



Parish Grasslands Project

Issue 13

September 2006

Our website is now up and running and looks great.

Check it out on www.parishgrasslandsproject.org.uk

Little Cows With a Big Future (Dexter Cattle)

A number of people have stopped to ask questions, look, touch or proffer carrots and apples to two little horned cows which have become part of the Parish Grasslands Project. While they began as "pets" for probable breeding, or becoming a "mini herd," they have risen to the dizzy heights of becoming working girls. Cola the adult cow and Mayweed Willow her calf, were part of the Castlemear's prize winning Dexter herd owned by Sue and Bill Osborne, who farm on Lydney Park Estate. Cola and Mayweed were gifted to me, and first became involved in the project on land owned by Sally Secrett at Greystones, and in March this year came to Jean Green at Hollyside Farm on the Common. The highlight of their year was the Grasslands Open Day when they could follow the enthusiasts looking at a variety of fine flowers and grasses round the field.

Because most people have never met a Dexter before, let me introduce you. The Dexter breed originated in the South Western region of Ireland, and are thought to be descended from the predominantly black cattle of the early

Celts. The frequently heard theory that Dexters are a comparatively new breed is a complete fallacy as the breed is fully described and mentioned by the proper name in a report on Irish Cattle written in 1845 by Mr David Low. From the



publication, we learn that the breed owes its modern appearance, name and qualities to a Mr Dexter, who was agent to a Lord Howarden who came to Ireland in 1750 making it his home. It was stated that Mr.Dexter had produced a curious breed by selection from the best of the hardy mountain cattle of the area. They were first introduced into England

The Committee

Chairman:

George Peterken
Tel: 01594 530452

Vice Chairman:

Peter Chard
Tel: 01594 530513

Secretary:

Jim Swanson
Tel: 01594 516540

Membership Secretary:

Lho Whitfield
01291 689685

PGP Treasurer:

John Josephi
Operations Treasurer:
Roger Gaunt

Committee Members:

John Childs
Jane Morgan
Sarah Sawyer
Ursula Williams

Newsletter:

Sally Secrett

Our next meeting will be on **Tuesday 7 November** at 7.30 pm in the Mackenzie Hall, when the speaker will be **Dr Johnny Birks of the Vincent Wildlife Trust**. This Trust has done a great deal over the last 20-30 years to protect and promote Britain's wild mammals, and has financed research into the factors causing some of them to decline. It has been fully involved in the successful comeback of otters, and it is working hard on dormice and the almost-vanished water voles. Johnny could talk interestingly and at length about any British wild mammal, but we have decided to concentrate this talk on polecats (which have returned), pine martens (which may have returned) and 'big cats' which may well be living amongst us.

The next meeting of the Monmouthshire Meadows Group will be held on Tuesday, October 10th at the Pelham Hall, Penallt at 7pm, when Roger Evans, Fungi Expert, will give a talk on Grassland Fungi. This will be followed by supper and wine. The cost will be £8 to include supper and a glass of wine. Phone Maggie Biss on 01594 530286 to book.

in 1882 and first shown at the Royal Show at Norwich in 1886.

What does the breed look like? Dexters are the smallest British breed of cattle. They are dual purpose, good for meat and milk. Cows are 38-44 inches, with bulls 42-48 inches at the rump. There are two recognized types, short legged and non short. The Dexter breed colours are black (most common), red and dun (light brown). They are naturally horned although many are dehorned or bred as polled. Although solidly built, the Dexters have a grace of their own, and they are a great advantage to those who wish to farm only on a small scale. Quite easy to handle, they are lightweight meaning they are better for the land, especially under wet conditions. They have good animal health.

Cows are a sustainable way of managing land. They don't need petrol or oil, and do not pollute, and apart from an odd moo they quietly get on with the job. Contrary to public perception, cows are very useful to the environment. Most people think they are stinky creatures, well some do love wild onion - you must pardon the occasional burp. Happy and healthy they will graze up to 10 hours a day and don't complain or rust in the rain. As the Dexter grazes, they deposit fertilizing manure over the field, which because it contains carbon makes it easier for plants to absorb the nutrients they need. Dexters are being used in biodiversity action plans on lowland grassland, wooded pasture, heathland and sometimes chalk. Able to tackle coarser grasses, which often shade out finer

specimens in areas that may be damaged by much trampling, small breeds like Dexters are a better choice than other cattle. Allowing them to roam hilly land keeps wild grasses short thus preventing rare plantation from being strangled. On steep hills, due to their size they have a low centre of gravity, which gives them an edge on their bovine counterparts. From ditches to the white Cliffs of Dover, in numerous grassland projects across the land, Dexters are there, doing a great job for biodiversity and the environment.

Patricia Pinkerton

Machinery Update

We have had a busy summer of work with 44 requests from PGP members and 11 from MMG members. We still have 10 jobs to complete and hope that we can get these done before the weather changes. We recognise that members have to wait for us to complete the work and sometimes are impatient, but there are reasons for these delays. John has a farm to run, animals to be fed and cared for, and in addition has to take animals to the abattoir, collect the meat and then deliver orders. All this takes time and the machinery cannot be operated on a full time basis. John maintains and repairs the machinery free of charge and the Machinery Ring only pays for the spare parts that are required. Some of the fields that we operate in are very rough since they often have not been farmed for some time. This does result in heavy wear and so the careful operation of the machinery by John and Robert ensures that damage to the machinery is minimised.

We have been approached by people wishing to join from an ever widening area, ranging from Woodcroft, Woolaston, Aylburton, Parkend and Newland. Some of these include a Gloucestershire Wildlife Site, an RSPB reserve and some excellent flower meadows. We certainly cannot take on any sites that are further in distance.

Hay making takes precedence in July and August and is naturally highly weather dependent. We welcome anyone wishing to help in the hayfields. Haymaking has been traditionally a community activity and it would be good to make it once more a time when we join together and drink cider in the hayfields. Some of our members were able to sell their hay from the field and so reduce the cost. It is vital however that members remove any ragwort from the fields before they are cut. Ragwort is extremely poisonous to horses and so horse owners will only buy hay

guaranteed ragwort free. We have been informed that it is also illegal to allow ragwort to seed in your fields.

There are other contractors available to meet the demands and they are listed on the PGP website, so perhaps next year members will be able to take advantage of their services and avoid delays.

We are at present fitting an extra set of wheels to our alpine tractor to enable us to tackle really steep fields. These have been bought through a grant from the English Sustainability Fund of the Wye Valley AONB and are being adapted and fitted by John. This year members with very steep fields have been at the end of the queue, but next year perhaps we can meet their needs more rapidly.

Our finances will be produced at the AGM in February 2007 and published in the Spring Newsletter.

Peter Chard

The Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty has just announced a new Grant Scheme. It is aimed at small landowners, Parish Councils, community groups and other individuals within the boundary of the English region of the Wye Valley AONB and will provide cash grants towards suitable work and projects. Full details are enclosed with this newsletter.

Bracken Control - to flail or not to flail

Our flail mower is a wonderful machine and can tackle a dense growth of bracken and bramble and reduce it to a fine powder, leaving a neat sward. After two or three cuts the bracken is much reduced and the vegetation, grasses and other plants become much thicker and the bracken more dispersed. The bracken needs to be cut, but due to the growth of thick grass the cut results in a thick mulch instead of fine powder which stifles growth for a short time and appears to prevent the growth of finer grasses and flowers.

An alternative is to use the bracken bruiser. This is a heavy ridged roller which crushes the bracken stems reaching maturity and uncurling its final frond. The crushed stems then form brown fibres which appear to kill the bracken slowly. The grasses and other plants seem able to survive the crushing effect without too much damage. I have just rolled my field which had flowers of devils bit scabious

and harebells and they have survived the treatment.

There are some disadvantages in using the bracken bruiser. Because the bruiser is only 6 feet wide and is towed behind the tractor as compared to a front mounted 7 foot flail, it takes longer and so it costs more to bruise than to flail. After treatment with the bruiser you do not have a neat sward, but a field of flattened bracken which looks untidy and takes at least a month before the bracken dies. Secondary growth of bracken begins to appear both in bruised and flailed fields which may need a second cut at a later stage.

My large field has had one part bruised and a second part flailed and it is difficult at this time to tell the difference between them. Roger Gaunt had a field bruised and we both expressed concern at its appearance after treatment with bracken that

seemed to survive the treatment.

Three months later all the original bracken is dead. A very small amount of secondary growth did appear but Roger was able to cut this by hand and at this time the field is totally clear of bracken.

It seems that the best way to control bracken is to use the flail if you have dense bracken, but use the bruiser on lighter dispersed bracken. However, be warned, bruising will cost more and the field will initially look untidy after treatment. Both methods are effective in destroying bracken growth. The other option is to use a selective spray such as asulox, but be prepared for secondary growth requiring further treatment.

Peter Chard

Our Dream Coming True

We moved to our present house in Brockweir a few years ago – we are the lucky owners of just over 5 acres of land, adjacent to our Edwardian brick cottage. We liked the fact that we took under our wings three fields, which in time can be turned into a wildflower haven – or at least that is our dream. Sadly, the previous occupiers were very meticulous when it came to mowing the ‘lawn’ and most of the outdoor space was treated like a parkland area with neatly mown grassy sections and the odd ornamental plant specimen poking from under the tree canopy. Our family has always been unconventional when it comes to plants/gardening so we did not like the

state of things in our new home. So luckily for us the Parish Grasslands Project (PGP) came into being and we immediately became members. Before our PGP days, we began to cut the grass in our three fields only once a year, taking care to remove the grass a few days later in order to impoverish the soil with the hope that this practice would encourage any wild species to move in – it was hard work, so on the third year of our residence on the property we asked the PGP to help us with the grass cutting and this has helped us tremendously though we still have to remove the cut grass by ourselves.



This new land management regime has already begun to pay dividends; late this spring we were overjoyed to find three common orchids making themselves at home on two of our three fields. We are looking forward to more wild species ‘invading’

our territory and most importantly are anxiously awaiting the arrival of those PGP people so that they can once more cut the grass for us.

JL - Brockweir

BarBQ—29 July 2006

We again gathered at Cowshill Farm by invitation from John Childs and his family, and John Josephi again made all the arrangements, but we were unlucky with the weather. After gasping through a dry and very hot July, we watched the weather forecasts apprehensively through the preceding week, and the

promised occluded front duly scored a bull’s-eye on our BarBQ. In fact, we did better than we might have feared. Some 30-40 people were not put off, and the trees round John’s house kept off most of the light rain that actually fell. We were very pleased to see several

members of the Monmouthshire Meadows Group in the crowd, as well as a representation of our own members. Our thanks again to the two Johns, and to Jane Morgan, who organised the sweeter part of the food.

Orchids

When we published our book last year we included a section detailing the species of native plant that were recorded in the Hudnalls grasslands earlier in the 20th century, but which had not been seen for many years, and may well be extinct locally. Such losses remind us that further losses are possible if management changes, and provide an incentive when we see opportunities for improvement or even re-introduction.

This summer has been encouraging for the evidence that orchids at least can look after themselves, given half a chance. First, Ann Lawson found a single flower spike of **early purple orchid** on the margins of a field in the centre of the Hudnalls, a triumph of observation - and evidence of the hidden benefits of dog-

walking. Early purples are never likely to be common – the soil is too acid – but close to the limestone and on the margins of wet hollows, this species can just about find what it needs. Later, Sally Secrett noticed that the **birds-nest orchids** that she found two years ago, had re-appeared roughly where they were before. Then as a by-product of our Open Day, one of the visitors took photographs of spotted orchids in Peter Chard's field, and a botanist friend later identified some as **heath spotted orchids**. This species was always known to survive in the general area, and is frequent in and around the heathland of Poors' Allotment, but we had overlooked it locally because it is very similar to the common spotted orchids, which are widespread and indeed common in some fields.

At the end of the summer these not totally unexpected finds were embellished by a whispered word from someone who undoubtedly knows, that a small colony of **bee orchids** has become established in recent years close to St Briavels (but not on the Hudnalls), accompanied by a **pyramidal orchid**. These are species that require lime in the soil, so they will always be more likely to appear on the plateau, and could well be flowering regularly on the verges of the Coleford-Chepstow road.

Orchids are flowering plants that behave like fungi. They produce millions of dust-like seeds that are spread far and wide on the wind, then if they fall on suitable ground, spend years building up a subterranean rootstock before they produce above-



ground leaves and eventually flowers. They can do this because they survive by symbiosis with soil fungi. So, the orchids one finds are small, but they are at least 6-7 years old, and they may be able to live for decades if the ground is kept in suitable condition.

George Peterken

Nightjar Watch



Back in February, Barry Embling of the RSPB braved snow and wind to speak to us about the heathland restoration projects at Tidenham, which, among other animals, have employed some of John Childs' Gloucesters. Several members asked then if it would be possible to visit the new heathlands, so, late on the warm, dry evening of July 20th, ten of us met at the Forestry Commission's car park opposite Poors' Allotment. As the ground became steadily darker and the bright sky lit up with the setting sun, we walked out on the path along the edge of the heath and waited, whispering, for action. We had a distant view of the white buzzard that has hung around the heaths for the last year or two – a very pale specimen with a few flecks of brown that might remind one of a barn owl or an osprey – and had to wait until dusk at 9.50 pm for the nightjars to appear, ghostly presences flying low over the bushes, darting sideways occasionally to catch a moth. We were treated several times to close fly-pasts, and at one point they were circling over us, but only once did we hear their distinctive churring. Apparently just the one pair have returned since the heathland was re-created, but they maintain two nests about 30 metres apart.

Ursula Williams was reminded of an unnerving evening when she was out walking the dog somewhere in the Dean, and came across a crouching man dressed in black, who was wearing white knickers on his head. Expecting the worst she bravely walked on, but the man explained that he was only searching for nightjars. Evidently, Bill Oddie had said that nightjars treat a white object as a challenge and try to fight it off, which brings them into view. In his hurry to get out he had grabbed his daughter's underwear!

George Peterken

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.