

Parish Grasslands Project

Issue 1

October 2001

Owners of 72 fields responded to the questionnaire—see page 4 for the summary.

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Chairman’s Message

At last! The daylight hours are decreasing, the temperature is (in theory) dropping, and our 6 months’ battle with the grass problem is almost over for another 6 months.

During this summer George Peterken has awoken many of us to the idea that grass growth with its attendant weed species is something to relish rather than agonise over, that one man’s weed is another man’s wildflower, and that if we collectively muster our energies to manage pasture according to our needs, we may all of us benefit from our ability to do it that little bit more effectively.

Our Field Walk (reported in this Newsletter) gave participants a chance to look at pasture under a wide range of regimes from deliberate total neglect to the manicured half acre, and to consider ways and means to improve performance. I suspect that, in broad terms, ways and means are twofold; self help for those who have machinery, livestock and, importantly, time, while for those who lack some or all of these it means the services of a versatile contractor who can do what is required at the time when it is needed, and not some weeks later. To make it worth a contractor’s while to regard us as a significant source of employment we need members with acres, and I would ask you to talk to neighbours with fields

and to encourage them to participate with us, whether formally or casually. They’re all out there and their needs are often the same as ours. We shouldn’t lose sight of the fact that this project stems from George’s awareness of the botanical riches to be found within our boundaries, and that for those of us who want to pursue this aspect there may be a grant scheme which could help fund work deemed necessary.

Finally, I would like to thank George for his Wake Up call, Peter Chard for mustering and organising meetings and questionnaires and a lot of tricky work with spreadsheets which has helped us a lot, and Mike Davis for nobly undertaking to manage our finances and to collect our £5 subscriptions.

Speaking of which.....

John Josephi

The Committee

Chairman:
John Josephi
Tel: 01594 530598
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Tel: 01594 530513
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Michael Davis
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Committee Members:
John Childs
George Peterken
Jane Morgan
Carol Wilson

Next Meeting

The Parish Grasslands Association will meet on Tuesday November 27th in the Mackenzie Hall at 7-30pm. This meeting will take the form of a brains trust and we hope that the “experts” will be able to

respond to the questions raised both from the questionnaire exercise and from the floor.

Grazing with Donkeys

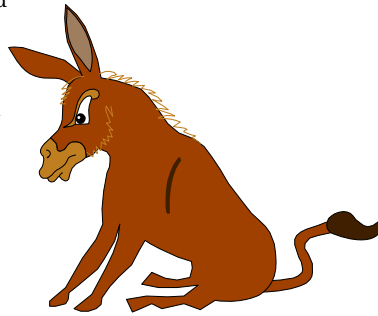
Nearly thirty years ago we decided to get two donkeys to help to manage our three 'fields'. One of the original donkeys and her daughter are still with us.

At that time the 'Top Field' showed a handful of cowslips in the spring and later a lot of common spotted orchids along with other flowers. Bracken was spreading in from all four sides. 'The Ruffet', as the name implies, has rock outcrops and at that time was covered with gorse, bramble and some bracken. The 'Front Field' was reasonably clear and had been quite well grazed. This is also unimproved grassland.

In this article I will set out how each field has been managed and what the problems have been.

The Top Field has been shut off about Easter-time each year and the wild flowers have been allowed to seed. Grazing starts again each year in September, and continues through the winter until quite bare by the following Easter. Over the years the cowslips have spread considerably, although rabbits tend to eat some of the flowers, the common spotted orchids have declined but the common twayblade has increased. There are several patches of adder's tongue fern and last year one plant of the rare moonwort appeared, but my marker was displaced and I was unable to find it this year.

Bracken has been, and is, a continuing problem. For several years I 'bashed' it with an old Forest tramline dragged behind the little Ferguson tractor I then had. (The Ferguson has gone but I still have the tramline if anyone wants it!) This was moderately successful. I then started cutting some of it with a brush-cutter and sliding it on a plastic sheet to make piles at the bottom of the slope. This is quite hard work. My latest strategy, which I think may be successful, is to use a second-hand contractors' mowing machine set high. It has rotary cutters (about 26" diameter) and is quite powerful being 7HP. I have used it twice this year on two sample plots and the results look good, so I hope this will prove to be the best method



yet. In the patches I have cut the bracken and coarser grasses seem to have gone but the other herbs seem to be left.

The donkeys gradually eliminated the gorse and the bramble from The Ruffet enabling the bracken to establish itself more strongly. This is cut to a greater or lesser extent each year depending on how energetic we feel. There is a good range of wild flowers including bluebell and wood anemone in the spring.

Donkeys eat most things and love wood cut from The Hudnalls. They eat the twigs and strip the bark of all species of tree or shrub except sycamore and elderberry. (Laurel is poisonous.) They also eat nettles when they are going over which can mean that nettle seed is spread in their droppings.

The Front Field doesn't seem to change much. Being grazed constantly (except when the donkeys have an occasional holiday next door) it doesn't have quite the display of flowers we have in the Top Field.

Donkeys are quite straightforward animals to keep. They need a farrier regularly to trim their hooves which grow steadily, unless worn down on a stony surface. We buy in 20 bales of hay each year for winter-feed to supplement what they get from foraging. They have a shelter which is used more often in summer to avoid the flies than in winter when they often have frost on their backs!

If anyone would like to visit or have further information I can be contacted on 01594-530475.

Roger Gaunt, Coldharbour.

Comparing Experience of Grassland Management

Notes on field visits on 22 September 2001, compiled by George Peterken

A group of 11 'commoners' spent a bright, warm afternoon looking at management issues in fields attached to five different properties, and then repaired to the Josephi's for tea and doughnuts. The points that came up in discussion illustrate the range of problems and solutions found on the commons.

Stop 1: Beechwood House (George and Susan Peterken)

This is a group of small fields alongside Birch Hill Lane. Bill and Gerald Creswick use the grass as hay and silage, then put on cattle or sheep later in the summer, and again occasionally in March. The fields are shut up for hay from late March to June/July. The Creswicks also trim the tops of the roadside hedges, but otherwise the owner manages the margins.

- * Trees overhanging from the adjacent wood have to be cut back continually. Some limes and oak branches stretched up to 8m over the field, reducing grass, obstructing tractors, and encouraging bramble invasion.
- * An old post and rail fence, originally for horses, will shortly need to be replaced.
- * The other hedges had spread to 4-5 times their original width, especially in years when the fields were not grazed in summer. Bramble can run 10m a year into overgrown grass. The hedge had been cut back and bramble rooted out with a pick axe.
- * A black poplar sapling had been planted on a wet patch, but had to be protected from browsing.

- * Yellow rattle is increasing patchily, mainly after years when hay was cut late.
- * New ash pollards had been started from hedge shoots. With a power line running along the boundary, they could not be allowed to grow into trees.
- * We saw the contrast between fields grazed by cows after hay cutting, and those that had no aftermath grazing.
- * A hedge full of Cherry plums was seen. Now somewhat overgrown, the problem is how to cut it back and still have some plums.

General: The present arrangements work well, and they have generated flower-rich fields. There is a need to manage hedges and renew fences to ensure that late summer grazing can continue.

Stop 2. Oakwood Cottage (Pam and Michael Davis)

Pam and I moved here 2 years ago. There are four tiny fields totalling just 2.5 acres, enclosed by tall hedges, stone walls and beautiful mature oak and beech trees, the branches of which reach out into the fields and touch the ground. Dozens of oak saplings have regenerated under one tree, and I have transplanted some of them to fill gaps along the hedgerows. The grassland is indicative of a semi-natural sward including crested dogstail, sweet vernal grass, black knapweed and bird's foot trefoil. The fields have been cut for hay for many years by the local farmer, but there has been no aftermath grazing by livestock, and consequently the sward is thick and dense with fewer wild flowers than we would like. Ox-eye daisy grows in our drive but cannot get a hold in the fields. We would like to diversify the grass and encourage more wild flowers and herbs because they are such a special and beautiful feature of this area; and we think that probably the best way to achieve this is to graze the fields after the hay has been made. The problem with this is that the field boundaries are not stock proof and we are not keen to keep our own animals. We also have a problem with bramble and bracken spreading with great vigour into the grassland from the field boundaries. Many hours have been spent cutting this back with a "slasher" [long handled billhook] and strimmer with metal blade. The result was that a few more bluebells and wood anemones appeared in spring; however the prospects of continuing to control such rampant growth by such means is daunting!

Managing these fields is something of a balancing act between competing desires! We wish to keep things looking natural, however we want to encourage wild flowers and prevent the fields reverting to scrub and woodland – therefore, we need help with fencing, hedge laying and grazing animals.

Stop 3. Morgan's Cottage (John and Belinda Josephi)

This stop demonstrated pasture management on a self-help basis, made possible by the presence of two horses, two sheep, a tractor-mounted swipe (topper) and by the owner's willingness to use herbicides at field edges, and to cut back overgrown hedges and spray out regrowth. The condition of the sward was also improved by the owner's willingness to shift piles of horse dung to the margins regularly. One small, wet field, which is hardly grazed at all, is topped in June and September. This regime has sustained a rich variety of wildflowers.

Another field contains a small orchard, which is starting to lose some of its older trees. We discussed the local and national initiatives, which may provide funds for restoration of

old orchards, using traditional local varieties of apple, pear and plum.

Stop 4. Rose Cottage (David and Julia Garnett)

This gave us an example of intensive control (gardenisation?) of a whole field. The field extends to 1 acre, lies next to the house, and along the side a public footpath runs. At one end it merges with the garden. The field has been planted with a scatter of trees, including some fruit trees, and the grass has been kept down with the ubiquitous ride-on mower. Deer have browsed the trees: the only foolproof protection found has been individual caging.

- * Mowing without grazing has generated a very vigorous sward, but has evidently reduced the diversity of flowers in the grassland.
- * Irregular scatter of planted trees and bushes is inconvenient for mowing. Planting in rows might make cutting easier.
- * The garden would need to be fenced off if the field is to be grazed.

General: The field is a fine amenity, but mowing is a burden, and without mowing the field would rapidly fill with scrub and rank weeds. Mowing for hay or some pasturage would be better if the field could be properly fenced and the trees protected.

Stop 5. The Cherries (Brian and Tricia Lawrence)

This showed us the opposite of the Garnetts' pasture management. The paddock a single field that has been used intermittently by a neighbour, but not for the last 2 years.

- * During the first year of neglect it made a good showing of wildflowers, but
- * After 2 years the pasture has become a thick growth of rank grass, docks, thistles and rosebay, but it could still be recovered to good pasture or meadow.
- * Sallows have started to invade.

General: This illustrates a fact of grassland life: use it or lose it. If existing satisfactory arrangements come to an end, one has no more than 2 years to find alternatives. If fields are not used for longer than this, species diversity will be much reduced and restoration will be a harder and more expensive operation.

John Josephi's conclusions:

- 1 Positive management has to be exercised, whether it be wildflowers, forage, or simply tidiness you have in mind.
- 2 The ideal of cutting for hay followed by grazing will probably give the best results in terms of weed control and species diversity, but, in the absence of livestock, topping once or twice at the right times can produce a similar result.
- 3 Encroachment by bracken and bramble from a hedge and wall can only be kept at bay, never eradicated. Methods range from the Peterken pick axe to a jungle buster. The choice is yours – if you have a jungle buster!

Help at Hand

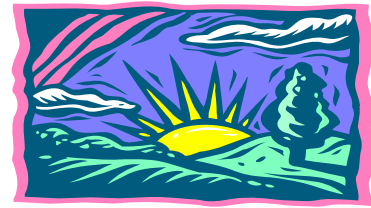
Nick Davies writes: Having been brought up, and involved in the farming community, on Hewelsfield Common, I know only too well how much a battle it is to keep land clear from the nuisance of Bracken and Bramble, which just loves to take over any grassland that you might have, but may not have the time to tend. An alternative to using chemicals and sprays, is having the field "topped", which will weaken the growth of any Bracken, and encourage the grass to re-establish itself.

Topping is like cutting a lawn with a rotary mower, but this mower is attached to the back of a small tractor. It will mow off most unwanted "guests" that you might have growing in your pastures, and with grass that has grown just too long, it makes a neat job of cutting that as well. With this type of pasture tidying, the mown grass and weeds are left on top of the field.

Hedges are cut with a flail hedge cutter mounted on the back of a tractor. This will cut branches up to 2 or 3 inches in thickness, and can shape a hedge fairly tidily. Anything bigger than this, growing in the hedge, can be cut using a chain saw.

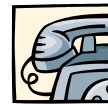
All jobs are looked at first, and a rough estimate given.

Nick Davies



**Pasture Topping
Hedge Trimming**

Other jobs undertaken



**Eves. 01594 530233
Mobile. 07752 321954**

All Enquiries Welcome

Gathering Data

This has been a very useful exercise for the association and will give us much food for thought. Here is an attempt to summarise the findings so far.

- ◆ 22 members have responded. They own 72 fields comprising an area of 135 acres.
- ◆ The majority of the fields are rough pasture with some affected by varying amounts of bracken and bramble.
- ◆ 17 members have satisfactory working arrangements at present, nobody has a formal scheme such as stewardship.
- ◆ Hay making, top cutting, grazing and fencing are the major requirements.
- ◆ 14 members would like advice on management and 7 members are seeking direct help.
- ◆ Everyone would like to receive a newsletter.
- ◆ 9 members support the idea of the association acquiring equipment, and 10 would welcome the availability of a flying flock for grazing.
- ◆ Application for grant aid for the association is requested by 12 members.
- ◆ The provision of a contract is supported by 11 members, but further information would be needed. There is a majority for 5 year contracts.
- ◆ The committee will try and deal with some of the individual needs raised.

My thanks go to all those who completed and returned the questionnaire. The committee has found the information very useful, but it would be better still with more people completing the questionnaire.

It would be a great help if members can persuade a friend/neighbour to complete a questionnaire and return it to Peter Chard, Bryn House, Brockweir Road, Hewelsfield.

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.