



NEWSLETTER

www.parishgrasslandsproject.org.uk

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Annual Subscription

The PGP annual subscription of £5 per household is now due. Please send a cheque made out to Parish Grasslands Project to **Jean Pitt, Court Cottage, Hewelsfield, Lydney GL15 6UL**, as soon as possible.

If you have an e-mail address and have not already given it to Jean, please do so, as the saving in terms of cost, materials and time enables us to keep the subscription at this low level.



Flower of the month
Primrose *Primula vulgaris*

Programme for 2009

This Newsletter comes later than we had intended. Peter Chard intended to edit this one, but he had only progressed part of the way when he fell ill. Moreover, his enforced absence has forced us to 'dust ourselves down, pick ourselves up' and re-group. In particular, we have had to consider new arrangements for our machinery and management service, and this has proved to be difficult.

The PGP was, in any case, planning to do less this year. Peter, Roger Gaunt, Jim Swanson and Patricia Pinkerton have stood down from the committee; Sarah Sawyer now has a full time job with the AONB; and I, too, cannot spend as much time on the PGP as I have. On the other hand, Mike Topp joined the committee at the AGM. Over the years, Roger, Jim and Patricia have made substantial contributions, for which they deserve our considerable thanks.

It is difficult to do justice to the work Peter Chard has done for the PGP. In effect, he has been a co-chair, initially with John Josephi, then with me, but, more to the point, he has been a constant and prolific source of ideas and initiatives, as well as the hardest worker on our various projects. In addition to organising our first two Open Days, he undertook the applications which brought us money for machinery and our book, and then acted as co-ordinator for the work under our management service. In the months before his illness, he promoted sheep-keeping tuition and had many ideas

for promoting grazing in general. He will be impossible to replace.

Sally Secrett has designed and edited our Newsletters from the outset, making them look clear, attractive and interesting, and she has also put together our Open Day leaflets. We are very grateful for her help: without it, we would have appeared very amateur. Tony Eggar, who designed our book and walks leaflets, has now taken on the Newsletter.

Our **boundaries meeting** on 4 March went well, and we intend to have an autumn meeting, though as yet we have not selected a topic. The next event is likely to be the launch of a **wild flowers leaflet**, which, like our walks leaflets, will be a 12-panel folded A3 sheet. It will show almost 100 of the commonest wild flowers to be found locally, with photographs and short descriptions, colour-coded to help identification. Paul Wilkins, Tony Eggar and myself are putting it together, and we aim to complete it before this year's flowers are all over.

We will not run an **Open Day** this year. Sarah, who organised it last year, has less spare time, but, more to the point, we felt that the level of interest has been such that a 3-yearly interval would be more appropriate. Monmouthshire Meadows Group will still go ahead with theirs this June.

George Peterken

Dates for your Diary

Keep an eye on the Diary page of the website www.parishgrasslandsproject.org.uk for the launch date of the Wild Flowers of the Hudnalls leaflet, probably in June.

Keeping sheep by Louise Frankel



Last year I wrote an article for this Newsletter describing the remarkable transformation achieved by John Childs and the Parish Grassland's alpine tractor clearing an apparently impenetrable mass of brambles and bracken in an overgrown field.

This weekend a lamb was born in that field, representing an astonishing turn around for an area of land I have since discovered had not been grazed for over twenty five years.

The past six months have also represented a steep learning curve for us – ever since we made the decision to take on livestock to help us maintain the field. Me and my husband are both novices, although we had gained some insight into the various habits and requirements of horses, ponies and sheep, having lent another field to various people requiring grazing (more often than not through the Parish Grasslands website).

Having decided to try and keep our own sheep, it was then a matter of arming ourselves with as much information as possible. We attended a number of workshops organised by Peter Chard and Jim Swanson of the Grazing Animals Project, and latterly with Phil Saunders in Bream, all of which proved invaluable.

So far as the breed was concerned, and as is so often the case, it was no more than a chance remark by a friend that she was wanting to reduce the size of her flock, that led us to Hebrideans. Neither of us had ever heard of Hebridean sheep but the more research we did, the more we became convinced they would be suitable.

Hebrideans are a primitive breed of black sheep with horns, originating from Scotland and until relatively recently listed by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust. However numbers have increased as they are gaining in popularity through their reputation for 'conservation grazing', an ability to thrive even on poor vegetation and graze in a beneficial way.

We were attracted by their hardy reputation which means they are less prone to some of the problems faced by more commercial breeds, and their meat is reputed to be delicious, although we are a year away from proving this to be the case. Furthermore, they are a small breed which would make them easier for us amateurs to handle, but whilst it is certainly true that once caught they are light enough to manage relatively easily, this is probably counterbalanced by their general high spirits!

Having obtained an agricultural holding number and registered with the local animal health office we started with six ewes to provide nothing more than mobile grass cutting. However, it wasn't long before we got sufficiently carried away to think we would like to try lambing. We sourced a ram from a separate flock and 'Homer' joined us last autumn.

Though they were at first extremely wary, it was only a matter of days before they ran towards us at the sound of a few sheep nuts rattling in a bucket. 'Bucket training' is really the only way to successfully manage a small flock. Our local farmer gave us the hint of only giving them the nuts within a corral of hurdles; that way, any time we do need to handle them they are confined in a small space.

Start up costs haven't been too daunting, the sheep were considerably less than the sum of their parts in a



butcher's and the next most expensive item has been the hurdles. Our basic kit includes antiseptic spray, foot trimmers and shearing scissors and on-going expenditure involves sheep nuts, salt licks and hay for winter feeding with various veterinary products for treating foot rot and fly strike. So far we haven't needed to worm them and are hoping our policy of rotating their grazing every three weeks will not only ensure that remains the case but also reduce the incidences of foot rot.

Caring for them obviously has a time cost and if we go away we need to arrange for someone to look at them



daily. Their feet need trimming every few months – although if they lived on hard stony ground this would be less of an issue, and we have had a couple of incidents of lameness to deal with. Having once thought we would attempt shearing ourselves we fairly quickly decided that that would be a job best left to the professional.

Despite a good supply of winter grazing and hay we did discover they were chewing the bark off apple trees (ironically one of the reasons we decided not to keep ponies or donkeys) so have had to protect the trunks of those.

Having said all that, when John Childs initially cleared the field we chatted about various livestock alternatives and I recall him saying that whatever decision we made we would be surprised by the depth of satisfaction to be gained from looking after animals, and I have often reflected on how true his words of wisdom proved to be. They have provided infinite pleasure to us all and the children are learning some invaluable lessons. Looking after livestock is a great responsibility and not something to be undertaken lightly but we have found the time and expense required is far outweighed by the gains felt.

Management

After reviewing the difficulties of the very wet 2007 and 2008 summers, and recognising that John and Robert Childs had less time to spend on our work, Peter Chard intended to co-ordinate a reduced service in 2009, concentrating on the flower-rich fields where the owners had come to rely on us, but his illness forced a re-think. In February we decided that the best course would be for the machinery to be used mainly by the Monmouthshire Meadows Group, who are minority owners, on the other side of the Wye. However, in March, new opportunities developed when (i) Mike Topp offered to take on the co-ordination, and (ii) John and Robert Childs found a third person who would be available to share the workload.

We now look like being able to offer help with flailing, bracken-bashing, mowing, raking, hay-making (big bales), use of trailer to dispose of waste, and post-driving/fencing. Any member who wants work done, or who just wants to know the up-to-date position, should phone Mike (01-594-531496) or contact him by email (mike.topp@yahoo.co.uk).

We apologise for the inconvenience this uncertainty will have caused to members, and we remain unsure how many years we can operate aging machinery. The best long-term solution would be to have several local farmers and smallholders who are prepared to help with management for a reasonable fee, and have enough business to spread the costs of equipment and maintenance. Management would be a bilateral

arrangement, much like it is with, say, a plumber, and the charge would recognise that the same levels of skill are involved, both in the field and in the maintenance of the equipment. The problem is that some fields are so small, irregular or difficult to access, that ordinary farm machinery is difficult or impossible to use – which was the original rationale for our Alpine tractor.

In that connection, we suggest two alternatives to our machinery:

Michael Welham of Denehurst Farm has been advertising in *Village News* that he is available for hedge-cutting, topping, fencing, mowing, etc. Contact: 01594 530445, or 07900 295826.

Rob Simmons of Hewelsfield Court is available to mow grass, etc around midsummer. He is also willing to 'park' sheep later in the season if someone needs 'mobile lawnmowers' on their fields (though this will need sheep-proof boundaries). Contact: 07876 346044.

Chris Hodges (who spoke at our boundaries meeting recently) is available to repair and build drystone walls. He can also repair and build new walls from old. Contact: 01594 833784, e-mail chod@caffoot.com and website www.drystonewaller.co.uk. As part of the AONB programme of practical courses, Chris is leading two weekend dry stone walling courses on 16/17 May and 11/12 July. Cost is £40 for each weekend - call Sarah Sawyer on 01600 710844 to book.

Looking after flower-rich grassland by Peter Chard

Unlike most farmland, the small fields of the Hudnalls still have a lot of semi-natural grassland, i.e., flower-rich mixtures of native grasses and herbs. Whereas 98% of the semi-natural grassland that existed in the English lowlands in the 1930s has been replaced by houses, arable fields and sown grass, or has been so heavily fertilised that the small herbs have been squeezed out, in the Hudnalls the figure is nearer 40%. It is this environment of attractive fields, which I value as a national treasure, that the PGP helps to maintain for ourselves and future generations.

How can we look after these pastures and meadows? We cannot just abandon them to nature. If we do then the grassland will disappear and we will be left with fields covered with bracken and bramble, trees will become established and turn into scrub woodland, the Wye Valley will lose its intriguing mixture of woodland and grassland, and its landscape will be devalued.

Grassland will only survive if it is managed, and, if we want flower-rich grassland we must use some kind of conservation management, whichever suits your lifestyle. The first aim should be to avoid increasing the fertility of the soil. Artificial fertilisers should never be used. Highly fertile soil promotes the growth of coarser grasses, such as cocksfoot and timothy, and excludes less vigorous grasses, such as sweet vernal, and most kinds of flower. The less-vigorous growth on natural soils allows space between the grasses and sunlight reaches the soil causing flower seeds to germinate from the seed bank, become established and spread. Cropping fields without fertilising them enriches the flora, but it takes a number of years and so we have to be patient if we embark on this course. The most effective way to reduce the fertility of the soil is to make hay and remove it from the fields, allowing year by year the gradual establishment and spread of a wide variety of flowers. However it can be difficult to find someone to make hay especially if you have a small steep field.

The smallholders who worked this land all kept grazing animals to provide food or an income. Keeping animals is a very effective way of removing the vegetation during and at the end of the growing season. Ideally, you will keep animals on the field during the late summer, autumn and winter months and move them to another field during the spring and early summer and not bring them back until the flowers have seeded. The ideal, however, is not always possible, so you may have to compromise. One can lower fertility by mowing or topping without grazing, but this leaves layers of compost that encourage the growth of coarser grasses.



Those of you who keep animals know that it is not economically viable to run a small flock or herd but although you do not reap an economic return you do reap some unexpected advantages as well. There are various ways you can manage by using animals but the first step is the relatively expensive one of making sure you have stock proof fences.

If you decide to go for a grazing animal as a lawn mower then it is perfectly possible to keep several elderly sheep, donkeys, ponies, cattle etc on a small field and to treat them as pets. Even sheep and cattle get used to the person who feeds them and come running for food and exhibit different characters. A daily check is essential but most of the time the animals look after themselves and attendance at Phil Saunders' workshops will build up a basic expertise and knowledge of what to do or who to turn to for help if you encounter a problem. Finding a friend/ neighbour to keep an eye on them when you go away is vital. Like any pets, they have finite lives: you have to subscribe to the farming dictum that "where there are livestock there are deadstock".

If you are more ambitious then you may decide to keep a small flock or herd and breed your own livestock. One of the great pleasures of keeping sheep for me was to go out in the morning and hear a lamb bleating and see it running across my field following its mother responding to my call. However it's not all pure pleasure when you have to go out in pitch dark and pouring rain to assist at a birth, any more than it is to have to feed orphan triplets in the middle of the night! There is however, the satisfaction in autumn in filling up the freezer with home grown lambs, but not everyone subscribes to that.

Grazing animals remove the grasses as they feed and grow, but also fertilise the soil with their dung. This provides food for a variety of insects and invertebrates, and this is very important in supporting the number of rare lesser horseshoe bats which we have on the common.

Everyday that I go out to walk in the Wye Valley I feel how privileged I am to live in such beautiful countryside and in my view those of us who are fortunate to own property and land on the commons hold it in trust for those who will follow us. I believe that it is incumbent on us to keep and maintain our property and our land and not let it deteriorate and become devalued. I recognise that there are economic arguments also which point in the same direction. I therefore feel justified in making a plea that we manage our trust and if possible leave it in better shape than when we took it over.

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.