was hard to dry, so we made hay in the middle of the fields and rolled the grass from the edges out of the shadows. We also sowed kale by pushing a little box-seeder, and fed the crop to the cattle and ponies by strip grazing. One year there was more fat-hen (or Good King Henry) than kale.

Until the late 1980s we brought up both beef and store cattle – Galloway crosses mostly – bought from Hart Hill Farm, and thereafter I borrowed some bullocks in the summer to keep the pasture sweet and counteract the

negative effect the horses had on grass. This stopped when the breed of bullocks changed to athletic continental cross-breeds, which had a habit of leaping the walls and vandalising the Hudnalls Woods! Today, it's horses, and I just top the rank areas with my ride-on and still wage war on bramble and bracken along the margins.

What of the flowers? Flower Field, so named because it had clumps of three different varieties of daffodil, was ploughed and the daffs vanished for about four years, only to reappear in the same places. Strangely, they have hardly multiplied since. The pastures have a good selection of wild flowers despite the attentions formerly given them, including the occasional dose of 20-10-10. In fact, it's remarkable how quickly the wild species re-established themselves. The common spotted orchid in particular has spread rapidly in the last 10 years. I have helped things along by introducing cowslips, which seed and spread when the rabbits don't eat all the flowers.

The Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust surveyed the fields in 2002, and we have added some species to their list, so we know that the fields contain at least 65 species of grassland plants in addition to the woodland species in the hedges and woods. Top Field is much the most diverse, and this is presumably because it still has wet areas, despite the drains, and has never been ploughed. Amongst the plants found there are ragged robin, lousewort, lesser spearwort (a small buttercup), marsh bedstraw, greater bird's-foot-trefoil, oval sedge, glaucous sedge, yellow sedge and smooth-stalked sedge. The last-mentioned has not been found anywhere else on the Hudnalls. It is common further west in Pembrokehire, and George Peterken tells me that it grows at the remotest place in Britain – the point in Fisherfield Forest, NW Scotland, which is the furthest one can get from a public road on the mainland. Other uncommon plants are ladys-mantle, centuary and field scabious.

Despite the continuous hard work to keep the brambles, bracken and the Hudnalls woods at bay, and always seeing something else that needs attention, having the land has brought much satisfaction.

Jane Morgan

Machinery Operations

Our management operation aims to fill a need that was not being satisfied. Thus our focus is on small, irregular fields on rough or steep ground with poor access, which are inherently difficult and expensive to manage, and which are often located on narrow lanes. They have little value in commercial farming, and they are difficult to reach and enter with standard farm machinery. Not surprisingly, many have fallen into disuse, or have been under-used.

We budgeted for a loss in 2004, when our machinery was available only during the second half of the summer, so our first full year of operation in 2005 was our first chance to assess whether our operation is practicable and financially viable. After passing two jobs to other contractors, we did 51 jobs, taking 322 hours, and this was as much as John Childs and his helpers could fit in.

The financial results have recently been audited, and they show a slight loss on the year. We found that the cost of net and wrap was higher than we had anticipated, and we also discovered that working on difficult ground with, in some cases, rank grassland led to a much larger bill for spare parts than we had allowed.

OPERATING YEAR	2004	2005
Charges		£18/hour
	£	£
Administration	50.54	152.42
Insurance	575.40	686.24
Fuel	147.00	666.96
Service		320.15
Net/wrap	344.65	606.46
Spare parts		568.67
Labour	859.50	2,881.88
Bank charge		5.00
Total	<u>1,977.09</u>	<u>5,887.78</u>
INCOME		
Work done	1,500.00	5,802.24
BALANCE	(477.09)	(85.54)

We discovered in 2005 that our charges did not quite cover costs; that our operation is not cheap and is in fact more expensive per acre than some contractors. Our higher costs are hardly surprising, given that we concentrate on land that commercial farming has ignored, and that our repair costs are higher, due to operating on rough terrain.

In order to keep the operation running, we must charge enough to cover our costs, including anticipated repair bills. In the long run, we need to build up capital that would be used to match-fund any grant we might seek for replacement machinery. We also need to maintain a reserve because many of our costs come early in the season (insurance, fuel, materials) and our income arrives only after the work is done.

The management sub committee has therefore decided to increase the cost per hour to £22. This still compares favourably with a

number of other contractors. We will not change the charge for the baling operation which remains at £25 per hour which will cover the cost of netting. If you are making haylage there will be a surcharge of 80p per bale to cover the cost of the plastic wrap. Haylage should only be made of good quality grass. There is always a risk that if soil from molehills or animal manure is picked up with the bales that it will result in the bale being unusable. It costs more to make, but bales of good quality haylage are saleable at approximately £4 per bale. Members are advised to store the bales under cover since birds, rats etc may break the seal, thereby making the haylage unusable. It is best to cart it within 12 hours, i.e., before fermentation commences.

We accept that members will look for other contractors if they think our charges are too high. However, our charges are the minimum that is needed to maintain our operation. We are willing to help with 'ordinary' fields, provided we have the spare capacity, though we do not want to compete with other contractors, and we are happy to pass jobs on if we cannot fit them in.

We also offer a free visit to advise on management. In fact, we like to look at your fields if you are intending to make hay or haylage, and give you an estimate of cost. Any estimate will be subject to variable weather conditions extending the time of working. We can give no guarantee of when work will be carried out since it is dependent on changing weather conditions. We aim to cut hay from the middle of July after the flowers have seeded, but we may start earlier if weather conditions are appropriate and we have a large number of jobs to complete

We would ask members requesting hay making to be aware that if bracken or bramble are present around the edges of the field, it may be necessary to clear the edges using the flail. Bracken, bramble and thick docks not only result in poor quality hay but also clog the baler thus extending the time of working and putting up the cost. Members must also remove any ragwort from the field before hay making starts since ragwort is very poisonous and the hay cannot be used. Overhanging branches at the edge of the field may prevent the access of the tractor and may overshadow the cut grass making it difficult to dry

Hay is a valuable commodity and, if you do not propose to use it yourself, you could sell it. If you wish us to dispose of it, please tell us before we come. The same applies if you want us to cart it from the field.

We now possess a post driver which means that we can carry out fencing very efficiently. We can also provide you with fence posts and netting at competitive prices.

A machinery hire sheet is included in the newsletter so if you want work carried out this year please complete the sheet and send it to Peter Chard, Bryn House Brockweir Road, Hewelsfield GL15 6UR as soon as possible. We try to group jobs to cut down the travelling time and keep charges to the minimum.

Peter Chard

Flowers in the Fields: a natural history of grassland in the Hudnalls

On sale at the Village Shop and all willing local bookshops for £5.

Our small book was published in November 2005 and it seems to have been very well received. We were given excellent coverage by Sue Rushton in *The Forester*, and a whole page by Bob Smyth in the *Forest Review*. By March 15th we had sold 260 copies through the Village Shop, bookshops in Coleford, Chepstow and Monmouth, and directly. We also managed to sell 13 copies after a lecture to the Chepstow Society and six after merely sitting in the audience at a local history society meeting up-river in Ballingham.

We were able to include a lavish number of colour photographs because the Heritage Lottery Fund granted most of the printing costs, the logic of this being that, having helped us to buy the machinery for management, they wanted to ensure that the benefits of management were brought to the notice of visitors and those residents who did not benefit directly from the machinery. This grant was matched by the voluntary time that George Peterken and Tony Eggar put into its production.



Our sale price is probably on the low side in commercial terms, but the aim was to have it read. If the voluntary time had been commercially costed, the price would have been nearer £19 and we would have had piles stuck in the loft. However, it clearly sells on its appearance, and we owe that to the HLF, to Tony Eggar's skills as designer, and to Michael Jenkins, the printer.

Most of the text was put together by George Peterken, but Bruce May and Roger Gaunt contributed sections directly, the historical section owes much to earlier writings by Austyn Williams, and the quotes from Flora Klickmann's diary were made possible by Andy Klickmann-Cale. The photographs came from several sources, particularly Andy Purcell (mammals, birds and the air photograph), Peter Hugo (a friend of Roger Gaunt, who contributed the butterflies and moths), whilst George Peterken and Tony Eggar filled in with the views, most of the general grassland photos, plant portraits

and end-paper montages. We were fortunate that Adrian Phillips, a former Director-General of the Countryside Commission, was not only willing to contribute his mother's painting, but also brought it over for us to photograph. The Flora Klickmann photo comes from a flier inserted into a copy of *The Flower Patch amongst the Hills*, bought in Stella Books. We used an old Ordnance Survey map partly because it was out of copyright, but also because we could see all the detail despite the reduction in size. We were lucky, too, that Tessa Knight allowed us to use her unpublished research results from radio-tracking Liz Rush's bats, and that Ian Standing could supply copies of the historical maps. The historical pictures came from Mary Harris's archives. Stan Scrivens and his fiddle seems to attract most attention, but only Stan noticed that the man on the tractor on the inside front cover is also him. We had also intended to include a shot of Margaret Reynolds holding a spirit level against one of the walls it was used to level, but when push came to shove she was not in the best of health.

Our book has attracted many appreciative comments. Bob Smyth in the *Forest Review* described it as 'sumptuous' and 'brimming with vigour', and remarked especially on the 'wonderful wildlife photos'. Sue Rushton in *The Forester* described it as 'lavishly illustrated' and a 'graphic account'. Julian Branscombe, Chief Executive of the Gwent Wildlife Trust, responded simply: 'congratulations on the beautiful book'. These and other comments illustrate the general response: people first see the photographs and design, but then find the content interesting, and the underlying aims of the PGP encouraging. Dr Terry Wells, a retired specialist in native grasslands, had seen nothing like it, and thought our book and our efforts should be an encouragement for other communities.

Help us on Open Day - June 4th 2006, 11am to 4pm

Last year's open day attracted about 150 visitors to 6 sites and many asked if we would repeat the event this year. We hope to open 8 sites this year, 4 in our area and 4 in the Monmouthshire Meadows area, but this will depend on the assistance of members. Our sites are Bryn House, Brockweir Road, Hewelsfield; Hadley & Hollyside Farm, Brockweir Common; Sylvan House, Brockweir Common; Beechwood House, Birch Hill Road. We need three volunteers at each site, one to welcome visitors, distribute leaflets, sell booklets and direct visitors to the guides, and two to take the visitors around the fields. You don't have to be an expert to do this. If you volunteer we will arrange a time the previous weekend to show you around the site and help with any identification of flowers. If you can give a couple of hours to help this would be invaluable. We need to know by April 20th to advertise these sites, so **please** give Peter Chard a ring if you can help, even if you are unsure about the date. 01594 530513

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.