



# NEWSLETTER

www.parishgrasslandsproject.org.uk

## COMMITTEE

*Chairman:*

George Peterken 01594 530452

*Secretary, Treasurer and Membership:*

Jean Pitt 01594 530255

*Minutes Secretary:*

Ursula Williams 01594 530247

*Committee Members:*

- John Childs
- Tony Eggar
- Jean Green
- John Josephi
- Sarah Sawyer
- Mike Topp
- Gemma Bode
- Sarah McLellan

[www.parishgrasslandsproject.org.uk](http://www.parishgrasslandsproject.org.uk)

## Sward to Sweater

Our next meeting will be on **Saturday 29 October** in the loft of the Brockweir Village shop, starting at 2 p.m. This is an unusual time for us, but it is also an unconventional meeting, for we will showcase sheep from the fields to the clothing on our backs.



There will be several elements:

1. Short talks by several residents about keeping sheep on their own fields.
2. Demonstrations of shearing, carding, spinning, dyeing - all processes in preparing the wool for use. (Sadly, shearing will have to be demonstrated through photos, not on a real sheep!)
3. Demonstrations of weaving, knitting, felting, and embroidery – some of the skills.
4. Samples of clothing, carpeting, felt, ornaments – some of the products.
5. Questionnaire and discussion of whether there is scope and interest enough to bring local wool producers and users together more in the future.

## CONTENTS

Sward to Sweater	1
Younger generations	2
Flower hunt	2
Bat talk and walk	3
Hudnalls woodland walk	4



This should prove to be a stimulating meeting, covering a wide range of aspects. The background motif is that, having emphasised landscape, habitats, wildlife and farming aspects of parish grasslands, we now want to link these more to end uses and local skills. The missing aspects are meat and use of whole skins, but these could be brought up in the discussion.

We have a full afternoon of contributors, but if anyone else wants to make a short contribution, they should get in touch with Sarah Sawyer ([sarah.sawyer@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:sarah.sawyer@tiscali.co.uk)), whose idea this meeting was. We will lay on refreshments

at some point in the afternoon, and it would help if we could have some sense of how many will come – so could those who expect to be present tell one of the organisers, Sarah, Tony Eggar or Mike Topp.



## Flower of the month



Bird's-foot trefoil  
*Lotus corniculatus*

## Younger Generations by George Peterken

In recent years the PGP has arranged a June Flower Hunt for the younger children at St Briavels School and the Play Group. Officially, these have been school and group activities, with teachers and some parents in attendance, but they have been made possible by Jean Green's generosity in allowing her fields to be trampled, and by other PGP committee members, who have helped on the day. Each time we – and the children – have enjoyed ourselves no end, so we have increasingly become enthusiasts for helping the younger generations to experience, enjoy and learn about their environment.

This year we have enlarged our efforts. Instead of just an afternoon, the Flower Hunt became an all-day event for both school and play group. It was organised by Ursula Williams, and her account of the day follows. We also approached the Youth Club to ask whether they would be interested in activities we might be able to arrange, and the answer was broadly, yes – anything at night! We thought of badger-watching, but Keith Childs advised us that the badgers would not co-operate. We tried to arrange light-trapping of moths, but in the end too many people were away to make this practicable. But, we did arrange a night of bat-tracking with sound-detectors through the generosity of Ian Rabjohns of Penallt. An account of the evening by Barbara French and Becky Rush also follows.

## The Flower Hunt by Ursula Williams

Thursday, 16th June and a clear blue sky, 'cotton wool' clouds and a fresh breeze. A perfect day for the Flower Hunt in Jean Green's special meadow on the Common.

At 10.15, 23 children from the playgroup, sundry parents, the Playgroup Leader and her helpers all arrived at the field carpeted with clover, buttercups, orchids and many, many other species of flowering plants.

Equipped with sweep nets and wearing their wellies, the children



wandered around the meadow catching moths and butterflies (if lucky), grasshoppers, bugs and flies, in the nets and picking flowers. The highlights were a

cinnabar moth, red and black with electric blue antennae, and a baby toad, with a fat spotty tummy and bronze-coloured beady eyes. I was amazed by the confidence of these small children in the field and in the adjoining wood they were so focused and plainly enjoying themselves.

Their picnic break overlapped with the arrival of the reception class from our school who also brought their lunchboxes, their class teacher along with her assistant. Now it was their turn to roam and, again, a very impressive group apparently totally relaxed in this new environment. Their session was supervised by a tutor from the RSPB - more sweep nets and also tick sheets. The children





enjoyed making rainbow charts from different coloured petals and leaf rubbings as well as chasing butterflies through the tall thistles and running through the shady wood.

Both groups seemed very aware of the pleasure of being outdoors exploring and were respectful of the environment handling a spider with an egg sac with great care, mindful of the potential sting of nettles and the prickle of thistles. The noise of the seeds in the pod of the yellow rattle was 'how it got its name' I was told, and a five year-old advised me that 'it's good to have time to relax and just look at things'!

So, thank you to Jean Green, who set up the day, providing drinks & washing facilities, disposing hay bales in rows under cover for the children to sit and shelter should it rain, getting the field flailed to reduce the herbage to 'wellie' height, cutting paths through the wood and hosting the day.

Thank you to Jo and her helpers, and to Nadia and Julie for arranging transport and bringing these well-behaved children, to the parents who took part with enthusiasm and to Carrie from the RSPB.

## **Bat Talk and Walk** by Becky Rush and Brockweir Youth Club members

On Friday 15th of July the members of Brockweir Youth Club and the Parish Grasslands Project were treated to an informative talk and guided walk about the bats in our area. The talk was given by Ian and Jessica Rabjohns of Monmouthshire Bat Group. "As well as the talk Mr. Rabjohns showed us some dead bats that he has preserved. I learnt a lot about how bats interact with each other and how long their life span is" (Rosie Worrall). Dan Moore said, "The bat night was excellent because you could hear the bats sending their echo waves over the special radios. The bat people were experts and answered all of our questions". The 'special radios' are known as bat detectors. It is difficult to hear bats with the naked ear because the frequencies at which they emit their squeaks and whistles are too high. The bat detectors can be tuned to pick up these sounds making it easier to track the bats when the light begins to fade! Each species of bat echo locate at a different frequency and it is therefore possible to identify the bat being tracked.

After the talk it was time to go and see if we could find some bats! We walked along the lane behind the Mackenzie Hall using the bat detectors as our guide. "We heard lots of interesting sounds on the bat machine and really got to understand what they're like. Sometimes the noises were quite loud, that meant they were close, the quieter it was the further away they were. Sometimes we even got the chance to glimpse one or two of them" (Xena White). The bat detectors picked up two species of bat, the Common Pipistrelle and the Soprano Pipistrelle, the most common and smallest species in the British Isles. "We found lots of bats and could see them flying above our heads. As well as seeing and hearing bats we also saw glow worms near the end of our walk" (Rosie Worrall). The evening was a great success and thoroughly enjoyed by the children from Youth Club. "Over all it was a really enjoyable experience and if there was an opportunity to go on one again I would definitely say 'Yes'!" (Xena White).



## Hudnalls Woodland Walk by John Josephi

We decided that our summer inspection of the Great Outdoors should take the form of an evening woodwalk through the Hudnalls “Free Wood”, and accordingly, on July 20th a mixed bag of locals and raiders assembled at Morgan’s Cottage in the company of George Peterken, Chairman, botanist and plant hunter, John Josephi, working forester and Austin Williams, historian and archivist of all things local.

Our aim was to find out how the use and management of Hudnalls woods has influenced the tree cover that we see around us today, and after an introduction from George and a warning of hazardous walking conditions we scrambled – abseiled? - down the scarp below Birchfield, pausing as George pointed out to us the Wood Fescue, an important grass of great rarity but somewhat anonymous demeanour. (It seems a pity to me that rare and endangered species cannot contrive to look a bit more impressive.) Nevertheless it is on the strength of this and other rarities that the Hudnalls is designated a SSSI, among a number of other prestigious acronyms, the upshot of which is that any plan for active management of the woods is likely to be turned down or rendered impracticable.



We left the tree cover briefly to admire the Valley with its outcrops of Offa’s Dyke and its drifts of Small Leaved Lime which denotes Ancient Woodland sites and gives our reach of the Wye Valley much of its distinctive character, before re entering the wood to be confronted by a plant more glamorous than the Fescue but seriously less welcome, namely the Himalayan Balsam which we have most of us come to dislike intensely. Few people would believe that this weed was growing unobtrusively by the river at Bigsweir House in 1960 and only decided to invade the Parishes 5 to 10 years ago.

Beyond the Balsam we discovered a group of near mature Wych Elms, a rare remnant of a species which dominated our landscape until the Dutch Elm Disease of 1970 and which is now prized for furniture making as well as the fact that rare invertebrates need it as a food source.



Passing through a fine stand of managed Oaks, planted by the Bigsweir Estate in the 19th C we moved on to the “Free Wood” zone which has been continuously coppiced by the commoners of St Briavels for centuries. Austin Williams, whose family have lived on the Hudnalls since the 1700s, explained to us the rights of the commoners to take timber from the Free Wood for their immediate needs, whether as fuel, charcoal, fencing or building. However, the WW2 broke the continuity of coppicing, and from the 1950s the largely Beech woods, unworked and unmanaged, have started to collapse, pulling up roots and destroying footpaths, much to the dismay of George Peterken and his Sherpas as they prepared for the final assault on the summit.

As the ground levelled we paused to inspect a European Larch planted by John J 40 years ago, and felled recently with a height of 75ft. We considered the merits of owning homegrown softwoods to fell and convert on site into building materials for projects.

Our final stop revealed one last instance of industrial activity within the Hudnalls, namely “stonehewing” or stonemason work. We found a flat round half completed millstone lying in the wood where it was being hewn preparatory to being rolled down the scarp to the River Wye, where it would be transported by boat to Bristol to service the cider orchards of Somerset.

We concluded our evening with wine and cheese under a Walnut tree at the venue.

The walk was well attended by a wide range of interests among the participants, 23 in all, we thought.

We counted them out and we counted them back in ..... or was it 24?