



Volunteers at a first work session on the Community Orchard site at St Briavels Playing Fields, hopefully the first of a number of sites in the two parishes *Photo: Ellie Van Der Heijden*

Tree health check

Tree diseases are always with us, and they often feature worryingly in the news agendas before being largely forgotten about. What happened to Sudden Oak Death? Where are we with Ash Dieback? That leaf-browning ailment of horse chestnuts - does it matter?

We are likely to look these things up only if we notice something on one of our trees, and our local Forestry Commission has a good website at forestry.gov.uk. There are 15 or 20 common tree ailments you can find information on, but a general roundup currently shows three main culprits.

Sudden Oak Death! *Phytophthora ramorum*. Yes, it's a prime concern here, but not the in the way it sounds. It appeared around 20 years ago, having wrought havoc in the oaks of the USA, and there earning its name. It was found in our rhododendrons, but did not go on to have much effect on our own oaks. Instead it has affected various species, most notably larch, and it is often referred to now as Sudden Larch Death. It's causing major trouble in larch plantations across the West from Cornwall up to Galloway, and that includes the Forest of Dean where there have been big outbreaks and clearances from 2012. It's currently reported around Lydbrook.

There is a worrying condition of oaks though, called Acute Oak Decline. You will see dark fluid oozing from cracks in the bark, the tree will soon look poorly, and will probably die in four or five years. How this is to be managed is still the subject of active research by our local FC teams who are experimenting on trees in

Chestnut Wood. We are on the frontier of the westward spread of this disease, and it will likely become more prevalent. There is an associated appearance of Oak Jewel Beetle, but we don't know whether this is causal or coincidental.

Chalara Ash Dieback is around, but this isn't an intensive ash area, the spread is slow, and there is beginning to be anecdotal evidence that some trees recover. Don't cut all your ash trees down! Apart from general wilting and leaf curl, you may see fallen, blackened leaf stems inhabited by fungus.

The horse chestnut condition mentioned above is called HC Bleeding Canker. It sounds appalling, and there's no chemical treatment. Half of our trees are affected, but a good number just recover. If bark lesions spread and join, the tree will need culling, but prior to this it isn't a real safety risk.

Management and reporting

Immediate reaction to finding a diseased tree should be to avoid trampling around it or driving vehicles around it too much, especially in wet conditions, as this could spread spores and pests. James Williams, Forestry Commission Forester for our district, emphasises that we should find the tree alert website which will allow us to upload our own photos and descriptions of trees showing signs of trouble, and receive personal advice on treatment and management.

Have a look at the Forestry Commission website and see what they're doing!

Phil Morgan



Issue 37

October 2018

N E W S L E T T E R
www.pari sh grasslands project . org . uk

COMMITTEE

Chairman:
Mike Topp 01594 531496

Secretary, Treasurer and Membership:
Sally Secrett 01594 530539

Committee Members:

Helen Axe
Deborah Flint
Jean Green
John Josephi
John McCarthy
Philip Morgan
George Peterken
Phillip Powles
Gwion Trefgarne
Ursula Williams

CONTENTS

Flower survey results	2
School garden triumph	4
Community orchard news	4
Health check for trees	4

Things to spot this month



Sloes, hazel nuts

The experts will be talking about trees

Trees are one of the main features of the landscape that surrounds us, and something that surely has an impact on all of our lives. That is why we have chosen the topic for the Parish Grasslands Project meeting this month..

The meeting is entitled Our Trees, and will take place at the Mackenzie Hall at 2.30pm on Saturday October 13. Our aim is to provide expert information and discussion about trees of all types, broad-leaf, coniferous, fruit-bearing; naturally-propagated, garden, plantation etc etc. This will all be focused from the point of view of someone planning to plant trees, but in a manner that we hope will interest everyone, from the specialist to those with merely a passing interest in the subject.

Our two expert speakers will be local woodmen John Josephi and Gwion Trefgarne. Each has a lifetime of working experience in the world of trees. Three presentations are planned for the day, one covering species, problems and issues, another on mature size, choice of species, insurance and legal responsibilities, and a third on the arrival of new tree species in Britain. After each presentation we will have a panel of experts to discuss issues raised

Don't miss our October meeting



and to field questions from the floor. During the interval there will be a display of tree-planting and tree-climbing equipment and, weather permitting, the meeting will close with a demonstration of tree-climbing. As usual, during the interval we will be providing tea, coffee and a staggering array of cake.

All are welcome to attend and entry is free, although we invite a small contribution towards the refreshments. It will also be possible to join or renew membership of the PGP at the meeting, for the modest sum of £5 per household per year.

A century of change

Has our wild flora changed, and if so, how and by how much? During 2018, we have tried to complete an assessment of change over the last century by first compiling a list of the plants growing wild in Brockweir, Hewelsfield and St Briavels from *The Flora of Chepstow*, published in 1920, and comparing this with the present-day list compiled by walking the parishes in 2017 and 2018. We have been greatly helped by Elsa Wood, the botanical recorder for Monmouthshire, who has crossed the Wye from the Nurtons and filled the gaps left by my recording and the records sent in by other PGP members.

The outcome is superficially too good to be true. Roughly 500 species were definitely or probably growing here in 1920, and the modern list stands at 497 species. But this masks a substantial amount of change, brought about by the way we use the land. Whether the changes are good or bad will be for you to judge.

First, what has happened to the species here in 1920? About 100 have not been found, despite diligent searching, and must now be deemed to be locally extinct. These include species of all habitats, but

George Peterken on how our latest survey records the comings and goings of wild plants in the parishes

the arable weeds, heathland, limestone grassland and wetland species have come off worst. Many factors underlie these losses, but the main ones are that a) farmland is more intensively cropped, and b) the rest of that land, such as the Hudnalls and the parish woods, are neglected or under-cropped. These declines are set to continue: for example, as we found last year, surviving heathland plants, such as Harebell and Tormentil, are less common than they were in the 1990s.

Where have the new species come from? Some may simply have been overlooked in 1920, but most must really be additions to our flora. The problem is that there is no way we can tell which is which. However, most genuine additions are likely to be non-native species that have escaped from gardens and elsewhere. These include several aggressive and



The children digging meadow turf...



and working at the school



Four attractive additions to the local flora since 1920: from left, French Crane's-bill, Greater cockooflower, Celandine saxifrage and Cornflower
Photos: George Peterken

often unwelcome species, such as Indian balsam, Red valerian, Japanese knotweed and Cherry laurel, and some attractive and inoffensive additions, such as Celandine saxifrage, Ivy-leaved toadflax, Snowdrop and Greater cockooflower.

Then there are a few non-native species that went wild before 1500 ("archaeophytes"), which include Cornflower, Chickory and Lesser periwinkle, which were evidently not here in 1920. There are even a few native species that seem to have colonised, including Reflexed saltmarsh-grass, which has spread from tidal marshes with the salt applied to frosty roads. Elsa also

recorded five hybrids between native species, which are new species in a wholly different sense.

The details will be available when we have fully analysed the results later this year, but the broad picture is clear. We have lost and are still losing native species and replacing them with exotics. Most of the lost native species can still be found nearby, such as heather and cross-leaved heath on Poors' Allotment, but a large number of formerly frequent or common plants are now hard to find locally. We now have to ask: does this matter, and, if so, is there anything we can do about it?

Aspiring young gardeners from St Briavels School created a very impressive entry in the School Garden Challenge at the RHS Malvern Show. Their garden combined the themes of the Forest of Dean's industrial heritage and the natural beauty of the local landscape. It was created by the children at the school then transported and recreated at the show site, where it won Best Build from the sponsors, BAM, and a Commended from the RHS. The Parish Grasslands Project was delighted to be consulted to help with the garden. We enabled the children to collect meadow turf as part of constructing the garden and advised about raising a number of meadow flowers.

Photos: Alexia Naylor



The award-winning garden at the RHS Malvern show