Deadly danger in the woods

Gwion Trefgarne on the threat to one of Britain's favourite trees

Sadly, after the slaughter of elms by Dutch Elm Disease, our beautiful and valuable ash trees now face a battle with another fungus, *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus* (previously known as *Chalara fraxinea*). The fungus first appeared in a consignment of ash trees from Holland to a nursery in Bucks in 2012. It has since spread to most of the UK. We must lament loudly the importation of trees which are so easy to grow here.

Up to tens of miles the spread of the fungus is by wind. Over longer distances, infected plants, timber and logs could be implicated.

Ash Dieback causes leaf loss, crown dieback and bark lesions. Once infected, the outcome is usually fatal, either directly or indirectly, by weakening the tree and making it susceptible to other pathogens, especially Honey Fungus. It is important to recognise that older trees can resist the infection for some time.

However, it is now becoming apparent that some ash trees (with a greater genetic variation than English elms) resist or tolerate infection. This is undoubtedly the key to the survival of our beloved trees. The best hope is to identify the genetic factors which enable certain ash trees to tolerate or resist infection. This knowledge can then be used to help breed new generations of tolerant ash trees for the future. It must also be noted that ornamental ash species are also affected, including the weeping variety. The fungus has not been reported in any non-ash species. In gardens, burning leaf litter may offer some control, although given our inability to calm the winds, this must be of dubious benefit. And on the other hand the tiny mushrooms of the fungus grow in the leaf litter and release their spores, which go on to infect other trees. There is also a study of the use of Biochar as a control.

Remember that ash are late to flush, so if you don't see leaves in April or May it doesn't necessarily mean that the trees have Ash Dieback. In addition, symptoms can be confusing in autumn as leaves die back and are shed naturally. In autumn also clumps of ash keys (seeds) are retained after the leaves have fallen. Particularly from a distance these can be confused with disease symptoms.

The Forestry Commission has a comprehensive guide to Ash Dieback at https://www.forestry.gov.uk/ashdieback. The RHS website also has some good information on the subject.

It is most important that we do not see this disease in isolation from the general globalisation of tree diseases. In the case of Ash Dieback the tragedy seems compounded by the fact that it could have been avoided if we had only questioned the uneccessary importation of nursery stock.

No report on the future of ash trees would be complete without mention of the menace of the Emerald Ash Borer, which is now present and waiting, Stalin-like some may say, in eastern Europe. It has also wreaked havoc among North American trees. If this should invade, our native ash trees will face an uncertain future. Let us be vigilant and hope for the best outcome.

Some of the effects of ash dieback

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ST. BRIAVELS HEWELSFIELD & BROCKWEIR Parish Grasslands Project

N E W S L E T T E R

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C O N T E N T S

Things to spot this month

Fieldfare and field maple

Much to discover at our October events

Find out about field boundaries

We'll be looking at field boundaries — walls, fences and hedges — in our autumn gathering on Saturday October 14. "Good fences make good neighbours," as the poet Robert Frost had it, and it behoves us all to attend to them. In our parishes we have boundaries as interesting as any in the land.

The extraordinary density of our stone walls will be the subject of a survey by the AONB; some walls are very much as they were when first built, some are bulging and some collapsed. And we'll be invited to join the survey and a discussion about their condition with an experienced local waller. The history and features of our parish walls will be the subject of an introduction by our local expert George Peterken. There will be a hedging demonstration indoors, from local hedgers, and discussion on the birds and animals who make their homes in our field boundaries.

We are also planning a hands-on session in November, when hedging and wall-building can be tried under expert guidance. More details of this at the meeting on October 14, which will be held at the Mackenzie Hall, Brockweir, starting at 2pm. There will be an interval with cakes, tea and coffee. All are cordially welcome, PGP members free, others are asked to make a donation to help cover cost of refreshments.

Phil Morgan

First visit to the community orchard

Our second event in October is an open day at the site of the new community orchard, on Saturday October 21. This is an opportunity to find out exactly where the community orchard will soon begin to take shape, and to learn about the plans for the orchard so far.

We would like to hear ideas from anyone who lives locally about how we might develop the project, and how the community would be interested in using the space. We want the whole community to benefit from the community orchard, and our aim is to ensure that there will be opportunities for anyone to become involved with the project, in a wide variety of roles. So we would like to hear from anyone interested in joining the small team of volunteers who have already signed up to help to make the orchard a reality. This is a chance to get in on the ground floor of an exciting new project, and to help to shape it from the outset.

Now an admission: not only does the orchard have no trees as yet, but the open day will only last from 10 am to 12 noon. The site is about 125 metres upstream from Brockweir Bridge. Come to the Quay and follow the signs. Tea, coffee and cake will be served. If you would like to be involved or learn more but can't attend, please get in touch via the PGP website.

Mike Topp

How fare the flowers?

George Peterken on the results of our survey

This summer the PGP has tried to assess how the wild flora of our two parishes is faring. To that end, we have collected records of eight flowers of open, usually grassy habitats, compiled maps for each and compared the 2017 occurrences with such past records as we can find. Most of the observations were made by members of the PGP committee, but we invited anyone who could recognise the chosen species to send in records, and this has given us valuable additional information. Clearly there are more actual and budding botanists out there than we thought.

We chose species that were not only distinctive but would also be informative. In 1920 all were recorded as common and widespread on our side of the Wye, and the *Flora of Gloucestershir*e records that they all remained common in 1948, but not one of the eight is common now. Summarising, our tentative conclusions are that:

The species that prefer well-drained, neutral and alkaline soils, Cowslip and Field Scabious, are doing reasonably well, though the latter is mostly confined to the verges of the main road through St Briavels.

Two of the species of poorly-drained, moist and wet soils, Bugle and Meadowsweet, are doing well, but Ragged-robin is now very restricted.

The species of dry, well-drained, almost heathy soils, Harebell and Tormentil, are at risk of local extinction in the next few years. The hay meadow species, Yellow Rattle, can still be found in many places on the Hudnalls, and is resilient, despite the reduced area mown for hay.

Cowslip is the species for which we think we have the most complete information. It is easily visible in April to early May, but stops flowering in late May, by which time it is hidden amongst tall-growing grasses. “Cowslip central”, where there are several large populations, is located in the centre of the Hudnalls, but small groups of cowslips can be found throughout the two parishes, except the commercial farmland on the plateau. We also found a few False Oxlips, the hybrid between primrose and cowslip, and two places that sport Red Cowslips, which must indicate dalliance with garden Polyanthus.

However, cowslips must have decreased over the last century. In 1920 they were abundant in pastures, hedge-banks and open woods, i.e., managed

Discovering the joys of a midsummer meadow

Since 2008, Jean Green has invited children from St Briavels Early Years (pre-school) and from Class One of our school to visit her flower meadow at Holly Farm, Brockweir. Again this midsummer her meadow was a wonderful display of colour with the growth so luxuriant that we feared we may lose sight of some of the smaller children when they strayed from the paths that Jean had cut for the occasion.

Thus at 10 am on a warm, thankfully not too hot day, 31 children from Early Years and many parents arrived with Joanne George and her assistants. Jo, who is very focused on getting her children out in to their environment, takes these children weekly to their Forest Schools session in the Greenmeadow near the school... and it shows. They are all, though very small, confident and adventurous, not daunted by the negative qualities of nettles and thistles and very happy with mud and bugs! They quickly dispersed, sharing catch nets and collecting bottles to confine grasshoppers, spiders etc. temporarily in our keep net, and even used the PGP 100 flowers leaflet to try to identify flowers.

The water trough in Jean’s field is fed by a permanent spring and the children were delighted to net a single tadpole which was returned to recover in the water when the little children went home, to be fished out once more by the children of Class One when they arrived in the afternoon.

Just 20 in number, this group’s enjoyment of the visit was obvious. They relished using the catch nets (so many Marbled Whites, Speckled Woods and a few Commas this year), and they picked a selection of flowers to take back to the classroom to press. I saw one showing her friend why that abundant flower is called Yellow Rattle and they showed interest in the name “bacon and eggs” for the yellow and red Bird’s Foot Trefoil . Exploring Jean’s wood was also popular before returning for a much-needed drink sitting on the hay bales in Jean’s barn.

Asked what they had enjoyed, responses from this group included catching grasshoppers, climbing a tree, and rolling in the grass with friends... all good. Their thanks to Jean were wholehearted as from both school and pre-school teachers.

Quote of the day

Small boy from Early Years: “I hope we find a banded shield bug today.”

Me: “So do I. If you do, please show it to me.” I don’t think he did, but maybe we found a future naturalist?

Ursula Williams

False Oxlips left, and Red Cowslips

woods with grassy rides. Flora Klickmann records them as lavishly in flower (1.5.1924); beautiful in Cowslip Rise (24.4.1929); a great year for cowslips (23.4.1949); and very prolific this year (10.5.1950). The *Gloucestershire Flora* (1948) records them as plentiful on the calcareous soils in pastures and meadows. There are also several places where we knew cowslips in the 1990s, but not now, and many places where all we can find are a few old plants, i.e., a geriatric population.

Why have cowslips declined and why are they still declining? Building experience elsewhere on to local evidence, I think the main reasons are these:

Ploughing and fertilising fields, converting grassland to arable crops or improved leys.

Fertilising pastures that were not ploughed. Cowslips cannot compete with taller herbage.

Decline in numbers of cattle and replacement with prolonged sheep pasturage.

Decline of coppicing and other woodland management, which eliminates grassland from woodland.

Withdrawal of grazing from verges, leading to rank herbage, and overgrowth of scrub and hedges.

Abandonment of fields and failure to manage grass under new orchards.

General spread of nitrogen through the environment, which makes road verge vegetation even more rank.

Suburbanisation of gardens, including herbicides and new lawns.

There is no need yet to worry about the future of cowslips hereabouts, especially as several residents are obviously nurturing groups of them on their lawns, but they would be good “canaries in the mine”, which would alert us to further losses of flower diversity if we kept a careful watch on them each year. Other species, though, seem to be right up against it.

What we need now is more information. The eight maps and a report have been placed on the PGP website. If anyone can demonstrate that our worries are groundless; that seemingly at-risk species are in fact doing well, we would be very pleased. After all, this is the home of “The Flower Patch” books and it would be a shame to lose any more of our wild flowers.