



NEWSLETTER

www.p parishgrasslandsproject.org.uk

THE COMMITTEE

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John Josephi

Patricia Pinkerton

Sarah Sawyer

Ursula Williams

Newsletter:

Sally Secrett

Jane Morgan

Jane's sudden death on 12th February has left many friends and colleagues saddened. She had for many years been a part of the warp and woof of the community of St Briavels and Brockweir and many of her activities—the Moat Society, her painting, the Garden Society, and of course the PGP reflected her love and appreciation of our unique and beautiful environment.

Many of you will remember her article in the PGP Newsletter—April 2006—when she described the farming and management of the 8 acres of fields around Tyersall on the Hudnalls where she lived from 1971 to 2006. By the time the PGP was underway, she had long cleared the tiny fields of the bracken and bramble using a variety of machinery and animals over the years. The diverse flora that is now established has created a green oasis in the woodland proving it really can be done—a balance of wildness with species-rich grassland: tamed but certainly not sterile!

Moving to Brockweir in late 2006, she was busy clearing a steep coniferous woodland and had plans for the creation of another species-rich hillside to the stream below the house. For, with Jane, there was always 'work in progress'.

Jane certainly achieved at Tyersall the sort of management results that the PGP wishes to facilitate—and, in that it affirmed her own success, she fully identified with and supported the PGP. Indeed, she was a founder member of the Committee. A real country lover and practitioner she would be the first to admit that she struggled with the identification of those grasses—thank goodness for Yorkshire Fog—but the Bents and Fescues were not so easy! Happily our Committee is rich with experts and she was always keen to learn.

Jane's legacies for the future—those fields at Tyersall—can partially be seen from the public footpath FSB 28, and the Marchdyke project from the track to the south west of the Mackenzie Hall. Her family have welcomed the Committee's suggestion that a tree be planted in her memory and the new owners of Tyersall have kindly agreed that a site will be found within their grounds.

UW

Dates for your Diary

Field Visits: Potentially two this year. We've earmarked the weekends of 14th/15th June and 4th/5th October. One of these will be a supervised wander through a member's fields and the other will visit a sample of our remnant orchards. Details of both to be finalised – watch the Village News and our website.

Autumn Meeting: 11th November when we plan that a speaker will continue our orchard theme. 7.30pm in the Mackenzie Hall.

PGP Open Day: 1st June 2008

This year the format is to be slightly different. There will be four sites open to the public all within the PGP – Firtree Cottage, Ridley Bottom, Cowshill Farm and Oak Cottage. Details of the day are already on our website and will also appear in the Village News. There will be a leaflet available in the Village Shop and tourist information sites nearer the day; a species list will be provided. Sarah Sawyer (01291 689682 – email sarah.sawyer@tiscali.co.uk) needs volunteers to help on the day. Please contact her if you are able to assist. She stresses that, as each site will have a resident expert on hand, the helpers can enjoy very light duties with lots of time to socialise without the challenge of detailed plant identification

Monmouthshire Meadows Group Open Day will be on Sunday June 8th, giving us all a chance to see these stunning sites on the Welsh side of the river.

Apples, Pears and the Like

There is nothing innovative about fruit trees in the Lower Wye Valley.

*...“The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Art clad in one green hue, and lose themselves
‘Mid grove and copses....”*

William Wordsworth:

Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a Tour July 13th 1798

Following the AGM on 26th February 2008, we revisited the topic of regeneration, re-instatement and establishment of orchards in the parishes which has been tempting members of the PGP for some time.

Local contributors spoke of their experiences:

John Josephi has revitalised his derelict orchard by planting new trees of local varieties amongst the old apples and pears. The original orchard was certainly in existence in 1921 being shown on the OS map. He stressed the importance of giving his new trees sufficient space being mindful of their eventual size, and he was able to give the details of costs



Dead hedging gave John temporary protection for his new trees

of fencing them for protection from the browsing horses who will share the orchard. Part of these costs can be defrayed by Stewardship grants from DEFRA.



John thinks this should keep his trees safe from rabbit, deer and horses for up to 10 years. Optimistic?

Phil Morgan – recently-arrived at Wyese – has set about clearing and pruning a modern orchard which is choked by bracken and scrub. He seemed undeterred by the mammoth task ahead.

Helen Kemp and Bruce Chapple have some huge old orchard trees; they are keen to both care for these and have also been musing on the possibility and desirability of a parish orchard.

Keith Orchard – who inherited 10 fruit trees when he bought Yew Green Farm is now well established in cider and perry manufacture; he has over 90 trees at Yew Green Farm and a wealth of information on the complete process.

At Windward, recently-arrived **David Gifford** has planted a new orchard on his south-west facing slope, again using carefully selected local varieties.

Finally **Winifred and Les Baker** of Reckless Orchards, Llandogo, spoke of the use of orchards as part of their landscaping of major developments. What better way than apple blossom to soften the hard lines of a power station ?

Roger Gaunt also has experience of establishing a new orchard. When he came to Firtree Cottage on the Nedge 33 years ago, he decided he needed fruit trees. His writing below illustrates well the complexities of choosing varieties:

“When I was a boy, my father planted an orchard in the large garden of our Yorkshire home. I was thus aware of different varieties of apple such as Blenheim Orange, James Grieve, Beauty of Bath and so forth. After some time living here at St Briavels we decided to plant some fruit trees for our growing family as we had space enough. My father recommended John Scott’s Nursery at Merriott in Somerset. Their catalogue was quite a revelation! Dwarf varieties were available as maidens, bushes, pyramids and cordons and some as fans. Standards were available for orchards where stock graze and half-standards if required. Moreover, if we take dessert apples for example they were divided into Late Summer, Early Autumn, Late Autumn, Midwinter, New Year and Spring. A number of first choice varieties were listed under each heading and then a list of other varieties. To add to the complexity of planning, one of the numbers 1 to 5 was assigned to each variety to indicate the season of flowering, it being desirable to have two trees flowering at the same time for purposes of cross-pollination. Similar options were available for cooking apples, pears and the various plums. We chose carefully and planted eleven dessert apples, two cooking apples, three pears and two plums, ordering them in January 1975. We used spacing as recommended; however being too busy to prune the trees we found they were too close together and moved four dessert apples into one of the fields. Looking back 33 years on, the plums were a failure (though a native Blaisdon fruits well). One of the two surviving pears reached for the sky and has borne little fruit. The other is tiny and has a few fruits most years. The cooking apples—early and late—are quite reliable and we always have more than we can use. The dessert apples—planned to give us apples from August to March—give us sufficient most years from September to March. The trees receive little attention but a particular problem is ‘squirrels’. They take a bite out of an apple before it is ripe, throw it to the ground in disgust, then try another and so on. This means we lose most of the crop

from the trees planted in the original position. Those we moved into the field are better. As I write in late February we are still using the variety Winston stored in trays hanging from the garage ceiling to keep the mice at bay."

Stimulated then by the potential benefits of home grown local varieties of fruits and with thoughts of apple days, cider making, pruning fests, not to mention bottling, jams and chutneys, the PGP members decided further thought and advice is needed, with the possible long term establishment of a community orchard in mind. We will therefore hope to have an orchard expert as our speaker at the autumn meeting, and a field day looking at some of our remnant orchards in the summer (see Dates for your Diary).

Plainly, any community orchard project will involve:

- a sufficient number of committed participants
- a co-ordinator
- appropriate land

Anyone interested in whatever aspects please contact any member of the committee or Helen Kemp.

Further information is available from:

Chris Wedge – the orchards officer of DEFRA who has knowledge of all possible grant aid.
e-mail: chris.wedge@defra.gsi.gov.uk

The Gloucester Orchard Group
Web site: www.orchard-group.org.uk
e-mail: smithcovell@btinternet.com

Gloucestershire County Council
Gloucestershire County Fruit Trees
Contact Alan Watson 01453 794920

Matt Dunwell – now a Brockweir resident, runs the Ragmans Lane Apple Juice venture in Lydbrook – tel: 01594 860244. His juices are made from traditional organic orchards in Gloucestershire and Herefordshire and he also runs courses at the farm on cider and apple production.

UW

Apple Orchards and Cider

It is now known that the *Malus Silvestris*, the apple tree, grew wild in Britain around 4,000BC. The first evidence found for deliberate cultivation dates from the period of the Roman invasion of Britain in AD43, when, after army veterans were offered settlements of land on which to grow fruits, probably as an inducement to stay, orchards spread across the country. In Europe, cider making was already established by the beginning of the 9th century, and the Normans, who invaded England in 1066, had a strong tradition of apple growing and cider making. After the Conquest they would have been responsible for a marked change in the practice of apple growing in England, introducing a number of new varieties of apple; the first recorded were the Pearmain, which was particularly valued for cider making, and the Costard, which although now no longer grown, is preserved in the word *costermonger*, who was originally a seller of Costard apples.

By the early 13th century, monasteries made an important industry of cider, records show its popularity with the public, and labourers in monastery orchards received a daily allowance as

part of their wage. While the Black Death resulted in a sharp decline in fruit cultivation in England, Henry VIII reversed the decline, importing large quantities of apple trees from France, and throughout the 16th and 17th centuries large numbers of new orchards were planted with the bulk of these being for cider making. The author D Marshall, in his book *'The Rural Economy of Gloucestershire'* in 1796 laments the poor quality of much of the cider then produced, saying: "A palate accustomed to sweet cider would judge the rough cider of farm houses to be a mixture of vinegar and water, with a portion of dissolved alum to give it roughness." This may be some part due to a decline in the quality of the fruit crop because of canker and also because of poor orchard management.



The protection of the fruit market during the Napoleonic Wars, and the high tariffs imposed on all imported fruit after the wars, led to an

expansion of new orchard planting in the 1820s and 1830s, but the subsequent lowering of these tariffs in 1837 led to a collapse in the apple market. There was little improvement in the market demand until around 1870, when the effects of the industrial revolution in this country led to increased per capita income, and fruits again became profitable.

The customary method of collecting the apple crop was to beat the trees with long slender poles or rods, and then to collect the fallen fruit in baskets. Marshall in his book *'The Rural Economy of Gloucestershire'* published in 1796, condemned this method of harvesting by saying: "The criterion of a due degree of ripeness is that of the fruits falling spontaneously from the tree. Nature is the best judge of this crisis. No art has yet been discovered to mature unripe fruit, in any way equal to nature's process. Fruit, in all human probability, does not quit the tree (in an undisturbed state) until it has received its full complement of nourishment."

Patricia Pinkerton

Improving our Meadows

Signs of Spring are all around us in the garden, primroses are speckling the banks and paths thanks to the February sunshine and many of us are busy planning out their gardens for the Spring and Summer. For those of us fortunate to own meadows now is the time to start planning their management for another year. These small meadows separated by stands of woodland are mini nature reserves since their management or lack of management affects the populations of insects, small mammals and birds that live in and on them. The Curator of the British Natural History Museum said recently on BBC4 that the many individuals who care for nature reserves across the country are as important as the curators caring for the Museum in preserving our Natural History in a living form. Our meadows may not be designated nature reserves but collectively they play an important role in contributing to the wild life of the Wye Valley.



The Parish Grasslands Project is ready to assist with the forward planning by helping control the spread of bracken and bramble or by advising on the most appropriate form of management; for advice on the pros and cons of grazing, why not discuss with those in the PGP who have animals on their meadows?

We are also considering ways of improving the diversity of flowers in our meadows by the use of **green hay**. If we delay cutting the grass in a field that has a wide variety

of flowers until the seed is ripe, it is possible to transport the green hay carrying the flower seeds direct to a meadow that has less of the natural flowers of the area. The green hay is then spread thinly on the ground and the seeds drop out onto the soil. Next year when the seeds germinate we hope the result will be an improvement in the variety of flowers, but it is still an experimental procedure and we will need to monitor how effectively it works.

The green hay must be transferred immediately since if the cut grass heats up, the seeds may be adversely affected and lose viability. The meadows receiving the green hay should either be very closely grazed to expose bare soil, or should be areas of ground where bramble and bracken have been recently cleared to expose the soil. This will make it more likely that the seeds will find the appropriate conditions to germinate and to establish themselves. The process will require forward planning and we will need help to transport and spread the green hay within 12 hours of cutting. Why not join in and make it a “green hay making party” and enjoy some good local cider while forking up the green hay. If we can try out the process with 2 or 3 sites, it would give us the opportunity for comparison and to find out whether we can return some of our meadows to their former glory.

Peter Chard

Our Management Service

Our Management Service will operate again this summer and enclosed with this newsletter is a form to complete should you wish for assistance with your fields. Peter Chard asks that the requests are made **as soon as possible** so that he can prioritise the jobs. Despite poor weather and pressure of work, John and Robert Childs completed 27 jobs last year as well as maintaining all the machinery and once again we must thank them for their valiant commitment to this project.

Louise Frankel from Woodlands House has written of her experience of our management service:

“Having moved from Trelleck to Brockweir in June in order to gain more space for the family we then found ourselves somewhat daunted by the amount of land we had taken on. Our house sits in a lovely plot and the previous owners had maintained,

through light grazing and topping, the grounds immediately surrounding the house - however one outlying paddock had been left for a number of years and presented an apparently impenetrable wall of bracken and brambles, well above head height. As we were unable to venture more than a few feet into this field the bald fact that it extended to just over half a hectare (as recorded in the title deeds) represented the extent of our knowledge as to what might lie within. We got in touch with the Parish Grasslands Project and subsequently received a visit from Peter Chard who gave us some invaluable advice on not only clearing the overgrown paddock but also the work required to maintain the other paddocks, all the while pointing out to us the wild flowers and grasses we were surrounded by. When John Childs arrived in the Parish Grassland’s Alpine tractor it was

frankly very difficult to believe that one chap on his own using a smallish machine and flailer could achieve anything and yet within a couple of hours the entire field was cleared. The results have been nothing short of astonishing; all the vegetation has been pulverised and the paddock has revealed itself to be in a lovely light situation on a south facing slope, with stunning views down the Wye Valley. It is fenced and surrounded by hedges interspersed with some very handsome mature trees. In the very centre of the field John came across a small patch of grass, approximately 5 metres in diameter, the last bastion of grassland holding out against the steady march of bracken and brambles. We are now looking forward to the challenge of re-establishing the grassland throughout the field which, in the short term, we aim to achieve by a programme of regular topping.”

Traditional Haymaking



Brockweir & Hewelsfield Local History Group

Following our November '07 meeting when Eric Freeman spoke about traditional haymaking and George Peterken showed photographs and paintings of haymaking, these photographs of local scenes continue the story: Stan Scrivens' father is pictured on a wagon somewhere in the Triangle Stores area in around 1930. The conical haystacks must have been pre-1900 as the Brockweir Bridge is not in place. Thanks to John Norman for supplying these photographs.



Brockweir & Hewelsfield Local History Group



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Publications – both Existing and Planned

The PGP produced “**Flowers in the Fields**” in November 2005. It is still selling well both at the Brockweir Village Shop and local bookshops and is very reasonably priced at £5.

In 2007 a very successful leaflet was published of **three circular walks from the Brockweir Village Shop**. Tony Eggar is

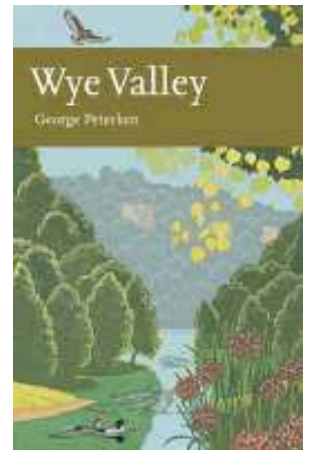
currently in the process of producing a similar leaflet of **walks around St Briavels**. It is hoped that the new leaflets will be available in Spring or early Summer. As with the Brockweir walks leaflet, considerable effort has been made to make the walks easy to follow to suit visitors to the area as well as residents. The St Briavels' walks should take from between a half and three hours. Detailed maps are included which show all the footpaths in the area. Copies will be available from local shops, pubs and the Castle for £1.

One of our members, Paul Wilkins, a retired science teacher with a lifelong interest in natural history, has volunteered to compile a list of **local flora** for the parishes/Hudnalls. This will inevitably take some years to complete. In fact, it will, or should, never be complete as surveys of this nature ought always to be ongoing in order to keep the lists up to date. However, he hopes to have an interim list in the not too distant future. Fortunately, there already exists a good deal of local data and he will make use of this, updating it with his own and other people's observations to produce an accurate picture of the current situation. He would be very grateful for any help – local observations, extant lists etc. A Parish Flora would be a rare and valuable document indeed. He can be contacted on 01291 689946 or e-mail: paul.wilkins@care4free.net

Our Chairman, George Peterken, has completed his “Magnum Opus” on the **Wye Valley** and the

result is a splendid and comprehensive study – erudite yet truly readable by the lay person. He writes:

“My book on the Wye Valley was finally published on 4th February 2008 as No. 105 in the New Naturalist series. Running to 466 pages, it covers the natural history, landscape history, ecology and conservation of the valley from Hereford southwards and the country through which it flows. Fortunately for those who don't want to read all the 120,000 words, it contains nearly 200 colour photographs. The “New Naturalists” are a publishing phenomenon, which inevitably invest authors with a touch of celebrity. The series started immediately after the Second World War as a vehicle enabling national specialists in natural history and countryside topics to write for a general audience, and from the outset they were illustrated by colour photographs and distinctive artistic cover designs. The series was immediately popular and has developed into a collectors' target, so much so that a hardback copy of the volume on the Hebrides changed hands in February 2008 for £2,800. The volume preceding mine – on the history of ornithology – sold out in two weeks and copies now sell at a premium. Even mine seems to be heading the same way: Collins had sold 80% of the print run by 17th February. There is even a New Naturalist Collectors' Club, of which I find myself an honorary member; I have signed copies in the Coleford bookshop; articles appear in the Forest Review; and I am to speak at the Hay Literary Festival next May. All very different from my usual experience of publishing papers in technical journals – which is total silence! My hope is that the book will interest more people in the valley. It cost a lot of effort to write, and I had to rely on information from others to cover many subjects, as well as try to make sense of published work in arcane subjects, such as coastal sedimentation, bryophyte ecology, butterfly history and water quality in the Wye. If this sounds abstruse, local readers will find a good deal on the Hudnalls and Wye Valley grasslands, two Hudnalls' residents will find themselves pictured, one far more identifiably than the other; three other local residents are pictured; and my wife – as so often in life – is often my scale object.”



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.