The new community orchard in the north-east corner of the St Briavels playing field

Fruit of our labours

Mike Topp explains how our latest initiative finally became a reality

We've done it! We have managed to create a modest community orchard. And it has taken just short of two years to work our way from the germ of an idea to reality. Our mini-orchard is in the north-east corner of the St Braivels Playing Field. During a series of working sessions in January and February a small but dedicated team prepared the ground then planted our six trees and erected tree guards.

The idea of establishing a community orchard was born in March 2017, at a meeting of the Parish Grasslands Project in the Mackenzie Hall. We had arranged for Chris Wedge, Natural England's orchard specialist, to give us a talk about traditional orchards. In the course of an interesting presentation he reminded us that although Gloucestershire had once been home to a great many traditional apple and pear orchards, very few now remained. Later in the proceedings, as we conducted the formal business of our annual general meeting, our (quite healthy) bank balance was reported. At that point Chris interjected that we should spend some of the money on creating a community orchard. The idea was enthusiastically received by many among the 60 of so in the audience, and so we were set on a new and unexpected path.

Work party stalwarts Mike Smith, George Peterken and Celia Bradshw

In the months that followed we tried to find a suitable site within our two parishes of Hewelsfield & Brockweir and St Briavels. We also investigated other community orchards, and a group of us visited one at Wenvoe, near Cardiff, which consisted of a number of separate small sites, with informal tenure arrangements. We decided that this model would suit our situation, and investigated a number of potential sites locally. These enquiries finally produced results last summer when the St Briavels Playing Field Committee offered us the use of a corner of the field.

We have planted six trees on semi-dwarfing rootstocks. The varieties we have chosen are: Ashmead's Kernel, Bardsey, Chiver's Delight, Laxton Fortune, Red Windsor, Lord Lambourne. They represent a combination of culinary and cooking varieties. One of the criteria when selecting them was to ensure a good succession for picking. We purchased the trees from Robert Boyle of Carrob Growers, Llangunville Farm Nursery, Llanrothal, Monmouth, after meeting Robert at the Chepstow Apple Day and discussing our project with him. See their website www.carrobgrowers.co.uk to find out more about each variety. A big thank you to Robert for his help and advice, and a big thank you also to Gill Skidmore and all the members of the St Briavels Playing Field Committee for their encouragement and support.

The whole idea of the project is to involve the local community in the care of the orchard, and ultimately in enjoying the fruits of our collective labours! If you are not already on our list of potential volunteers, and would like to be, please get in touch at mike.topp@yahoo.co.uk

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Meadows will be centre stage at March 14 meeting

At our annual general meeting this month we have arranged for a number of local smallholders to talk about how they manage their fields. This represents a return to our roots. The Parish Grasslands Project was founded more than 15 years ago with one over-riding aim: to support and assist those who look after the small fields and meadows of Hewelsfield, Brockweir and St Briavels, with a particular focus on encouraging wild flower-rich meadows. Over the years we have widened the scope of our interests to include, among other topics, natural history, the landscape and rural skills. This year however we are going back to first principles and focusing once more on field and meadow management. The speakers will talk about their relationships with their individual holdings, and tell us some of the things they have learned in the course of looking after their land. No two of the speakers use their land in exactly the same way so it promises to be a diverse and interesting meeting.

As usual we will try to complete the official business of the AGM as efficiently as possible so that we can move on to the speakers. All are welcome, whether PGP members or not. Hot drinks and cake will be served during the interval. The meeting, at the Mackenzie Hall, will take place at 7.30 pm on Thursday March 14.

A century of change

Our survey uncovered gains and losses among local wild plants. **George Peterken** and **Elsa Wood** report

Our wild flora has been changing rapidly. All over Britain and much of mainland Europe, the populations of wild plants have been thinning out. Throughout the English lowlands, counties have been losing species at roughly one species every second year, i.e., 50 species going extinct in a century. Many species are now virtually confined to nature reserves and other protected sites.

Most of these losses can be blamed on the need for agriculture to be far more productive than it once was – we all need to eat – so we had some reason to hope that Brockweir, Hewelsfield and St Briavels had escaped the worst. After all, we still have all the woods we had a century ago, and much of the other land is not intensively cropped. Further, in the Parish Grassland Project, we have an organisation that has, among other things, promoted interest in the environment in general and flowers in the fields in particular. However, we suspected that all was not well, and for the last two years we have, with the help of some other residents, checked on the fate of our flora over the last century and current trends.

We have based our assessment on the *Flora of Chepstow* (1920), which was compiled by W A Shoolbred, a physician who lived in Chepstow from 1878 to 1928. In the words of the *Flora of Gloucestershire* (1948), he was "one of the best systematic botanists … of his day … a careful, critical and enthusiastic collector of all the most difficult genera [who] was always careful in the matter of rare plants." One imagines him cycling and walking up to 15 miles out into the Chepstow hinterland scouring the district for vascular plants and bryophytes.

We know from Shoolbred's *Flora* the names of 123 species that definitely grew within our parishes a century ago. Most of these were species that were infrequent or interesting enough to locate, such as the rare Annual Mercury, which grew on an old wall in Brockweir. The rest of the parish flora can be compiled from general descriptions, e.g., Dandelion was "very common in grassy places" and must have grown within our parishes. After making judgement calls like this, we compiled a list of 487 species that were certainly or probably present a century ago and a further 94 that might have been.

In 2017 and 2018, with some help from other residents, we set out to find all the wild-growing species in the parishes, and by mid September 2018 we had found 504 species. A few species were being found for the first time in early September, but by then we were subject to the law of diminishing returns: it was hard to add any, and the season was running into autumn. We have a list of a further 38 species that we expected to find, but did not, but for analysis we have taken the list at face value.

Botanical surveys are never complete, but in round terms we reckoned that roughly 500 species grew wild in our parishes a century ago, and found 500 doing so now. So, the first response is relief: our wild flora is still as rich as it was. But is it? Comparing the lists in detail reveals a great deal of change.

First, the gains. We found 46 neophytes that were not on the 1920 list. These are species that have escaped from cultivation or been introduced in the last 400 years (either deliberately or by chance e.g. seeds on car wheels etc), usually much more recently. Shoolbred had found a few of these, including Gooseberry ("escape, hedges and woods") and Red Valerian ("locally abundant, old walls"), but we added a mix of welcome species (e.g. Celandine



One gain, Climbing Corydalis, one loss, Heather, and one on the danger list, Giant Bellflower



Three we have gained in the last century: Greater Cuckooflower, Cornflower, Bee Orchid

Saxifrage, Greater Cuckooflower) and now-notorious species, notably Japanese Knotweed, Cherry Laurel, Indian Balsam and Spanish or hybrid Bluebell. We also added nine archaeophytes – species that escaped from cultivation more than 400 years ago, including Swine-cress, Cornflower, Bristly Oxtongue, Chicory and Lesser Periwinkle.

The rest are species native to Britain. One, Reflexed Saltmarsh-grass, has spread in response to salt treatment of roads, and is certainly a post-1920 arrival, but the others may have been present, but overlooked in 1920 – there is simply no way to be sure. They include three orchids (Broad-leaved Helleborine, Pyramidal Orchid, Bee Orchid), riverside plants (e.g. Sea Aster, Flowering-rush, Lesser Pond-sedge, Yellow Loosestrife, Water Chickweed), infrequent species of woodland, heath and grassland (Wood Small-reed, Crab Apple, Climbing Corydalis and Lesser Hawkbit), and species associated with water (Pink Water-speedwell, Broad-leaved Pondweed, Greater Duckweed).

Now, the losses. Of the 123 species recorded explicitly from within the parishes a century ago, 55 were not found in 2017-8. They include species that were common or fairly common in 1920, Hairy Rock-cress, Almond Willow, Narrow Buckler-fern, Alder Buckthorn and Lemon-scented Fern. Of the other 364 species that were judged to be within the parishes in 1920, 48 were not found, including several that were common or very common in 1920, such as Hairy Tare and Marjoram. They may eventually turn up, but they have certainly declined. In 1920, more species were said to grow in woodland than in any other habitat, which is hardly unexpected in a well-wooded district. Since 1920, the area of woodland has, if anything, increased, so one might have expected the woodland species to have survived but, in fact, 29 species have not been found.

So, how do woodland species disappear if the woodlands survive? The answer is neglect of management and consequent loss of open spaces within woodland. As a result, our woods have lost Heather, Saw-wort, Adder's-tongue, Lady's-mantle, Harebell and many others. They just can't withstand the periods of heavy shade.

Much the same can be said about species of pasture, heathland, wet ground, open water and cultivated ground. Thus, the parishes have lost Heather, Bell Heather, Cross-leaved Heath, Heath Cudweed, Lesser Butterfly-orchid and other species of bogs and heaths, while Trailing St John's-wort, Common Milkwort, Heath Bedstraw and many others are much reduced. Despite the increase in arable cultivation, we have lost many weeds of cultivation, such as Corn Buttercup and Common Fumitory, while diligent search revealed just one "Common" Poppy plant in 2018, a species that was common in cornfields in 1920.

We hope to keep searching in 2019, but can we draw any firm conclusions now? Our wild flora has changed substantially, but local extinctions have been approximately balanced by new arrivals. Moreover, several species are heading for local extinction, including Harebell, Tormentil and Giant Bellflower. We still enjoy a colourful spring flora, but our hedges, verges and woodland paths are now mostly stocked with common and widespread species, not the variety of a century ago. Species still come and go: in the last 20 years we have watched Early-purple Orchid, Bird's-Nest Orchid and Autumn Lady's-tresses re-appear briefly.

No doubt our flora has changed constantly. A glimpse of this comes from William Heard Thomas, a Tintern physician, who recorded Lady's Slipper-orchid Cypripedium calceolus and Mezereon Daphne mezereum amongst a list of more credible species in the steep woods above the wireworks bridge. However, as in so much else, the pace of change has accelerated. Numerous causes, such as loss of niche habitats like bogs, can be identified, but ultimately, the driving force is the change in the way we use the land, which races back to the change from a traditional way of life to a community dominated by commuters, teleworkers and the retired. Does it matter? That's for PGP members and residents to decide!