



NEWSLETTER

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Fallow Deer and Wild Boar in the Hudnalls

Our next meeting and AGM is on Thursday 1 March, at 7.15 p.m. in the Loft at the Village Shop. It will be about the two species of large wild animal that make a big impact in the Dean and Wye Valley. Fallow deer have been common in the Hudnalls for many years, whereas the wild pigs are close, but have yet to arrive in earnest. The deer already affect our woods and gardens, but have only a limited impact on the grasslands. The pigs will, if they arrive in numbers, have a greater impact on the fields and gardens they choose to visit.



Last year, we carried out an informal survey of the deer by placing a map in the village shop and asking residents to stick in coloured pins where they live according to how often they saw deer near their home. The results confirmed our general impression, that deer are seen most often close to the woods, and least often in a belt though the central part of the Hudnalls. In effect, the deer use the woods for shelter and concealment and the fields and gardens for food. They do not seem to enter well-fenced or well-walled gardens close to houses, but anyone who tries to raise flowers and vegetables round the fringes may well rise one morning to find their vegetable garden leafless or all the flowers gone from their columbines. However, the deer are seasonal: they are not seen for weeks at some times of the year, but pass through every night at other times. Natural England have recently started a culling programme in their woodland National Nature Reserve.

We hope our meeting will give us an insight into deer habits and behaviour, and some tips about how we can minimise the inconvenience while maximising the pleasures of having them around. Natural England's deer man hopes to be present, so there will be a chance to find out what he will do and what he wants to achieve. We hope, too, to hear about how wild boar have affected the Dean, and what we can expect if they spread onto the Hudnalls.



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Parish Grasslands Project, c/o Beechwood House, St Briavels Common, GL15 6SL

Dean meadows group by George Peterken

In late January, after a period of informal discussion, an inaugural meeting of a Dean Meadows Group was held in Westbury village hall. The inspiration came from the PGP and particularly from the Monmouthshire Meadows Group, which has successfully brought together small landowners and others with an interest in maintaining flower-rich grassland from all over the county. The informal group behind the Dean initiative have much the same aspirations.

The meeting at Westbury was an opportunity to test the level of interest, and to explain what we and MMG have done in the decade or so since we started. Mike Topp and I represented the PGP, Stephanie Tyler and Maggie Biss represented the MMG, and Rosie Cliff spoke briefly about the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust. We had no idea how many would come, and the organisers clearly expected no more than the 50-70 that came to the initial meetings of the PGP and MMG, but as the start time approached desperate searches went out for more chairs, and even then the walls were lined by people who had to stand. We reckoned about 130 came, of whom more than half confirmed their interest in becoming a member. The next meeting will be on Saturday 21 April.

The Dean group will probably cover the whole of the FoDDC area, so it overlaps us. Once it is fully operational, it may offer opportunities that we have never fully realised ourselves. For example, it would be easier to arrange tuition and exchanges of experience for those who keep a few sheep – this is something that came up in our Swards-to-sweaters meeting. One can also envisage having a wider pool of people who would be prepared to help with aspects of land management. We already have people from outside our parish coming to our meetings, and this might increase – and vice versa. In fact, a Dean group would tend to replace the PGP in some respects, which may press us to continue our evolution towards becoming a society dealing with the whole parish environment, not just grasslands.

Sward to Sweater

Our autumn meeting on Saturday 29 October proved to be the most popular and successful that we have held, with 56 people just fitting into the Loft of the Village Shop. We had a number of speakers and demonstrations which covered the whole subject of keeping sheep on the land in our area. We started with how we use our grassland and why many of us keep sheep. Then we heard a succession of local speakers talk about keeping their particular breed of sheep. During their talks an overhead projector displayed some wonderful pictures taken by local photographer David Broadbent that superbly illustrated their land and sheep. It was explained how the size, location, orientation and steepness of their



land, as well as the uses the sheep would

be put to, determined how many and of what type of sheep had been employed. Tony Eggar, Sarah Sawyer, Mike Topp, Louise Frankel, Phil Morgan (in absentia), Brian Matt and George Peterken spoke for five minutes or so and it was interesting to see the variety. Apart from Tony, who employs his solely as lawnmowers, all are, or will be, 'utilising' their animals for either wool, fleeces, meat and hides, and sometimes for all of these.





Apart from the pleasures and satisfactions of looking after sheep, they also explained the nitty-gritty of keeping sheep: setting up fencing and shelter; the running costs of hay, sheep nuts and shearing; problems of foot-rot, fly strike and worms; whether to produce lambs; how to approach slaughtering and butchery. Several have rare-breed sheep, partly as a contribution to maintaining the breeds. And, for Sarah and Louise, sheep-keeping has become a whole-family concern. The only 'misfit' was George, who merely provides herbage and grazing for Bill Creswick's sheep, though occasionally having to haul them out of fences or bramble patches.



Having covered the why and how of keeping sheep we then turned to what to do with the wool. This came down to clothing, carpet, felt, insulation and pictures/ornaments. To have use of the wool you have to shear, clean, card, spin and dye it. Only then can you knit, weave, create felt and produce all manner of articles from sweaters to bags, pictures and ornaments.



So, following on from the brief talks by the 'shepherds', we were treated to a number of live demonstrations by local craftspeople who use wool. Whilst we drank tea and ate cake we wandered round the exhibits watching Ann Mills spinning wool from Jacob and Castlemilk Moorit sheep and Alpacas; Chrissy Birch demonstrated felting and embroidery; Yvonne Hoskins and friends showed carding, spinning and peg loom weaving. Finally we had a presentation by Anne and David Reid on dyeing wool using natural dyes from plants that they brought with them. As a backdrop to the demonstrations, placed around the walls and on boards were A2 sized boards showing many of David's photos and collages of Tony's detailed shots of many of the craft products.



A questionnaire was circulated asking people to show their interest in further pursuit of a range of aspects from sheep husbandry through, lambing to the various craft skills shown. This may lead to specific workshops on popular subjects in the future.

We all felt the gathering was a great success, which was due to the care and attention to detail of the organisers, Sarah, Tony and Mike, not to mention the cakes organised by Jean Pitt and others. It demonstrated that maintaining the parish grasslands was neither a chore, nor just wildlife gardening, but is the sum of a whole chain of activities that combines the maintenance of flowery fields with the pleasures of small-scale stock keeping and the satisfaction of using what had been produced. And it brought in a wider range of interest to our meetings.



Sheep and Holly by George Peterken

This is a photo of Bill Creswick's sheep eating holly in our fields in one of the recent hard winters. To many people, the very idea that sheep will eat such a prickly meal comes as a surprise, but sheep are obviously tougher than they look. In fact they liked it enough to run across the field and jostle me out of the way when I threw down the branches I'd cut from the hedges, and within fifteen minutes the branches were almost leafless. The explanation is not hunger: sure, the snow covered most of the ground, but they had bales of hay to eat. In fact, they climbed on top of one of the bales to get at holly higher up in the hedge.



Our perceptions of holly usually come from handling prickly foliage, but mine come from three years studying the ecology of holly in the New Forest. There, after a while, I largely gave up using gloves, because holly is not uniformly prickly, but usually has fewer prickles higher up the tree. There is also variation between individual trees: some are generally more prickly than others.

Even so, it still seems heroic that sheep will happily chomp on the prickles. I thought much the same about New Forest ponies, but their lips seem to have especially toughened, enough to withstand not only holly, but also gorse. Fallow deer are the same: together with ponies, they have chewed the New Forest hollies so hard, that the tree has almost been eliminated from some woods. In fact, one reason we have so much holly in the New Forest is that the Victorians drove most of the deer out and 'improved' the ponies with Arab blood to the point that their mouths became too sensitive for holly, leaving holly free to grow unchecked for a few decades.

The value of holly as winter browse was so well known to traditional farmers that they actually cultivated it to help farm stock get through the back end of winter, when holly might be the only fresh foliage for miles. Holly was grown in 'hollins', groups of hollies in pastures that were pollarded every few years, which looked like an orchard from a distance. In the Middle Ages, these were the most valuable kind of farmland, especially around the hill margins and towards the coast, where holly grows best. The practice declined in the 18th Century, but survived in a few places. Today, one can find many hollin place names on the map and in the Olchon Valley and the Stipperstones one can still see remnant hollins. Holly was also pollarded for browse in the Dean, but the old holly pollards have mostly gone. In the New Forest, though, there are still many thousands.

Afterthought by Tony Eggar

Following on from George's article above on sheep and holly, I thought I would add that *my* sheep (Welsh Blacks) won't touch *any* holly I cut down - maybe it's a breed thing. They will, however, virtually push me out of the way for ivy. This reminds me of the old song "Mares eat oats, and does eat oats, and little lambs eat ivy - a kid will eat ivy too, wouldn't you?"

I only got the proper words for this song relatively recently with the benefit of Google. As a youngster I got from my family: "Maisy dotes and dozy dotes and little lambsy didoes, a kiddley dyedy doo, wouldn't you!"

Jean Pitt

After many years of being on the committee we are very sorry to say goodbye to Jean Pitt who now has other commitments. She has diligently and efficiently organised the committee, particularly keeping the membership list and accounts in good order, thus releasing other members to organise meetings, etc. We are very grateful for her input and wish her well for the future.