

A walk in the woods

One of our first outdoor outings since the pandemic restrictions were introduced will be a walk in the Hudnalls on Saturday March 26, led by **GEORGE PETERKEN**. Here he introduces the history and ecology of this ancient woodland, subjects which will be further explored during the walk. We will meet at 2.30pm at John Josephi's field off the Hudnalls Loop Road — look out for signposting. There will be room for a few cars to park, but please share transport where possible, bring stout footwear and maybe a walking stick.

Anyone who knew the Hudnalls in 1777 would be astonished to see them now. Isaac Taylor's map shows an unenclosed wooded common, but by 1812 the first surveys by the Ordnance Survey record smallholdings all over the higher ground, a road system much like the present, and woodland confined to the steep fringes.

Even the woodland has changed. In 1806, Charles Heath was able to write in his Wye Tour Guide that it "does not arrive at any growth to render it of much value [because] the poor who cut it, and to whom the right belongs, make it up into small faggots, and send them by water to Bristol, where [they are] purchased by the bakers. The oak pollards are as numerous as the beech [on the Welsh side of the Wye] but from the high price which has of late years been given for bark, they have been so destroyed, as not to leave a twig behind from which a pound of bark [can] be obtained". Clearly, the woods were a hive of destructive activity, yet by the early 20th century much of the wood was disused and has since grown into dense, apparently natural stands of beech, lime and oak.

For a few decades, parts of the woodland were cleared of stones

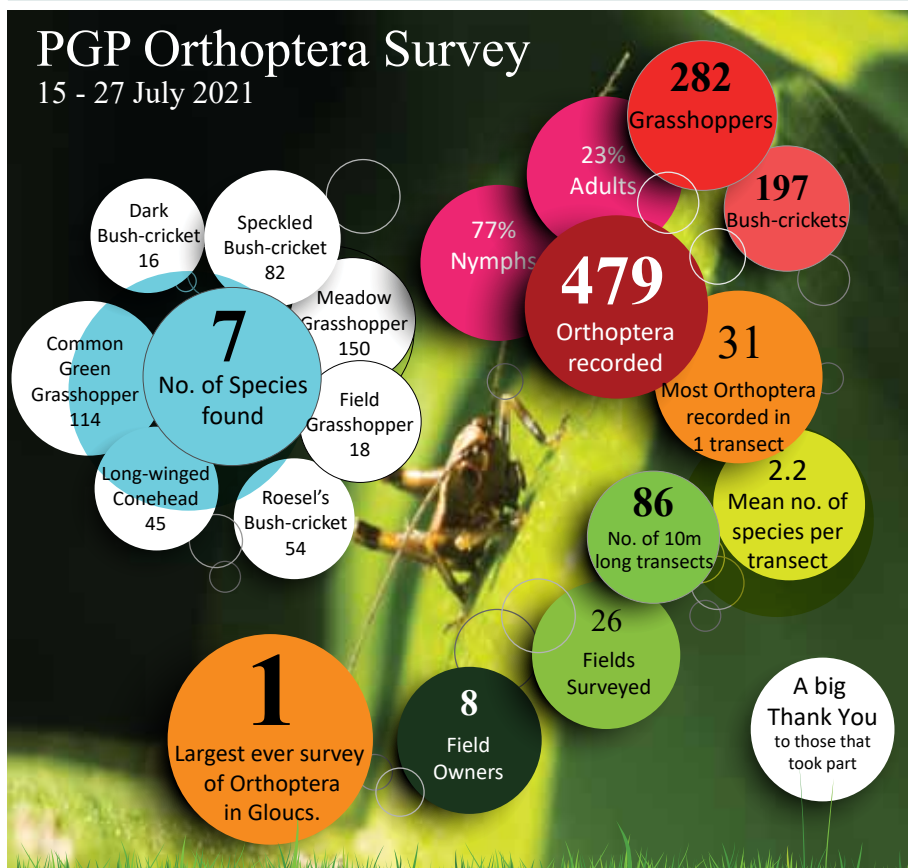


Traces of an ancient stone wall in the Hudnalls

and made into tiny fields, simple stone houses and piggeries were built, and all were linked by tracks between walls. These settlements were mostly abandoned before 1900, yet we can still find their remains, the fields once again reverting to woodland. Today, the walls and houses make a fascinating study of subsistence on the margins.

Ecologists see the woods as almost unique. The combination of beech, small-leaved lime and both native oaks is virtually confined to the lower Wye Valley, and this is one reason why Natural England's predecessors bought it as a National Nature Reserve.

During our walk in the woods we hope to demonstrate this ecology and history on the ground. Most participants will know well that the slope is steep, that the going is rough, and that for every easy stride downhill there is an equal trudge uphill.



It was a very hot and sunny couple of weeks in the latter half of July last year and we fought off thirst each evening to carry out the first survey of Orthoptera for the PGP. We marked the start of transects with a stick to which the surveyor was attached by 10m of rope. Sweep nets were used for sampling.

You will see from the infographic that we had some excellent results that really demonstrate the richness and value of the parish grasslands of St Briavels, Hewelsfield & Brockweir. Sites ranged from hill top to valley bottom and on north, east, south and west-facing slopes. The predominance of nymphs at this time was due to the cold and wet April prior, which delayed the hatching of Orthoptera right across the UK.

It would be good to associate these results with flora of fields surveyed and their land usage, and to repeat, perhaps in five or ten years time. Thanks to those owners who let us trample their grasses!

STEVE, EDWARD AND SASKIA BANNER



N E W S L E T T E R

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COMMITTEE

Chair:
Mike Topp 01594 531496

Secretary, Treasurer and Membership:
Sally Secrett 01594 530539

Committee Members:
Helen Axe
Gemma Bode
Matt Dunwell
Jean Green
John Josephi
George Peterken
Phillip Powles
Jackie Roby
Gwion Trefgarne
Ursula Williams



Thorn bushes growing on a section of Offa's Dyke at Cutt's Orchard – find out about management progress there on the centre pages

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NATURE WATCH What to spot now



Wheatear



Small tortoiseshell

Back to the Mac for local climate talks

We are very keen to get back to a full programme of events and activities this year, after the serious interruption caused by the pandemic. Two events are planned for March: a walk in the Hudnalls wood led by George Peterken (see back page) and our annual general meeting, which will return to the Mackenzie Hall at 7.30pm on Thursday March 31.

We have two fascinating talks lined up for the AGM, both by local speakers and in their different ways concerned with ways of tackling climate change. Current land management practices have been criticised as responsible for the loss of organic matter in soils, leading to increased desertification and a rise in carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. **Matt Dunwell** will explain how a change to using agro-ecological practices can bring rapid improvement, cooling the planet as we get to grips with lowering carbon dioxide in the long term.

Freyja Sears and **Matt Dunn** will bring us up

Positive accounts on how to tackle global warming

to date on their work designing and establishing a low-impact, off-grid smallholding on the outskirts of Tintern. This is a remarkable example of small-scale, sustainable, land-based living, under the Welsh government's One Planet Development policy, covering food, energy, waste, biodiversity, ecological footprint-tracking and zero-carbon building design. As usual there will be tea, coffee, cake and an opportunity to catch up with friends during the break between talks.

Finally, a reminder that PGP subscriptions for 2022 are now due, still a modest £5 per household per annum. It will be possible to settle up at the AGM, but internet banking is the easiest way of paying: account name Parish Grasslands Project, sort code 40 33 11, account number 21444336.

MIKE TOPP

Cutt's Orchard

Andy and Gill Stott report on progress with management of their fields and woodland on the slopes of Madgetts Hill

Cutt's Orchard is on the lower slopes of Madgetts Hill opposite the main road up Mill Hill. You can get to it on the Offa's Dyke footpath across the footbridge below Mackenzie Hall or along the lane from Brockweir to Madgetts. The woodland in the valley bottom is a mixture of mature oak, birch, alder and ash, with hazel, holly, goat willow and hawthorn and some open areas of bracken, with a dramatic flush of bluebells in the Spring. Above the woods are two grazing fields with an old stone barn.

A historic place

Offa's Dyke cuts down the hill. Dating from around 780AD, it was built by King Offa to create a frontier between his Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia and the Welsh kingdom of Gwent. In the valley bottom the dyke was used by the monks of Tintern to make a small mill dam, recorded in the 13th century.

After the Dissolution of the monasteries the Brockweir Grange lands passed to the Earl of Somerset, later the Duke of Beaufort, and became part of his huge estate across Gloucestershire and



Cattle grazing in open woodland

South Wales. "Rough Piece" barn probably dates from this time. The name Cutt's Orchard may be linked to James Cutt, a mariner who lived in Brockweir in the early 18th century. It may be a tease, based on the small number of crab apple trees that survive in the woods today! The land remained part of Brockweir or Townsend Farm up to the late 1960s. We'd be interested in any more history, photos or recollections that anyone can provide.

Management objectives

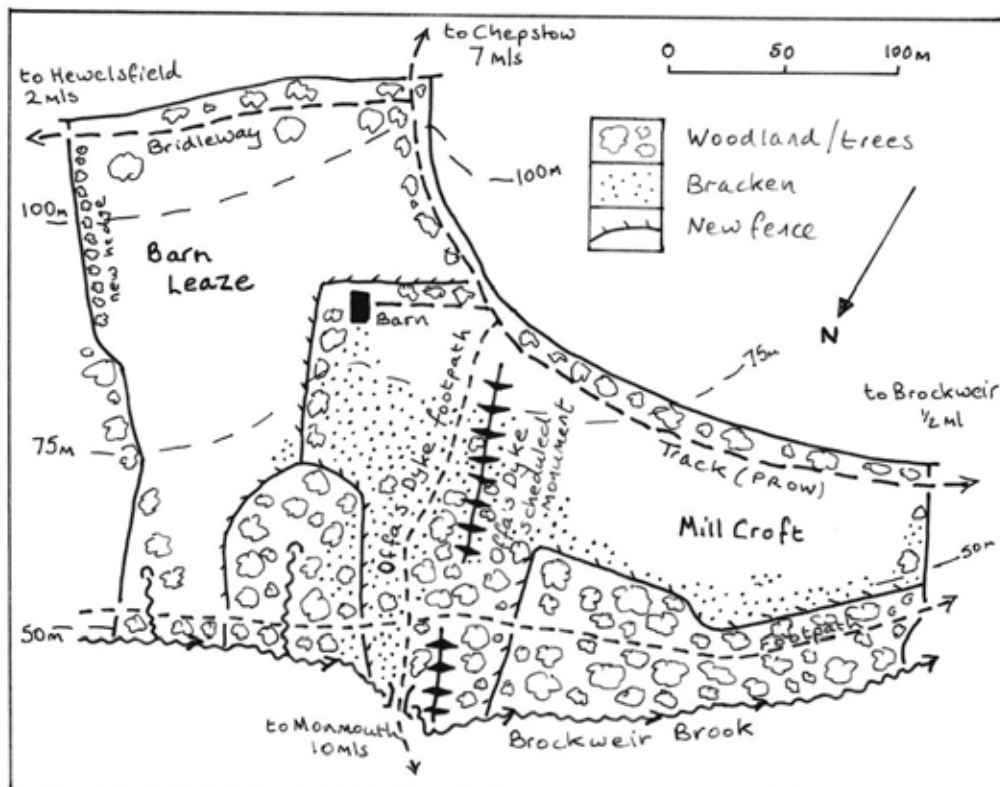
Initially we had the idea to plant trees to restore the former extent of woodland. However we found fragments of species-rich acid grassland with heathland plants like tormentil and heath bedstraw surviving here when they had been lost from elsewhere in the parish. In addition, Historic England objected to tree planting on the Offa's Dyke scheduled monument. It seemed a lot of tree planting would not really be suited to the site.

We realised that without continued grazing or regular cutting, the bracken and brambles would continue to spread, taking over the fields and gradually eliminating the remaining fragments of species-rich grassland. We are fortunate to have an arrangement with Peter and Liz our neighbours who graze their small herd

of Ruby Red Devon cattle on the land a couple of times a year. But we found that as well as keeping the fields in good shape, they particularly like trampling in the wetter parts of the woods, nibbling off any new tree growth within reach and rubbing against tree supports. The site isn't really big enough to experiment with re-wilding so we needed other ways to get the right balance between grazing, woodland regeneration and the special interests of the site.

Countryside Stewardship

We were not at all familiar with the complex workings of Countryside Stewardship — the various schemes and options, layers of prescriptions, conditions, maps and application deadlines. But we have learnt a lot after three attempts. Our third application focused on the restoration of species-rich grassland, planting a hedge and





Birch trees in evening sunlight

maintaining the stone barn. It also provided the opportunity to fence two parts of the woodland to prevent grazing.

Under the agreement we aim to create a more open area of wood pasture around Offa's Dyke, controlling the spread and density of bracken and scrub, restoring some species-rich grassland, protecting and improving visibility for the dyke. We have been

scattering some green hay from Mike Topp's flower-rich fields and from the Gwent Wildlife Trust farm at Pentwyn. We had our first crop of hay rattle last summer. We have been cutting some of the bracken and hand pulling Himalayan balsam to stop the spread of this invasive non-native species up the valley. We are leaving the oak, hazel and hawthorn seedlings that appear in the fields to take their chances with the grazing cattle, deer and rabbits.

In a gap in the Covid lockdown, we were very grateful to a gang of local AONB volunteers who helped us plant a 70m length of thorn and hazel hedge on one of the field boundaries. It was their first outing for many months and the 400 whips were enthusiastically planted in a couple of hours. The young hedge trees have done very well in their first year.

We have planted some other trees, mostly grown from seed, to extend the woodland within the fenced areas, whilst avoiding Offa's Dyke. As ash die-back progresses we expect a more open canopy in the woods and opportunities for regeneration. Where possible we intend to leave diseased ash standing but we have felled a few badly affected trees directly overhanging the popular footpath through the woods. The standing ash deadwood and more open canopy should help to improve the habitat diversity, nesting sites and bat roosts within the woodland. We hope though that some ash will survive.

The footpaths through the woods and track across the fields are very popular with locals and visitors – walking, biking and horse riding. This is a great place to enjoy this beautiful and peaceful spot and we are grateful for the considerate dog walkers who keep their dogs under control and collect their dogs' poos.

Thanks

We have very much appreciated advice and sharing of knowledge through the Parish Grasslands Project, with our local experts George Peterken and Gemma Bode, as well as advisers from the Forestry Commission, Natural England, Historic England, Wye Valley AONB and the Offa's Dyke South Study Group. We were really pleased to learn about the grasshoppers and crickets from Steve, Edward and Saskia — see back page.

What's new in Phil's toolshed?

The latest item from Phil Powles' toolshed to be highlighted in this continuing series is the Bison sappie forestry tool.

Phil says: "It's a little gem in my opinion, good for lifting logs, pulling, turning, moving and dragging. It fits nicely on your tool belt and it's light and manoeuvrable."

Here is the manufacturer's description: "An incredibly practical tool for lifting, pulling, stacking and trimming short timber. The Bison Hookaroon features a tempered tip of the sappie hook that has a special shape making it especially stable. The tip hooks into the wood firmly but can be easily removed again thanks to a facet cut. The long slim handle enables a powerful swing with minimal bending and secures safely into the timber. The handle is made of solid and resilient hickory wood with excellent vibration absorption, ergonomically shaped for user comfort and finished with natural varnish. The tip is ground sharply."

Phil uses a 380mm-600g model supplied by Norfolk-based outdoorprofessionalproducts.com for £59.99 including vat.

