



# NEWSLETTER

www.pariishgrasslandsproject.org.uk

## PGP helps real farmers!

Hay cut with our machinery on the RSPB reserve at Nagshead has been given to farmers whose grass was ruined by the Severn floods. The main 'friend in need' was Patricia Pinkerton, but it's good to show that the PGP can also help when it matters.

## 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

## Flower-rich Grassland and Meat

Many enthusiasts for flower-rich grassland believe that the meat grown on such grassland will somehow be better, but this seems rarely to have been tested. Now, however, the Grazing Animals Project (of which our secretary, Jim Swanson, is the regional manager) has combined with others to establish a research project to test this out. The results are far from complete, but preliminary indications have been summarised in GAP News.

In general, both commercial breeds of cattle and traditional breeds (i) grew faster on 'improved' grassland (sown leys and native grassland treated with fertilisers and herbicides) than flower-rich grassland, (ii) attained heavier final weights, (iii) better fat cover, and (iv) better 'conformation' (whatever that is!). None of this is surprising: if it were not so, the whole of commercial beef production based on sown and 'improved' grassland would have been invalidated.

However, some of the individual traditional-breed animals did just as well on flower-rich grassland as they did on 'improved' grassland. 'About a third of the beef shorthorns [in the test] that were restricted to 'unimproved' grassland attained a size, conformation and degree of finish that was the equal of those reared on 'improved' pastures.'

The implication is that the genetics of traditional breeds matters, and that within these breeds there are genes that will allow them to grow just as well on flower-rich grassland as on leys and fertilised grassland. Evidently, the traditional breeds have often been crossed with larger and less-hardy Continental breeds that seem to have reduced their efficiency as converters of native grassland. If this is so, then we could select bloodlines that will do well on such grassland. Other experiments on sheep have demonstrated the 'enhanced eating qualities and healthier fatty-acid composition' of sheep meat grown on herb-rich pastures.

In other words, it should be possible to have our traditional breeds and flowers and eat them without too much loss of meat production and some gains in quality. Or, if one has already decided to run a traditional breed, it should be possible to produce as much quality meat as on sown pastures.

George Peterken, Jim Swanson

## Next meeting: Tuesday 13 November, 7.30 pm in the Mackenzie Hall Traditional haymaking

Eric Freeman, supplemented with some pictures by George Peterken

Eric is a lively raconteur with a long involvement in farming. You may have seen him at agricultural shows riding some ancient farm machinery drawn by his fine white horse. He will speak about how hay used to be made, against a background of photographs and paintings of haymaking from medieval times onwards.

## Managing our Meadows

Can anyone remember a worse year for weather? It has certainly created massive problems for farmers with the likelihood of substantial price rises for feedstuff. The growth of grass, bracken and bramble due to all the rain has given us problems in management. John and Robert Childs have worked like trojans during the short windows we have had for haymaking. Their first priority has been to get sufficient hay and straw to feed their growing herd of cattle during the winter, and only then can they start hay making for members. Unfortunately Michael Welham, who had agreed to offer his services, caught pneumonia and glandular fever and was unable to work. We hope that Michael makes a good recovery and is able to help out later on.

This year has illustrated even more clearly that we are unable to meet all the demands of members for hay making. In some cases the fields have too much bracken which makes the hay worthless as fodder. We may be forced to select more carefully the fields that we cut for hay.

What other alternative methods of management can we recommend? The use of the flail is very effective in keeping down the bracken, but it does leave a mulch which encourages the growth of coarser grasses and reduces the meadow flowers. Another option is to use grazing animals as mobile mowers. Selective grazing can keep down the coarser grasses and result in more flower growth. The

meadows need to have stockproof fences or erect electric fencing which can be very effective. Some members already have arrangements with local graziers and allow them to use their fields. I have placed a short article in the Village News asking any grazier who could place animals in members' fields to get in touch with me, so I hope that I can explore the possibility of using grazing animals.

I have used donkeys for a number of years but this year with the flush of grass I had sheep on my lower field which only 4 years ago was a mass of bracken, bramble and scrub. Using the flail over the 4-year period reduced the bracken and bramble very significantly. The sheep ate down the coarser grass to a level sward and to my delight some meadow flowers have appeared, especially yellow hawkbit. The sheep were taken off in late May and now the grass has regrown so now I hope that I can get them back for autumn grazing.

All sorts of problems can occur with animals and many members may not want the responsibility of keeping them. I hope that the committee will be examining the issues involved and see how we can overcome any problems.

If any member wants to make their fields available to local graziers please give me a call on 01594 530513 and let me know.

Peter Chard

### Grazing Animal Survey

	Impact on Vegetation	Dunging Behaviour	Impact on Trees and Shrubs
<b>Cattle</b>	Non selective grazers. They reduce long course grass to average height, but do not selectively eat flower heads, so they maintain herb diversity. Trample bracken and low scrub, but create bare patches.	Avoid grazing close to dung pats and create mosaic form.	Remove leaves and twigs by tearing action which is highly damaging.
<b>Horses</b>	Selective grazers. Create mosaic, of benefit to some species, invertebrates, small mammals and birds of prey. Produce bare patches which can result in species diversity.	Some equines dung in selective areas which become enriched, while other areas retain low fertility and may be botanically more diverse.	Slow down shrub encroachment by browsing seedlings and nutritionally rich tips.
<b>Sheep</b>	Selective grazers take flowering heads and buds, can be problematic for species rich swards, avoid aromatic plants and produce very tight sward if over grazed. Little damage to ground unless overgrazed.	Spread dung widely, but some concentration in "loafing" or resting areas.	Some breeds such as Hebridean sheep are excellent at curbing or removing shrubs dependent on palate.
<b>Donkeys</b>	Non selective, graze on wide range of grasses including coarse species, sedges and rushes, create bare spots to roll on, but little poaching and avoid mud.	Dung in selected area causing localised enrichment and leaving large areas of lower fertility with species diversity.	Spend 20% of time browsing leaves, twigs and strip bark.
<b>Pigs</b>	Rooting behaviour destroys sward, but can be useful since pigs eat bracken rhizomes in autumn. At low density pigs can clear overgrown land and create bare patches. Some species (kunikuni) do graze.	Random dunging unless at areas of supplementary feeding.	Eat leaves and strip bark, can chew roots and destroy shrubs.
<b>Goats</b>	Graze and browse, but more highly selective than sheep targeting on seed heads of particular species. Will climb in shrubs and hedges to seek food.	Similar to sheep, dung well spread except in resting places.	Very effective browsers and can control invading shrubs. Will strip bark in winter and kill small hedgerow trees.

## Bracken: A discussion – is bashing a good method of control?

Those of us who have bracken on our land know that it cannot be eliminated. This article looks at non-chemical methods of control.

First of all let us look at the nature of the plant and how it grows. The energy of bracken is contained in the underground rhizomes (root system). These are extensive and labyrinthine. Cutting the fronds on the surface does not remove the underlying problem. Energy is stored through the winter in the rhizomes and used for the new fronds in the summer. When these fronds die back in the late summer, energy drains back into the rhizomes. During the summer energy is added to the system so that unchecked bracken will eventually dominate the ground cover until superseded by scrub and eventually woodland.

How is this pernicious weed to be controlled? One method is by cutting. If this is done just as the bracken has fully emerged and the fronds have reached maximum expansion (energy outlay at maximum with no return yet) then the bracken is weakened. There are (always) sufficient resources for re-growth, so this must also be cut again when the frond has reached maximum expansion. Two cuts a year at the right time will weaken the rhizomes significantly.

The Parish Grasslands Project bought a 'bracken basher' to be used behind one of our tractors. This employs a different principle and in my experience works better than cutting. The basher is basically a roller with grooves so that every two or three inches there is a ridge. The theory is that instead of cutting the bracken (as above) when new shoots immediately start from the rhizome, the plant is only injured and 'bleeds' from the fronds that have been crushed at several places along their length. This drains the energy that would otherwise go into new fronds.

Last year (2006) the densest patches of bracken in one of my fields were 'bashed' with this machine, but the rest of the field was cut and raked off. The 'bashed' area showed very little re-growth of bracken and it was not deemed necessary to bash again as odd fronds could be tackled by hand.

This year (2007) the bracken was slow to emerge, but did eventually appear in the grass. Where it had been dominant to a height of several feet it is now significantly reduced, but still there. In retrospect it may have been useful to have it bashed again but I had decided earlier in the year to have the whole field cut and raked off using our new side rake and it was one thing or the other.

In conclusion, our bracken basher does a surprisingly good job and if used systematically would nearly eliminate the bracken. If the field is rolled in this way it is not then practicable to cut the grass later in the season so that it dies back *in situ*. This is not necessarily a good thing and the ideal would be to have some grazing taking place at the same time.

Footnote: In reading up on the subject in GAP News (Grazing Animals Project) I found an article describing how pigs were used to remove bracken. Apparently they prefer bracken rhizomes to all other roots and vegetation and do a wonderful job. If anyone would like to read this article please let me know.

Roger Gaunt, Firtree Cottage, St Briavels.

## Haymaking 2007



Late-August haymaking becomes a social occasion at Hollyside. The visitors from Dingestow have come to inspect our tractor and baler.

Jean Green's hay bales not-quite-safely gathered in. At least some of the bales will keep Patricia Pinkerton's Dexters in fodder through the winter.

## Insurance for Small Field Owners

We asked **James Wakeley**, NFU Group Secretary & NFU Mutual Agent, to provide some notes on insurance to cover those who own and use small fields. At the same time, he has seized the chance to say a bit about the NFU as well. ....

Many people want to live in the countryside and to own their small part of it. Many want to use their land to support themselves financially, to provide an additional income stream or simply to pursue a hobby or interest. Working closely with the National Farmers' Union, but as an entirely separate organization, NFU Mutual has over the years developed a range of insurance products and services to address the needs of the farming and rural community.

What is not always appreciated is that many standard household insurance policies may not provide cover for rurally based enterprises. If you ride as a hobby some policies will not even provide cover for your stables. There are important areas that you should be aware of when it comes to insurance, beyond simply being able to repair or replace your existing property (property in insurance terms means goods as well as buildings). These revolve predominantly around issues of liability. If you allow someone to use your land for grazing, who has legal responsibility if the animals get out and cause damage to someone else's property? Depending on the agreement you have with the owner of the animals this could be your responsibility. If you run a small business from home, do you have public or product liability cover in the event your products might cause harm to someone? Are you covered for the outbuildings you use for your business? Do you employ anyone to help you on your land, even on a voluntary basis, if you do you may need employers liability insurance.

NFU Mutual has a wealth of experience when it comes to providing insurance for those based in the countryside whether for cars, tractors, quadbikes, homes or country based businesses, big or small. We can provide the right policy to make sure that you have the cover you need, after all insurance is about peace of mind. Your local office is based in Cinderford. If you want more information or you want someone to come out to meet you please ring the agency on 01594 827722.

**The National Farmers Union (NFU)** has been at the forefront of farming and rural issues for nearly 100 years. It remains the NFU's objective to enable farmers and growers to deal on level terms with other interests and to present agriculture's case effectively to the Government. The NFU represents the farmers and growers of England and Wales and its central objective is to promote successful, socially responsible farming while ensuring the longterm viability of rural communities. The NFU is a membership organisation and provides a range of membership categories for those individuals and businesses that are connected to the farming industry or indeed those who are simply interested in the countryside. Countryside membership means that you will be part of the leading membership organization that actively supports the countryside community. With 70,000 members in the UK, we focus on both local and national issues supporting you in your campaigns and desires to maintain and care for the countryside. One of the many benefits of membership is access to the NFU's years of experience of matters concerning the countryside, be they legal, environmental or planning issues. Our free members helpline, available every week day, provides a quick, easy and confidential service to Countryside members on a wide range of practical and legal issues. Each month brings you a free monthly magazine which combines useful articles, discounts and reader offers which will become a very useful information source.

## Open Day 2007



Jean Green admiring her spotted orchids with her daughter and grandsons, who acted as helpers on Open Day



Open Day is not all hard walking and plant identification: Peter and Ann Chard and Bruce Chapple entertain visitors at Bryn House



A rural idyll in the flower patch at Sylvan House

*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.*