



AUTUMN NEWSLETTER

www.parishgrasslandsproject.org.uk

Give us the tools

It's a rare individual who doesn't have a favourite hand tool, specific to their interests.

It's that kitchen knife, garden dibber or carpentry saw, the one that fits comfortably into the palm, does everything it's supposed to plus a little bit more and is the first thing you'd save in that fictional house-fire so beloved of newspaper interviewers (after spouse, kids and dog, of course).

So at this year's autumn meeting on Saturday October 17 we've decided to focus on hand tools for

Come along to our October meeting where the theme will be working the land by hand

land management: on practical implements for the day-to-day working of your fields and on historical ones, providing a vivid glimpse into our past.

We're delighted to welcome Simon Fairlie, ecologist, author and journalist, as our guest speaker, to explore the age-old art of scything. Simon will be outlining the benefits of managing

grassland by hand in what is certain to be a fascinating discussion. There will also be an opportunity to order one of Simon's scythes for yourself – so now we can all recreate that scene from Poldark...

The Usk Rural Life Museum has kindly lent part of its exceptional collection of artefacts for the afternoon. There will be a demonstration of blade sharpening, a chance to find out about the Wye Valley tanning industry by means of an 18th century barking tool, and much more besides.

So dig out your own favourite hand tool and come along to join us at the Mackenzie Hall. Start time is 2pm and all are welcome.

Alice Hogge

COMMITTEE

Chair: **Mike Topp**

Secretary, Treasurer, Membership: **Sally Secrett**

Minutes Secretary: **Alice Hogge**

Committee members:

Helen Axe

Deborah Flint

Jean Green

John Josephi

Philip Morgan

George Peterken

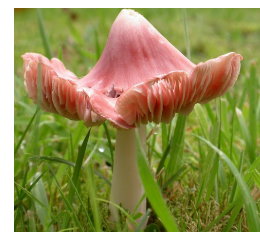
Phillip Powles

Ursula Williams

CONTENTS

Gadr Farm visit	2
Shearing course	3
Flower hunt	3
Meet Simon Fairlie	4

Things to spot this month



Pink waxcap

We're on Twitter

The Parish Grasslands Project has joined the social media revolution and opened a Twitter account. This will help us to publicise our activities, not only within the membership but much more widely. We will also

follow other organisations with similar aims, and their tweets will be shown on our website. To find out more, follow @ParishGrassland or keep an eye out for our new website arriving in a few weeks.

On these pages we highlight some of our activities over the summer

Great crested newts at Gadr Farm

The evening of 15 May saw a 16 strong group of Grasslanders pay a visit to Gadr Farm, near Trelleck, home to Mr Alan Morgan and his family. The farm is a 160 acre holding of traditional livestock rearing pasture, now managed under the Glastir Scheme (Stewardship if you live east of Offa's Dyke) which encourages landowners to manage along conservation lines, and which until recently paid grant for educational visits.

Our visit had been billed as a chance to view the fabled Great Crested Newt and, in the many ponds and scrapes which Alan has



Herb paris

created on his lower ground, we were able to get close and personal with both the Crested and Common varieties. Sarah Sawyer and Jon Eckert had joined us, bringing pond dipping nets with which to explore the wonders of the deep.

On a reconnaissance visit earlier Ursula Williams and I were shown the difference between frogspawn (mounds of tapioca) and toadspawn (long thin strips of jelly with eggs dotted along them, looking like the ammunition some of us once used in cap pistols)

The Great Crested was a surprise. Large, dry and scaly like a miniature Komodo Dragon, lying up in a "newt hotel" which Alan had built for the purpose. This was simply a pile of short cordwood



Toad spawn

stacked on dry land which gradually disintegrates, making ideal habitat for amphibians.

Hedge planting and hedge laying were all part of the great plan. Coppicing and pollarding of willows as well as the provision of owl nestboxes which had recently been tenanted by Tawnies were all included. One field of poorer pasture had been converted to woodland by planting mainly ash, with aspen, rowan, spindle and shrubby plants at the ride-sides.

Part of the holding consists of ancient woodland on the steep hillside that overlooks the farm. Here we saw a wealth of early purple orchids and some patches of herb paris, which most

take to be an indicator of ancient woodland. Alan had cleared a "coupe" within the wood to encourage coppice growth, and to protect the young regrowth from deer browsing had constructed an impressive "dead hedge", a wall of dead branches and cut hazel which costs less than a 6ft deer fence but often fails to "do the business." Alan's Great Wall of China seemed to be very effective.

With Glastir grants and livestock sales forming the staple of the farm's income, other sources are needed for a holding of this size, and Alan meets this need with a firewood business. Some timber is taken from the woodland but the bulk is brought in 20 tonne loads from a local timber merchant. This seasons for a while before being logged, split and delivered to local clients.

Ingenuity and enthusiasm seem to be the hallmarks of management at Gadr Farm. We were therefore not surprised to find the owner among the conservation award winners at the Monmouthshire Show this year.

Moucher



Great crested newt



There was an excellent turnout for our July sheep shearing course, conducted by John Voyce at Tidenham Chase. Here Judy Craven and Jon Axe, with expert guidance, try their hand

Flower hunt at Hollyside Farm

Once again members of the Parish Grasslands Project made arrangements for children from the St Briavels Play Group and St Briavels School to visit and see the variety of wild flowers growing at Hollyside Farm and to use sweep nets to catch and observe insects which feed on the flowers. On this beautiful sunny morning teachers and parents brought pre-school children (25 or 26 - it was difficult to count them as they kept moving!) As well as observing the wild flowers the children, with the aid of nets, soon scattered around the field catching grasshoppers, butterflies, spiders and other insects which were put into little pots and then transferred to a larger net enclosure for observation. With smaller nets "pond dipping" in the



spring water tank was also enjoyed, catching tadpoles and a baby newt. Also a small frog was found!

This happy group concluded their visit with a picnic lunch in the clover patch of the field. In the afternoon the school minibus brought teachers and children, smartly dressed in school uniform, from the reception (Bluebell) class. They enjoyed the same activities as the morning group (though some children were reluctant to release their "pot" catches into the observation net!) These children happily completed the afternoon with cooling drinks as they sat on hay bales in the shade of the barn and the captive insects were released in the field.

Once again this year's flower field visit was enjoyed by everyone, young and old.

Jean Green

Introducing Simon Fairlie

George Peterken on the man behind the scything revival and the main speaker at our October meeting

The main speaker at our October meeting will be Simon Fairlie, who organises the Green Scythe Fair at Muchelney that John Josephi and I visited and enjoyed earlier this summer, and who runs The Scythe Shop and the Scythe Association.

Having watched him in action at the Scythe Fairs, I am sure he will be both entertaining and informative. Some idea of what Simon will talk about can be gleaned from his review of my Meadows book in *The Windrow* in December 2013.

Thankfully, he liked the book and praised it, but he also criticised what he called a “missing link”. “The one disappointment for readers of *The Windrow* is that Peterken hasn't yet latched onto the fact that there is, or could be, a scythe revival.”

Here is a selection of what he went on to write. I had written that “In Britain hay seems to be mown by ordinary tractors and side-mounted mowers or not at all.” Simon points out that this is not strictly true:

“Thus, places such as Tinkers Bubble, Monkton Wyld and the Dyfedd Permaculture Trust have been scything and making hay [the traditional] way for years, and other places are following suit. There is plenty of labour — voluntary labour — available for tedding, cocking and carrying in hay (though, inevitably, booking it in advance is problematic).



Simon Fairlie

“Admittedly, the number of holdings in the UK where hay is mown by scythes and made by hand on a commercial basis is tiny. But Peterken seems to be unaware of the large number of conservation bodies — including the National Trust, Natural England, the RSPB and at least a dozen county wildlife trusts — who find that using volunteer labour with scythes is an

effective way of harnessing voluntary labour.

“He fails to mention the hundreds, possibly thousands, of people who find that a scythe is the only tool they need to convert the nether end of their often substantial gardens into ‘wildflower meadows’.”

I stand corrected, of course, but I know that a good deal of volunteer scything takes place and that this is essential in maintaining churchyard meadows, small nature reserves, the remoter parts of large gardens and other special places.

I very much hope that there will be a steady increase in manual haymaking generally. In fact, it would be great to find that volunteers would be available to the likes of us if we can find no other way to get our grass mown, especially after finding that our own attempts to provide a more mechanised management service worked only for a limited time and under ideal conditions.

So, we look forward not just to hearing from Simon about the practicalities of scything, but we hope to be convinced that there really is a scything revival in train. Perhaps we should join the Scythe Association and help it along.

Scythes in the churchyard

By the time you read this, the Dean Meadows Group will have hosted the world premier of a new film about Caring for God's Acre. This is a conservation group that concentrates on the management of habitats, particularly grassland, in churchyards and other burial grounds. Churchyards have long been recognised as important refuges for wild flowers, and by far the best management for them is late mowing by scythe combined

with frequent, “tidy” mowing along paths and around new graves. CFGA started in the Diocese of Hereford but is seeking to expand, and the film is intended to publicise the value of churchyards and the work of CFGA. Don't expect to see real film stars: one of the contributors is George Peterken. If you read this in time, and are interested, the meeting is in Westbury village hall at 7.30 pm on Friday 9 October.