

# A rich crop from the meadows

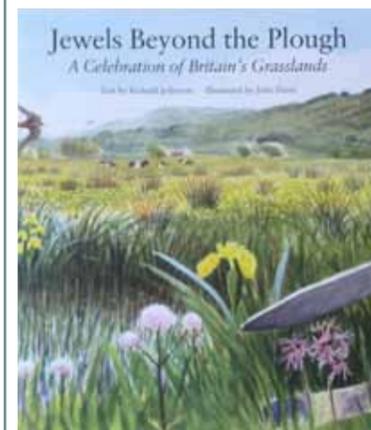
In the last issue we carried reviews of George Peterken's latest book. Here he surveys some recent titles which examine the same topic

My **Meadows** book (*British Wildlife Publications*) came out last year and I'm pleased and relieved to see that the reviews I've come across approve. In fact, the only hint of criticism so far has been a reviewer from the RSPB, who said it wasn't cover-to-cover, unputdownable reading, and I would not disagree with that. It also seems to have sold well, for the publishers are reprinting.

However, the real critics are oneself, one's wife and one's honest friends, in that order. Try as I might, I can never eliminate all errors, even with the help of sub-editors and those who I persuaded to comment on late drafts. Reprinting gives one a chance to make tiny corrections, but I have yet to hear whether a group of species I omitted by accident from the second chapter can be inserted. Only one person has noticed, a former colleague who wrote more in sorry than in anger to wonder why her favourite meadow plant had not been included.

Apart from mine, there seems to have been a minor spate of meadow books recently. This year John Lewis-Stempel's **Meadowland: The Private Life of an English Field** (*Doubleday*) gives a month-by-month account of the growth and management of his meadow near Longtown and the wildlife he sees there. It is carefully-observed nature-writing, more in the style of Richard Mabey (who once sat ingognito at the back of one of our PGP meetings in the Mackenzie Hall).

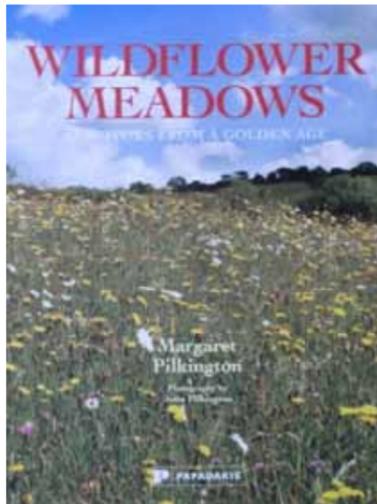
Another that combines art and natural history is **Jewels Beyond the Plough: a Celebration of Britain's Grasslands** (*Langford Press, 2012*): the text is by



Richard Jefferson, Natural England's grassland specialist, and the illustrations are paintings by John Davis. The text is authoritative; the illustrations show not just grassy fields, but also portraits of the birds and flowers.

At the same time,

**Wildflower Meadows: Survivors from a Golden Age** (*Papadakis, 2012*) appeared. Written by Margaret Pilkington, who has run a meadow study group in Sussex for years, and illustrated with large-format photos by her husband, John, this concentrates on the meadow plants and the history of management.



Much earlier, Andy Garnett and Polly Devlin wrote **A Year in the Life of an English Meadow** (*Frances Lincoln, 2007*) an account of the meadow they rescued in Somerset, embellished with illustrations of all the plants. Polly Devlin was a regular contestant in the BBC's Round Britain Quiz. When we visited them, we were told that their house was where Anthony Armstrong-Jones was 'locked up' for the night before his marriage to Princess Margaret.

One consequence of completing my book was that I was invited to appear at this summer's Caerleon Festival. A series of mainly local authors conversed about their books on a stage before an audience of about 50 bibliophiles. One of the other invitees was Dave Goulson, the professor from Sussex University who won a Sunday Times award for **A Sting in the Tale** (*Vintage Books, 2013*). This is all about bumblebees with a little about meadows, which sounds dry, but is in fact a humorous and informed account of trials and triumphs of his bee researches – cover-to-cover reading, in fact.

It attracted rave reviews and another book contract, for he is about to bring out *A Buzz over the Meadow*, the story of his restoration of a meadow round his French holiday home. Bee-keepers, gardeners and PGP members would find both hugely entertaining and enlightening. I asked him if there was any chance of him coming here to talk to us, but sadly he is far too busy with the day job teaching and researching.



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## NEWSLETTER

www.parishgrasslandsproject.org.uk

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### Things to spot this month



Rowan berries

## The story of our fields

We will hold the official launch of the Parish Grassland Project's new publication, *Our Fields*, at our autumn meeting at the Mackenzie Hall on Saturday October 11. The 44-page booklet, sub-titled *A compilation of memories and experience of land use in and around the Hudnalls*, tells the stories of a selection of residents and their fields.

We asked a cross section of current and recent field owners to relate the history of their ownership, what their fields meant to them, how they have maintained them, and what changes have taken place. In the end we collected 18 case histories, most of them written by the field owners themselves. The owners range from one whose family has been in place since the mid-19th century to a couple who moved in little more than 12 months ago.

*Our Fields* is a companion to our earlier publication, *The Flowers in the Fields*, which was produced in 2005 and focused on the natural history of the Hudnalls. Like the *Flowers in the Fields*, the new booklet was compiled by George Peterken and designed by Tony Eggar. Both publications are on sale in the Village Shop, Brockweir, priced £5.



### DON'T MISS THE AUTUMN MEETING

Grassland is the theme of this year's autumn meeting at 2pm on Saturday 11 October at the Mackenzie Hall, Brockweir. There will be talks on many grassland matters, including conservation grazing with horses and making compost from field-grass. Full details on page 2. There will also be an expert panel helping us explore what the future holds for organisations like the Parish Grassland Project. So questions at the ready please – we welcome your comments. We will also launch our new booklet, *Our Fields*. Entrance is free for all members; donations welcome from non-members.

## We're going back to our roots

### Alice Hogge introduces the line-up for our autumn meeting

For this year's autumn meeting, we have (please forgive the pun...) gone back to grassroots. With the sale of our tractor and associated mowing equipment and with the publication of our latest book, *Our Fields: A compilation of memories and experience of land and its use in and around the Hudnalls*, we're in contemplative mood. We turn 13 this year. Were we at school we'd be selecting our GCSE subjects and well-meaning adults would be asking us what we wanted to be when we grew up. So now seems a good time to take stock: to establish what we've achieved and where we stand in relation to other environmental schemes; to explore the many, distinct ways in which our members are using their land; and to deliberate how best we can continue to serve those members in the years ahead.

This being the case, on Saturday 11 October at 2pm in the Mackenzie Hall, we will be assembling a fine band of speakers to help us examine a variety of grassland-related topics. After several years of organising our wildflower-hunts for local schoolchildren we are delighted that Ursula Williams has agreed to tell us more about this rich educational resource we have in our midst. Ann Harris will be on hand to talk about conservation grazing with horses, disproving the popular notion that equines are bad news if you're a meadow enthusiast. Cinderhill Farm has been going from strength to strength of late, catching the eye of television, radio and the national press, and Deborah Flint will be there to share with us the day-to-day challenges – and joys – of making a living from your fields. George Peterken will be highlighting how altering our land-management style can, in turn, alter the range of wildflowers we see around us, taking us back through history to see what our landscape might have looked like under different agricultural regimes. As the hedgerows burgeon with fruit and nuts, Helen Axe will be explaining how low-maintenance forest gardening – in effect, reproducing nature's own growing style – can dramatically increase the productivity of our land while, at the same time, providing ample forage for the wildlife we wish to encourage. And Chris Parsons, of Dean



Meadows Group, will be encouraging us to forgo hay-production with its all too precarious weather-window and, instead, to concentrate on turning our field-grass into compost, perfect for our flowerbeds and vegetable gardens.

We thought long and hard about the finale. At previous meetings we've given you roaring chainsaws and the clash of water-divining coat hangers. This time round we've opted for the sabre-rattle of debate, the better to help us discover just what role community-led bodies like the PGP can play in promoting biodiversity. Our disputants are George Peterken, Chris Parsons, Stephanie Tyler (of Monmouthshire Meadows Group), Andrew Nixon (Wye Valley AONB) and Chris Wedge (Natural England). Together they will be discussing the interplay between local, regional and national organisations and asking whether small-scale projects get enough recognition and support from the bigger players. With so much attention being paid to farmers and, at the opposite end of the scale, to designated nature reserves, we grassland-owners are often left out of the picture and yet it's precisely our style of non-intensive land-use that can often reap the best dividends, providing vital "natural corridors" for all manner of species to spread and proliferate. So are we more valuable perhaps than our diminutive stature might suggest? What else could we be doing to assist in this? And what are the main challenges we face? Come along and join the conversation – we welcome your questions and opinions.

There will be refreshments, exhibits and copies of *Our Fields* on sale.

## Can we reverse the trend?

### George Peterken reflects on a conference addressing the continuing erosion of Britain's flower-rich grassland

One Friday in mid-July, Plantlife, the charity devoted to wild plant conservation, invited me and 80 others to a conference on "Reversing the Trend", the trend in question being the seemingly unstoppable erosion in Britain's stock of flower-rich grassland. Held at Wiston House, a mansion set in parkland near Steyning in Sussex, the participants were the movers and shakers of grassland conservation and management in Britain, senior representatives of landowning, farming, bee-keeping, nature conservation and rare breed conservation organisations, various charities, journalists, a government minister (Lord de Mauley) and no less an interested party than HRH Prince Charles, who is famously enthusiastic about the meadows he has created at Highgrove and who agreed to be patron of the Coronation Meadows initiative launched last year by Plantlife, the Rare Breeds Survival Trust and the Wildlife Trusts.

Why invite me, you might well ask? I've been to several such gatherings on woodlands and forestry, and have spoken at some, but this was my debut as a grassland ecologist. Evidently, my Meadows book had been noticed, for I was listed simply as "author", though I first thought my invitation was something to do with the grassland projects we have undertaken locally. Whatever, these conferences tend to be general, vaguely uplifting and full of good intentions and general bonhomie, and this was true to form. Prince Charles, who arrived in mid-session by helicopter, gave a well-informed and actually quite inspiring address, then remained through lunch, chatting with everybody.

Listening to the main speakers and the break-out

discussions, I was struck by the absence of the people on the ground. Chief executives, chairs of committees, senior academics and the like were there in force, and some even owned land, albeit mostly large estates. But, the likes of us in the PGP, the Monmouthshire Meadows Group and the Dean Meadows Group were unrepresented, so I said so in discussions. When they discussed how they might interest the general public and the "small landowner", I said that the groups in and around the lower Wye valley have actually been doing this since the millennium.

The PGP, MMG and DMG spring from the community and we seek help from outside organisations when we need it. Inevitably, perhaps, we operate below the gaze of organisations with a national perspective. We and other local initiatives – such as the fritillary festivals in Oxfordshire (Ducklington) and Staffordshire (Motte Meadows), the participatory Hay Time projects in the Pennine Dales, and even the Green Scythe Festival at Muchelney – represent what one inevitably calls the "grass roots" interests, which complement the efforts of national and regional organisations.

The PGP may be seen as an unconventional parish society, but we and other community grassland projects may yet turn out to be vital contributions to maintaining the diversity and health of the countryside and the benefits this gives us. I am hoping that some of the people with a national perspective will come here and see what we have been doing. Even if they don't, our new booklet (like the Monmouthshire Meadows' 10th anniversary booklet) will show them the diversity of interests in the remaining small, flower-rich fields in the British countryside.

