



# NEWSLETTER

www.pari sh grasslands project.org.uk

## THE COMMITTEE

*Chairman:*

George Peterken 01594 530452

*Vice Chairman:*

Peter Chard 01594 530513

*Secretary:*

Jim Swanson 01594 516540

*PGP Treasurer and Membership:*

Jean Pitt 01594 530255

*Operations Treasurer:*

Roger Gaunt

*Committee Members:*

John Childs

Tony Eggar

Jean Green

John Josephi

Patricia Pinkerton

Sarah Sawyer

Ursula Williams

*Newsletter:*

Sally Secrett

## PGP's New Stock Group

We thought that last summer was terrible and delayed our efforts in hay making, but this summer is catastrophic. Fields remain uncut and for farmers with livestock to feed during the winter it is a very worrying period. We can only hope that that by the time you are reading this, as you enjoy the warm sun of a St Martin's summer that you are saying "what's the big fuss about?" It's all my fault, since I went out and bought a tent at the end of July; yes it proves finally that I am barking mad!

I do apologise to all those PGP members who booked our services for haymaking and flailing. We will complete the work though if it is too late in the season at least we will flail the meadows. On a more cheerful note we have made progress in organising a series of practical workshops on grazing animals. These workshops are and being run by experienced graziers who will give members the opportunity to handle sheep and cattle. Each workshop covers the following practical issues relating to sheep: Catching and handling in the pen. Care of feet. Checking for fly strike, dagging and treatment. Worming. Checking teeth. Checking general condition.

Grazing is the best method of management of flower meadows, providing it is not too constant and the animals are moved from time to time and the meadows are given a resting period. There is great pleasure in seeing your own sheep or cattle grazing your fields especially in early spring when lambs and calves are born. Harvest time

also is a time of satisfaction when your freezer fills with your own meat, but it is equally satisfying to those who want mobile grass cutters and are satisfied to have more elderly sheep, cattle or other grazing animals on their meadows. We intend to plan a series of more advanced workshops in the spring for those wanting to breed their own sheep or cattle. PGP also intends to provide its members with a list of "consultants" who are prepared to come and look at livestock and offer practical advice and help. This would of course involve a fee for the advice to be agreed with the consultant. Anyone reading this who is interested in joining these workshops and becoming part of the stock group should ring me on 530513. The numbers for practical workshops are of necessity restricted, but we are prepared to organise more workshops if there is a demand.

The principal aim of the PGP is to see the number of flower meadows increase and the number of meadows clogged with bracken bramble and scrub reduce. This will result in an increase in the variety of insects which provide food for both birds and bats, so enriching the wildlife of the Wye Valley.

For more information on conservation grazing please see [www.grazinganimalsproject.org.uk](http://www.grazinganimalsproject.org.uk)

Peter Chard

## Membership

**Please send an email to [jeanpitt@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:jeanpitt@hotmail.co.uk) so that she can update her membership records**

## Dates for your Diary

**18th November, 7.30pm, The Loft, Brockweir & Hewelsfield Village Shop:** 'Conservation Grazing and Biodiversity-does it work? Come and join in a discussion and find out more about the highs and lows of having grazing animals on your meadows.

## Scything Bracken

Want a Scythe blade made to measure? Ring Matthew Fedden 01594 510473

At any time from the Iron Age to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, one could have seen men mowing hay with scythes throughout the English and Welsh lowlands. However, like so much of traditional agriculture, scything has now been confined to the history books, collections of early photographs, older landscape paintings and the margins of medieval religious manuscripts. For the time being, one can still see hay-making with scythes in parts of east-central Europe, but in Britain the last people to scythe for real are now pensioners. The last instance I know about locally was mentioned by Randolph Ball of the Bowls Club, who said his family cut hay with scythes on the slopes of the Angiddy valley until about 1950. So it will seem perverse that this summer I have been regularly scything in my own fields. It came about, partly because I had experienced traditional agriculture – scything included – in Romania in 2007, partly because I already owned a traditional scythe snaith and blade; and partly because I wanted to cut back the bracken spreading in from the boundaries of our meadows. I acquired the snaith (the wooden handle) in 1971 from Whelnetham Woodwork, the last traditional rake factory in East Anglia, when I was involved in protecting Bradfield Woods, the coppice from which the factory drew its material, and the blade came from a friend in Wickham Skeith, but I had never managed to fit the two together. Bill Howard drew my attention to the 'scythe shop' in Somerset, where I called last year to buy the fittings (The owner turned out to be a heavily-bearded graduate drop-out who had used my first book as a course text – we were both very surprised!). In fact, the fittings still failed to join, but I was saved by Joyce McKay, who had a spare metal-handled scythe rusting quietly at the bottom of her garden.

The serious point is that the scythe has proved to be helpful and easy to use on small patches of bracken spreading from the hedges. Even though my strength and skill only allows me to use it in 30-45 minute bursts, I've been able to cut all the many patches three times this year, the herbage has already recovered and I have high hopes that the new fronds will be weaker next spring. Provided one catches them young, bracken fronds cut easily, even with a fairly blunt blade. As a hand tool I can easily walk from one patch to the next, without cutting anything else in between. And I don't have the expense of acquiring or hiring a strimmer or motorised cutter.



The photo shows one of the smaller bracken invasion patches facing up to the onslaught. It also demonstrates that I don't know how to swing a scythe, but I rationalise that by saying I'm cutting individual bracken fronds, not hay. It does *not* show a

suburban, golden age romantic imbued with some rural ideal. Rather, I know well enough that scything is immensely laborious for ageing bodies, used to using machines to save effort, and I would not contemplate trying to cut the hay traditionally, but at the small scale of bracken invasions a scythe is highly practical, and one can do a little each day as a relaxing exercise.

George Peterken

## SCYTHING - Not so unique after all?

*Following on from George Peterken's experience with scything I thought it worth adding my own note which continues the theme and I think is most relevant.*

I have just over two acres of fields split into four paddocks that I rotate my four sheep around to keep the grass down. It is on a steep north facing slope so has little or no sun at times making the grass and flowers rather poor. However, there are constant invaders in the form of nettles, thistles, docks and bracken that would take over very quickly if I turn my back. The sheep are not interested in these weeds, of course. The previous owner had at some point spent some time getting rid of the worst offenders with some pigs, then resowed the grass. When I took over the land from him just over 5 years ago I quickly realised that I needed to act regularly to stop the weeds taking hold again.

I started with a Kawasaki strimmer/brush cutter, which is excellent but is hard work, noisy, smelly and generally not eco-friendly.

About three years ago I found a long handled scythe, I think at the Monmouthshire Show. I have found this to be very good.

I walk around the paddocks swinging the scythe and topping anything that I don't want. This usually takes about two hours, probably the same as with the strimmer. It is much less tiring, totally quiet and uses no petrol. The bonus is that I am unencumbered by leggings, harness, goggles and ear muffs allowing me to savour the buzz of insects, the birdsong and the scenery over the Wye Valley plus becoming far more familiar with every part of the paddocks.

There are areas where machinery is better at tackling thick growths of weeds, but generally the scythe is the preferred tool. I probably need to do the cutting three to four times a year and this is certainly keeping everything under control.

Tony Eggar



### STOP PRESS!

Reappearance of lost orchid.

**Autumn lady's-tresses orchid**, which was last seen in Flora Klickmann's Flower Patch (Sylvan House) half-a-century ago, but which has now appeared again on a lawn in Brockweir.

Paul Wilkins

## Open Day 2008

The mysteries of Yorkshire fog, Twayblades, Adders-tongue and Birds feet were unravelled on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June at the Parish Grasslands Open Day. This annual event offers the opportunity for both the local and wider community to come and view the flora of these unique pastures and meadows. The weather was typically British, starting fine and descending into a steady drizzle. Yet many visitors packed their picnics, braved the elements and had a thoroughly enjoyable day in the beautiful Wye Valley countryside.

At Oak Cottage scarecrows fashioned from hazel and chicken wire were dressed and stuffed with last year's bracken laced bales. A nature trail was laid out for younger visitors to follow, and tea and cake went down a treat huddled around the Rayburn in the barn. Firtree and Ridley Bottom were locations to admire a wider range of flora and to hear how these special fields have come to hold such a wealth of species. Visitors learned what steps were needed to maintain a flowery sward and appreciated their importance as a feature of the landscape and their contribution to biodiversity. The tranquillity and beauty of these sites were greatly admired.

Cowshill Farm, which was open under the LEAF farm scheme, proved popular with families. A close encounter with a Berkshire piglet produced more squeals from visiting youngsters than were generated from the sty! On top of the seat of Farmer Childs tractor, boys and girls, both big and

small, surveyed the landscape, farm buildings, and the all important livestock - Gloucester Cattle and rare breed pigs. To take home.....sausages, locally produced, top quality bangers, for that all important summer BBQ.

A big thank you to the numerous volunteers, too many to mention by name, who helped on the day and made this event a great success. In particular, thanks to the staff at the AONB office for their assistance with publicity and mapping services and to the landowners who provided the sites to host the event.

We hope to repeat this event next year and are currently assessing how we can reach a wider and more diverse audience. We are exploring the possibility of working with our local primary school to arrange a second visit to one of our members' fields. We aim to time this visit prior to the Open Day and devise a work outcome (a piece of art work perhaps) which would then be displayed on Open Day. We would hope in this way to encourage parents to visit and learn more about the Grasslands Project.

There may be other local community groups that we could work with to add value to the Open Day - the History Group and Garden Society for example. New ideas and partnerships are welcomed.

Sarah Sawyer

## Surveying for the elusive Brown-Banded Carder Bees

For those of you who haven't met me this summer, I have been working for the Wye Valley AONB unit as part of a training scheme paid for by the Heritage Lottery Fund. My responsibilities for this summer have been surveying the AONB for bumblebees and veteran trees.

Regular sightings of bumblebees in the garden are often misconstrued as indicating that bumblebees on the whole are maintaining their numbers. Sadly this is not the case and of the 22 species of bumblebee, only 6 are common. There are currently five species of bumblebee on the UK Biodiversity Action Plan one of which is *Bombus humilis* also known as the 'brown-banded carder bee' due to a deep coloured band of ginger hairs in the thorax. In recent decades *B. humilis* has undergone a major decline in its distribution with most populations currently found on extensive regions of grassland along the southern and western coasts of England and Wales. There are however still some inland populations most notably on the Salisbury Plains and populations of *B. humilis* are now thought to be stabilising (Benton, 2006).

Locally, the brown-banded carder bee has been recorded in and around Llanfihangel Tor-Y-Mynydd churchyard at Star Hill and if you wish to see the species, workers can be found there from July through until mid-September. It bears a considerable resemblance to one of the common species of bumblebees *Bombus pascuorum* also known as the 'common carder bumblebee' however *B. humilis* has no black hairs in the abdomen unlike *B. pascuorum*.

During the course of my study I have also found other species including *Bombus terrestris*, *B. lucorum*, *B. lapidarius*, *B. hortorum*, *B. pratorum*, *B. rupestris*, *B. campestris* and *B. vestalis* (the last three are cuckoo species which parasitize the nests of social bumblebees). The jewel in the crown was a specimen of *B. humilis* found in Penallt.

Bumblebees need suitable habitats for all phases of their lifecycles, namely; hibernation, nesting, foraging and mating. The carder bumblebees (including *B. humilis* and *B. pascuorum*) establish their nests above ground. Some suggest that the availability of suitable nesting habitat is possibly limiting the extent of bumblebees. A suitable nesting habitat for *B. humilis* is tall grassland with a relatively open sward exposed to the sun and an abundant supply of leaf litter and moss at ground level. Bumblebees also need a constant supply of foraging plants to establish and sustain the colony. *B. humilis* in particular requires flower rich grassland with continuous nectar and pollen sources from mid-May to the latter half of September (Benton, 2006). Being a long-tongued species, *B. humilis* likes flowering plants with a long corolla such as clovers and vetches.

I will be producing a full report on the survey and some management guidelines for landowners who wish to encourage *B. humilis* by December. However, if you are interested in learning more in the meantime please get in touch with me on 01600 710847 or at [robbacon@wyevalleyaonb.org.uk](mailto:robbacon@wyevalleyaonb.org.uk).

Rob Bacon

### References:

Benton, 2006. *Bumblebees: The Natural history & Identification of the Species Found in Britain*. HarperCollins Publishers.

Edwards. R. & Telfer. M. (Eds) 2002. *Provisional Atlas of the Aculeate Hymenoptera of Britain and Ireland Part 4*, Centre for Ecology and Hydrology.

## A Flower Hunt for St Briavels School

Last summer we had high hopes of running an after-hours flower hunt for the school environment club, but for various reasons it never happened. We did, however, have a rewarding visit to the school itself in mid-December, when we showed pictures of the parish fields and their flowers and actually managed to find buttercup, hardheads and three other meadow species still in flower.

This summer it all worked out well. For two hours on the afternoon of 26 June, 17 four- and five-year-olds spent two hours in Jean Green's fields searching out flowers and learning some of their names.

Under the supervision of three staff, three parents and four members of the parish grasslands committee, they split into three teams and within half an hour they had found almost all the 57 varieties of flower in the field. Most impressively, they were careful enough to ask before picking any orchids (this year there were dozens of spotted orchids, so picking one hardly mattered), and one team even realised that the funny things at the top of grasses were also flowers. When we gathered round to name them, one team was a clear winner and went off with the best chocolates, though we suspect they were carefully encouraged by an eagle-eyed supervisor.

By this time Patricia Pinkerton's Dexters were standing against their electric fence watching more entertainment in one hour than they had seen in several months, and the children had a chance to meet them. We put it that way because several were distinctly nervous of getting close – understandably, perhaps, for they don't normally come across livestock and they were



even smaller than the Dexters.

A short break for a picnic gave Sarah Sawyer a chance to talk about common



birds, using the RSPB's puppet Great Tits and the like, each of which can be made to squeak or chirrup in the appropriate way. But her inspiration was to bring along some butterfly nets, which gave the kids a chance to hurtle round the field after meadow browns, none of which was in danger

of being caught, tripping over tufts of herbage, falling into the hay, and arguing about whose turn it was to hold the nets next.

Thankfully, we finished with as many children as we started with, and they all enjoyed it to the point of over-excitement. We hope, also, that they absorbed a little understanding of the rural environment in which they live and the things that grow under their feet, and, just possibly, that many years from now, one or two will remember this as a highlight, and even the start of a new interest. We owe all this to Patricia Pinkerton (who made most of the arrangements), Jean Green (who allowed her hay to be flattened), Nadia Sainsbury (the teacher who took up our offer and led the children like *The Sound of Music*), Sarah Sawyer (who taught us how to talk to children), George Peterken, (who tried hard not to talk in Latin names) and the school assistants and parents (who knew well when to let the kids off the leash). Watching them all dashing around amongst the flowers was a rural idyll.

Patricia Pinkerton, Sarah Sawyer and 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.*