



NEWSLETTER

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Open Days

Open days will be June 9th and 10th, 11am to 4pm at Sylvan House, Yew Green Farm, Hadley & Hollyside Farm and Bryn House. Volunteers are needed to man each of the sites. If you can spare a few hours please ring Peter Chard 01594 530513 and offer your services as soon as possible.

THE COMMITTEE

Chairman:

George Peterken 01594 530452

Vice Chairman:

Peter Chard 01594 530513

Secretary:

Jim Swanson 01594 516540

PGP Treasurer:

John Josephi

Operations Treasurer:

Roger Gaunt

Committee Members:

John Childs

Tony Eggar

Jane Morgan

Patricia Pinkerton

Sarah Sawyer

Ursula Williams

Newsletter:

Sally Secrett

Our Management Service

When the Parish Grassland Project started, we saw ourselves mainly as a means of exchanging interest, information and experience about managing the small fields in and around the Hudnalls. At the time, BSE and Foot-and-Mouth had devastated local livestock, and restrictions on the movement of sheep and cattle had undermined the arrangements whereby residents had their fields mown and/or grazed by local farmers. We feared that the rate at which fields fell into disuse would increase, leaving neglected fields to turn rapidly into bramble, bracken, scrub and eventually woodland. A little of this was probably welcome to most residents, but wholesale neglect would not just cost us the flowers in the fields, but eventually cost us our views and the pleasant mix of trees, hedges, fields and gardens.

Early on, some of the committee members were keen to go further and set up a management service, offering not just advice but also practical help. The 'machinery group' of Peter Chard, John Childs, Mike Davis and Andy Rowlands drew up a specification and put together a bid for funds. By this time, a second grassland group had formed on the Monmouthshire side of the Wye, and they were keen to join the bid. Bill Howard became a member of the machinery group.

We were quickly granted part of our bid by the Forest of Dean District Council and the AONB's Welsh Sustainability Fund, but we were initially turned down by the Heritage Lottery Fund because we did not include any benefits for visitors and people who did not own fields. So, we added provision for the booklet, display boards, open days and walks leaflets to our revised

bid, and this succeeded. Funds were confirmed in spring 2004 and the machinery arrived exactly in the middle of the 2004 hay-making season.

Since then we have published the booklet, held two open days, set up one of the two display boards and have made some progress with walks leaflets. We have also now had two full seasons of the machinery service, which gives us a basis for reviewing how it has fared.

The service

We initially bought an Alpine tractor, flail, mower, tedder, baler, wrapper, topper, bracken-bruise, post-basher and brush-cutter. Later, as experience developed, we also bought a Massey Ferguson tractor, long-wheelbased trailer and extra wheels to make the tractor more stable on steep ground, and a side rake (which will sweep unwanted cuttings to the side of the field, thus avoiding the costs of baling). John Childs has kept the machinery at Cowshill Farm and he and his son Robert have done almost all the work. The programme of work has been co-ordinated by Peter Chard, who has collected requests from residents, had a look at the fields in question, and developed the requests into a programme. The treasurers, Andy Rowlands (2004-2005) and Roger Gaunt (2006) have paid the bills and sent out the invoices.

We have done 30-40 jobs in each of the last two years, covering roughly 120-140 acres. Some of the work has involved cutting and baling hay, but

some field owners have simply wanted the grass cut and the 'hay' removed. There have also been several requests to cut bracken and top overgrown fields. Most of the work has been on the Hudnalls and the nearby parts of east Monmouthshire, but we have also been asked to help elsewhere on the Gloucestershire side. A few requests were passed on to other operators, principally because we had too much to do ourselves.

Financially, we made a loss in 2004 and 2005, but were in credit in 2006. The actual operational budgets show only what we paid out to do the work and what we received back in charges. Grant income and depreciation of the machinery is shown on the formal balance sheets. Apart from paying for the time spent by John and Robert, the main items were insurance, fuel and wrap.

	2004	2005	2006
Jobs for Parish Grasslands Project	25	45	32
Jobs for Monmouthshire Meadows Group	10	11	8
Area of grassland managed (acres)	61	144	118
Hire charge (£ per hour)	18	18	22
	£	£	£
INCOME	1500	5802	4354
Administration costs	50	152	
Insurance	575	686	630
Fuel	147	666	644
Servicing		320	
Netwrap and stretchwrap	344	606	447
Spare parts		568	109
Labour	859	2881	1920
TOTAL EXPENDITURE	1975	5879	3700
Balance on year	(475)	(77)	654

Success or failure?

We have certainly demonstrated that there is a demand. In fact, the amount of work we have been asked to do has exceeded our capacity to do it. Most of our clients seem satisfied, but a small minority have been disappointed, and in 2006 we simply could not get round to complete all the work, which we know has

inconvenienced a few residents.

We have encountered operational problems, but probably no more than one should expect. These include:

- **Weather.** 2004 was wet, and so was the late-summer of 2006. This stops hay-making and ruins any hay that is out to dry. We have tried to time operations accordingly, but some hay has been spoiled after field owners insisted on hay being cut at a particular time.
- **Machinery.** The small-scale machinery has been very thoroughly tested on the difficult ground and rough grass. Mostly it has stood up very well, but the baler has broken down more often than we would wish.
- **Expectations.** A few field owners have been disappointed to discover that grassland work cannot be put into the diary for a particular day and time. John has to give priority to the stock on his own farm, and hay-making is wholly dependent on the weather. There have also been owners who expected meadows to look as tidy as garden lawns after cutting.
- **Quality of herbage.** Many fields have rough grass, which is harder to cut than a sown ley. Some field owners have not removed ragwort, which means that their hay cannot be used. We have also had the reverse of this: an owner who had St John's Wort in the herbage, and could not be convinced that it was not ragwort.
- **Time on the road.** Since the machinery is being used over a wide area, not a single property, the amount of travel time is large in relation to the work done, and field owners do not always realise that we must charge for travel time, just like a plumber's call-out charge. We have tried to minimise these costs by grouping jobs, but this means that some field owners have also had to be patient.
- **Charges.** Charges in 2004 were unsustainably low, partly because we did not charge properly for 'time on the road'. A few field owners complained when we included these in 2005.

Can we sustain the service?

The simple answer is that we are not sure. There are two main queries, financial and operational.

Financially we have roughly broken even, but only because John has been prepared to subsidise the service by claiming only a low rate for the time he and Robert have spent. This may have been reasonable in the short-term to get the service off the ground, but not in the long-term. John and eventually Robert want to make a reasonable living from the farm and their other business activities, and they also want to be able to buy-in help when they are stretched. In 2006, they could not get anyone to help when help was needed simply because we were not offering a competitive rate.

John accepted the low rate partly in exchange for the use of the machinery on his own farm, but on the other hand he further subsidised the service by storing all the equipment free and carrying out running repairs at no cost to the service. Without his subsidies, we could not have come close to making the service pay.

The service has also been subsidised by the willingness of Peter Chard, Bill Howard, Roger Gaunt and Gerry Chapman (audit) to give their time free. This is not a trivial matter, and without such voluntary inputs the service would not be possible.

The other financial aspect is the long term. We could only start because the grant enabled us to buy the equipment, and, if we keep going, that will eventually need replacing. We quickly realised that there was no hope of breaking-even if depreciation was brought into the calculation, i.e., we could not build up funds for replacements out of charges for work. The best we can hope would be to build up a balance that would be used as matching contributions for another grant application.

Operationally, we have depended on Peter Chard to spend a good deal of his summer acting as the co-ordinator and helping with some of the work. This ensures that John knows what is wanted on each job and relieves him of the need to spend time contacting field-owners. This work is voluntary and there can be no obligation to continue indefinitely. He will look for help in this role, but there can be no certainty that help will be found. The same in a different role can be said for Roger Gaunt and Bill Howard. Two of the original machinery group, Mike Davis and Andy Rowlands, have dropped out.

The other aspect of the finances is that the subsidy by the HLF will come to an end in 2007, when we are due to receive the last 5% of our grant. This will leave us with a small surplus, which will be the only resource if our operations make a loss. Each year, we need perhaps £1000 up front to pay for insurance and fuel before we have any income.

The service in 2007

Bearing all the above in mind, we have decided that we must charge more for our work so that we can pay John Childs and any others he asks to help a reasonable rate for the job. The new rate will be £28 per hour, and this will enable us to pay John £15 per hour. Other arrangements will be unchanged: Peter and Bill will take the orders and co-ordinate; Roger will look after the accounts; and John will house the machinery and undertake running repairs as a contribution to the project.

We recognise that the extra costs may reduce the demand. This would make the workload more manageable, though it would get less grass managed. We may, of course, discover that demand evaporates

at the new prices, but we will have to take the chance, simply because the service is not sustainable on the 2004-2006 basis. Unfortunately, we have only our own judgement to rely on: there is no other project like this!

Comments

The bad news is that three summers of experience has taught us that small, inaccessible, irregular fields on steep ground, whose grass has often been semi-neglected, are expensive to manage. That's why they tend to be neglected, but that is also why they still have a lot of wild flowers. Whether one compares the cost per acre or the cost per bale of hay, small fields cannot compete on price/costs with large, regular fields on easy ground.

The good news is that those of us who signed up for Stewardship know that the costs can mostly be met by grants from the ministry (DEFRA). Broadly speaking, anyone who keeps their fields as flower-rich meadow or pasture can easily have some of the costs back as a grant, and with a bit more effort can have almost all of them. We therefore hope that anyone who wants to keep their fields in good shape, but who is concerned at the cost, will consider entering the current scheme, and the PGP stand ready to help if need be. Sure, applying costs some effort and an obligation is incurred for at least 5 years, but in practice the effort and terms are not onerous.

George Peterken, but including contributions from Peter Chard and Roger Gaunt.

Machinery News

We are ready to start a new season and our alpine tractor is now equipped with extra wheels which makes it possible for us to tackle really steep slopes. We apologise to those members whose work was not carried out last year and hope that we can cover all the work required this year, weather permitting.

Please use the enclosed form to make requests for help with grassland management and send it with your subscription in the SAE provided. Please do not contact John Childs directly, since the work schedule is drawn up by me.

Peter Chard. 01594-530513

Stewardship

Some PGP members may not be aware that grants are available under Environmental Stewardship schemes that will defray the costs of maintaining your fields. You need to go through a process of form-filling, and may need some advice, but once that is done the schemes run with negligible further bureaucracy for at least 5 years.

Two schemes are available: (i) Entry-level Stewardship (ELS), and (ii) Higher level Stewardship (HLS). The first is a simple, basic level scheme that pays small amounts once you have satisfied the requirements. The second provides for much greater payments in return for more precise undertakings. The schemes differ also in that you would be accepted automatically into ELS if you meet the requirements, but entry to HLS is discretionary.

Entry Level Stewardship (ELS)

An ELS scheme lasts for 5 years and pays a basic £30 per ha each year. To qualify you have to maintain permanent grassland with low inputs (fertilizer and herbicides), maintain hedges, manage walls and manage wood edges. To enter you will need a 'vendor number' from the Rural Payments Agency.

Higher Level Stewardship

The HLS scheme lasts 10 years, but with a 5-year break clause. The amount you receive depends on what you chose to do. The list of options is long, but those that seem most relevant to the Hudnalls would be:

Annual payments

- £200 per ha for maintaining or restoring semi-natural grassland.
- £75 per ha supplement for making hay.
- £27 per 100m for maintaining hedges.
- £250 per ha for restoring a traditional orchard (or £190/ha for creating one).
- £45 per 100m for providing permissive access on foot (or £90 per 100m for a bridleway).

Capital payments

- £5 per metre for restoring a hedge
- £16 per metre for restoring a wall
- £1.80 per metre for sheep fencing
- £3 per square metre for creating a pond
- £149 for a wooden gate
- £96 for a stone gate post
- £112 per ha for bracken control.

In order to apply for an HLS agreement you would need to contact Natural England for a consultation prior to completing and submitting a Farm Environment Plan (FEP). This stage of the process is known as the pre-FEP consultation and is to help prospective applicants identify the potential environmental value of their holding and suitability for HLS. The more you set out to achieve, the more likely you are to be accepted into the scheme. Fortunately, if you are associated with the PGP you will be at a small advantage, since each

scheme adds to the value of a neighbour's scheme.

The full details can be read on the "Defra" Environmental Stewardship page <<http://www.defra.gov.uk/erdp/schemes/es/default.htm>>. The "Look after your land and be rewarded" promotional booklet <<http://www.defra.gov.uk/erdp/pdfs/es/es-promotional-booklet.pdf>> sums up the schemes and how to apply. Other highlights include the HLS payment rates <<http://www.defra.gov.uk/erdp/pdfs/es/hls-payment-booklet.pdf>>, not forgetting the new options <<http://www.defra.gov.uk/news/2006/060703a.htm>>. This includes the £30 per ha Cattle grazing supplement and £70 per ha 'Native breeds at risk' grazing supplement (you can only use one or the other, not both though).

Advice

As far as the application process goes, ELS is pretty simple, basically phone Chris Wedge at Natural England (see below) to request your maps and handbook, choose your options (most likely hedgerow and low input grassland for people within the PGP) and send the form back. Following a successful pre-FEP consultation, completing the HLS FEP is pretty straightforward once you get your head round it. Applicants can fill it out themselves or get an agent (e.g. FWAG) to complete the FEP and application form on your behalf. Natural England (see below) will pay the applicant (a fixed rate) for the cost of this whether they are successful in getting an agreement or not, so **there is no risk in submitting an application.**

Chris Wedge is our local adviser. He helped us draw up these notes, and he can be contacted for further help at: Natural England, Room 1:18, Block 3, Govt. Buildings, Burghill Road, Westbury-on-Trym, Bristol BS10 6NJ. (Tel: 0117- 9598644; Mobile: 077-755-93965, email: chris.wedge@naturalengland.org.uk website: <<http://naturalengland.org.uk>>

Chris Wedge also commented that, interestingly, although Gloucester cattle are one of the approved breeds eligible for the native breeds' supplement, they are not eligible when the sole objective of the agreement is to manage species-rich grassland, because apparently they do not make good conservation grazers! They should still be eligible for agreements within the PGP area though, as they can be used where one of the other agreement objectives is to provide cowpats/insects for Greater/Lesser horseshoe bats.

Chris reckons that field owners could get as much as £270 per ha for managing their grassland under HLS. The £75 per ha supplement for haymaking (HK18, page 86 of HLS handbook) may not be available to PGP members for the handbook says "This supplement supports the continuation or re-introduction of haymaking on sites that would normally be managed as pasture, due to the ready availability of livestock and/or the climatic difficulty of haymaking. These fields will have high existing environmental value as hay meadows, but are at risk from haymaking being discontinued for economic reasons." Might be worth trying for though!

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.