

Parish Grasslands Project

Issue 10

April 2005

WANTED: articles for our next newsletter. Would you like to contribute? We'd love to include interesting articles written by members rather than relying on our hard-working committee! For more information or to seek advice, please get in touch with Jim Swanson (01594 516540).

The Committee

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Sally Secrett

Trees on the Common

We met on Thursday 10th February for a mini-symposium on trees and their management. At first sight, this may seem beyond the scope of a grasslands project, but the boundaries of the small fields on the common are full of trees, and fully-grown, wide-spreading trees can shade almost the whole of some of the smaller fields. Field owners not only need to manage trees to keep the fields in good condition, but they are, like any resident, just as interested in trees as components of the landscape.

George Peterken briefly introduced the native trees that grow locally and the history of trees on the Common. The principal trees are beech, small-leaved lime, ash and both native species of oak, mixed with the introduced sycamore, and the smaller trees, such as field maple, alder, birch, and cherry and the larger shrubs, such as hazel, holly, hawthorn and yew. The Common was originally open woodland and heathy glades, but after the Common was settled in about 1800, the woods were confined to the slopes and stream-sides. Many trees were retained in hedges and walls, and to these have been added many self-sown trees along field boundaries. During the 20th century, some fields have reverted naturally to woodland, or have been planted with trees. The greatest menace to trees on the Common is the grey squirrel, which strips bark from beech, sycamore,

maple, sallows and oak, and can deform both mature trees and saplings.

Gwion Trefgarne works as an arborist and tree surgeon. He pointed out that tree surgery involved damage to trees, so the



aim was the minimum necessary work. The greatest problems arise on property boundaries, where neighbours may have different opinions on what should be done, or public safety is an issue. He stressed that branches should be cut a small distance from the trunk: if they are cut flush, then the wound is likely to let in rot. He admitted that he was not the person to recommend do-it-yourself tree surgery, though he had great respect for people who try with care. Employing a tree surgeon is fraught with pitfalls. It is important to be sure that he is fully qualified, works in

Dates for your diary

Saturday 21st May, 2.30pm Visit to Yewgreen Farm where Keith Orchard has established a new cider orchard. Due to parking and access limitations there will probably be a ferry service from the Mackenzie Hall.

Sunday 5th June Open Day. A new venture in which selected fields on the Hudnalls and over the Wye around Trellech and Penallt will be open to any visitors, rather like a garden opening.

Saturday 23rd July (provisional) BBQ at Cowshill Farm. By kind permission of John Childs, this will repeat the enjoyable gatherings of the last two years.

accordance with British Standard 3998 and has sufficient insurance, and for this one should expect to pay £180 per man-day. For further advice, Gwion can be contacted on 01594 530096.

John Josephi spoke about the timber values in trees. His oak wood by the Hudnalls loop road was the source of the central post in the new village shop, which amply demonstrates that local trees can have enduring value as timber. He spoke generally about mainly hardwood timber, pointing out that oak, which has many uses, was generally valuable, but that the value currently placed on other trees is little better than firewood prices. Even so, ash, which makes excellent firewood, has supplied him with axe handles, and lime, which makes poor firewood, is good for carving. Cherry and sycamore can also be very valuable if they are large, sound and accessible. There is a demand for interesting grain, so burs on oak, wavy grain in sycamore, and the complex grain around the rootstocks are in demand, i.e., don't cut through the base of the trunk of such trees, and it may be worth excavating the roots. Larch and red cedar are the most useful conifers. If anyone needs advice on timber values, or managing new trees to grow for timber, John can be contacted at 01594 530598.

Two members of the Monmouthshire Meadows Group also spoke briefly. Adrian Woods from the Nurtons has employed small, mobile saw-benches in his woods, and has found that the value of the timber that can be cut in a day greatly exceeds the costs of cutting. He has used some of his own wood for domestic renovations. He has also tried his hand at charcoal burning, and showed slides of a sample burn using a modern kiln. Finally, Bill Howard, who has used small wood from hedges and branch-wood to fashion wooden chairs, bowls and other objects, demonstrated some of his products and work in progress, and some of the tools he uses. This by no means exhausted the expertise available locally. For example, several people mentioned in discussion the fine joinery that Andrew Pyke has

completed for many local people. There was no formal summing-up, but perhaps the important take-home points were:

- Trees are just as important as the grassland in the fields in forming the local environment.
- The need for advice and assistance to be available to residents is probably just as great as it is for managing the fields themselves.
- On and near the Common, we have several experienced individuals who can be approached for advice. Advice is available, not only on the ecology and history of local trees, but on the highly practical aspects of tree surgery, safety work, using felled trees as timber, and growing good quality trees for our successors.

If there is an ideal, it is to grow fine trees, enjoy them while they stand, then use some of them locally, so that residents are encouraged to grow more.

George Peterken

Did you know that you can borrow library books from the Brockweir & Hewelsfield Village Shop? Titles that might be of interest to PGP members include:

- ◇ Managing the Historic Rural Landscape – edited by Jane Grenville
- ◇ Improved Grassland Management – John Frame
- ◇ Grasslands – Malcolm Penny
- ◇ Making Wildflower Meadows – Pam Lewis
- ◇ Orchards – (author unknown)

To borrow a book you need to be a member of Gloucestershire Library Service. If you're not already a member you can join in the shop – just ask for an application form. Alternatively, you can join from the comfort of your own home by visiting www.gloucestershire.gov.uk and clicking on "Libraries". This site also enables you to browse the Gloucestershire library catalogue and reserve a book (or video, or DVD) to be delivered to the shop for collection.

Fungi of the Hudnalls Grasslands

The Dean Fungus Group visited several fields on the Hudnalls during November under the leadership of Dr. Jack Marriott, and readers may be interested to know what they found. They visited fields owned by the Chards, the Gaunts, the Peterkens and Liz Rush, a good spread that was meant to be representative of local grassland as a whole.

Jack and his colleagues noted that the pastures and meadows of the Hudnalls have received little attention from mycologists, probably because they are all in private hands and difficult to access. However, they expected to



find a rich diversity of those fungi that prefer low levels of plant nutrients, such as the waxcaps (*Hygrocybe* species). In 1986, in a field near Highbury Wood that is similar to those on the Hudnalls, the group found *Camarophyllopsis*

hymenocephala, a species seen only six times anywhere in Britain, so their hopes were high.

The group visited two sites in the morning, and two in the afternoon, separated by a hearty repast in The George (a feature of fungus

foreys since mid-Victorian times!). In addition to several common fungi, they found six species of waxcap (*H.chlorophana*, *H.coccinea*, *H.conica*, *H.pratensis*, *H.punicea* and *H.virginea*) and an uncommon species that had never before been seen in the Dean area, *Marasmius scorodonus*. The final list was not as long as it would have been if they had been able to visit earlier, before the fungi had spent themselves out in heavy rain, but there was enough to suggest that an earlier visit would be well rewarded.

George Peterken

Using our Machinery

We learned a great deal during our first year of operation with the new machinery, and I am sure that we still have a lot to learn this year. The good news is that our charges are unchanged at £18 per hour, and that the times taken in using the flail, mower and turner are very rapid due to the speed and manoeuvrability of the tractor which reduces the costs. However (there always is a but!) we found that the process of baling requires two tractors on the field and two operatives to collect, wrap and cart the bales. Rather than charge double for this operation we intend to charge £25 per hour for the **baling process only**. Cutting and turning will be at the lower price. We will try this out for the 2005 season and judge on results. We would remind you that we do not seek to make a profit, but we do intend to accumulate a capital fund to service, maintain and replace equipment as well as cover our insurance and storage of equipment. The time taken for baling, wrapping and carting can be significantly reduced with the help of volunteers, which reduces the cost to you, so if you can offer help, please let us know.

Last summer the equipment was delivered late and with the appalling August weather we struggled to get the work done. This year we have more equipment and hopefully the weather will be kinder and we will have more time available. We did find fields that could not be cut using the mower and where the flail was used to remove coarse tufty grass. We are prepared to check the suitability of the grass before we bring the hay making equipment onto your land. This advice is free of charge.

We found last year that some fields had very coarse grass mixed with bracken and bramble that was unsuitable for hay. In some of the fields that were very shaded we struggled to dry the hay and in some cases wrapped the bales and produced really good haylage.



We would like to offer 4 options to you.

1. Advice on whether the grass is suitable for hay.
2. Flail the edges of the field to get rid of the bracken and bramble.
3. Where the field is shaded make haylage by wrapping the bales
4. If you want hay, to bale the centre of the field after it has dried

It is vital that you let us know well in advance so that we can group you together with neighbours and allow us to flail, cut, turn, bale and wrap small fields more efficiently in time and cost. We cannot guarantee dates and times since we are dependant on weather, so please be patient. Can you please let us know if you intend to retain the hay for your own use or whether you wish us to dispose of the bales?

For anyone wanting to reseed a field using green hay it is

vital that you let us know well in advance since the green hay must reach you within 24 hours of being cut. We can deliver the green hay, but you must arrange to do the spreading over your field.

We are currently negotiating with the Heritage Lottery Fund to buy some further items of equipment to enable us to offer more services. A set of chain harrows will enable us to break up clods of earth on fields that have rough patches in preparation for haymaking. We also intend to buy a second small tractor which can carry out work with a side rake and bale wrapper, but will not duplicate the alpine tractor we bought last year. We will also be buying a trailer to enable us to transport the hay.

If you want to clear your fields of bracken, bramble and scrub, the flail is your best option. It is highly effective and chops up the vegetation into small pieces. It is best to do this in early spring before the growth is too rampant. If you have dense bracken wait until it has grown to 2 feet in height and then use the flail but this will also cut the grass and any flowers at the same time. If you have a light infestation of bracken, you have the option of using the bracken bruiser which does not cut the grass and flowers. Our bracken bruiser has yet to be tried out. It operates by crushing the stems of young green bracken 18 inches to 2 feet high. This results in the production of toxins by the bracken which are absorbed by the underground stems and kills off the bracken, as opposed to the flail which cuts down the bracken but does not affect the underground stems. That is the principle, but what about the practice? I intend to use the bracken bruiser on half of my field, and the flail on the other half and see which is most effective. I suspect that I won't know the answer for 12 months. If you want to use the bracken bruiser on your fields please put a request on the hire form.

We also intend to buy a post basher. This will enable us to put fencing posts in your fields to enable you to graze them as part of your management programme. It is a simple operation to either put strands of barbed wire on the posts for cattle or stock fencing for sheep. This is the next step that we hope to implement to help us manage our fields. I would like to obtain an estimate of how many of us would make use of this service if we make it available. This does not commit you to have fencing work carried out this year, but will give us a measure of likely demand. If the demand is sufficient we will be able to offer you fence posts at trade price.

A machinery hire form is enclosed with this newsletter. Please complete it and send it to me if you intend to make use of the machinery. An early return will mean that we can get the work done more rapidly and enables us to group you with your neighbours to reduce the cost

Peter Chard
Admin Manager

Rare Breeds—White Park Cattle

These impressive animals can claim to be the oldest of British breeds, believed to have been introduced by the 'Beaker' people some 2,000 years before the Roman Invasion of 55 BC. According to Gordon Beningfield (author and rare breed artist) "it's not difficult to imagine the mystical significance that could have been attached to a magnificent pure white bull sacrificed for religious rituals, by either the Normans or the Druids". My own encounters with the breed are much less dramatic. First seen at the Cotswold Farm Park and then at a special 'Rare Breed' auction at Melton Mowbray, where an in calf heifer was offered for sale but was not sold to a bid of 2,050 guineas. The most striking thing about these cattle is their deportment. They appear almost regal; the way they stand and hold their head, surveying their surroundings, is similar to a stag on high ground. The calves, born all white, develop black – or occasionally red or brown - tips on their ears and muzzle,



eyelids, feet and teats. During the 13th century, two herds of these cattle were contained – one at the Chillingham Estate and the other at Vaynol Park. These cattle now have no human contact and are feral.

There are just a few hundred of these animals surviving today, mostly at farm parks. The meat, however, is well marbled and sought after in specialist outlets. After all it was King James I who was so impressed with White Park meat he knighted it 'Sirloin'! Winston Churchill considered them enough of a national treasure to ship a small number to King Ranch in Texas, fearing the breed may be wiped out in the event of German Invasion!

So is this the breed for the parish Grasslands Grazing Project? Could we add so much support to an endangered rare breed?

John Childs

The Gloucestershire Orchard and Bat Groups

The Gloucestershire Orchard Group (G.O.G.) aims to conserve, promote and celebrate Gloucestershire varieties of apple, pear/perry pear, plum, damson and nut. It was launched in 2001 with the assistance of Gloucestershire County Council in response to the decline in old orchards and loss of much of our heritage and habitat. Members include the public, farmers, councils, gardeners, schools and businesses. The website shows photographs of many of the old apple varieties and can be viewed at <http://orchard-group.org.uk/glos> Subscriptions are £10 for individuals/per household and £20 for corporate members per annum. Members receive the following:

- ◇ GOG newsletter (twice/annum)
- ◇ Restoring Gloucestershire Orchards booklet
- ◇ Training (pruning/orchard renovation, grafting, budding, fruit identification etc)
- ◇ Propagation material (budwood and graftwood from County Mother Apple Orchard, based at Uckington, near Cheltenham, donated by farmer and fruit researcher Charles Martell)
- ◇ Advice, information and opportunity to network with others
- ◇ Apple and Plum days etc

Corporate members have the opportunity to publicise their organization on the website and in leaflet form at training/apple days etc. The AGM is held in January, with an orchard-related talk and a chance for members to share ideas/ask questions. GOG is also a member of the National Orchard Forum (NOF), which brings together the many orchard groups throughout the UK <http://www.nat-orchard-forum.org.uk> To obtain a GOG membership form, contact the secretary, Ann Smith, on email smithcovell@btinternet.com tel. 01452 855677 or 109 Orchard Way, Churchdown, Gloucester GL3 2AP, or see GOG website under "how to join" to print off a form.

The Gloucester Bat Group are looking for help with numerous surveys, (notably one in the Forest), educational work and always welcome new members; they produce a newsletter and have an interesting and varied programme of indoor and outdoor events. Membership: £5 annually. Chairman: Maurice Febry (01242) 242160. Membership secretary: Jean Allen (01242) 572729



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.