



Friends of Leckhampton Hill & Charlton Kings Common

# NEWSLETTER

[www.leckhamptonhill.org.uk](http://www.leckhamptonhill.org.uk)

Issue 12 Free to members, non members 25p

Summer 2003

## Editorial

Firstly we must apologise for the lateness of publication, due to the pressure of work and exams.

Cattle grazing finally commenced on 1<sup>st</sup> May, starting with a plot at the east end of the Common near Shackleton. Some modification to intended enclosures had to take place as a result of the fire which engulfed the east side and end of the Common. The fire was a frightening experience as the fire came very close and only thanks to the valiant efforts of the fire brigade was it prevented from setting a hay barn alight. Hopefully, with successful grazing of the Common, such an event will not occur again.

In erecting the paddocks (approx. 2 acre plots), every effort is made to inconvenience people as little as possible. But due to the terrain, it is sometimes necessary to temporarily cross undefined tracks.

Many members, who regularly use the Hill and Common, will have noticed that the cattle were not in their enclosure for a week. This was because they were moved to the home paddock, so that they could be tested for TB. Thankfully everything was fine, particularly so as three of the Dexters are in calf, and are due to start calving in about four weeks time.

We would like to thank everyone for their co-operation in making this part of the conservation project possible. Interest has been expressed in the welfare of the livestock, and it is appreciated that people are controlling their dogs.



*Hope springs eternal, amidst the devastation of the fire.*

### Dates For Your Diary

#### Sun 3<sup>rd</sup> August

**Limestone Geology - the rocks beneath the grass.** A guided walk starting in Daisybank Road car park (adjacent to Tramway Cottage). Meet 09.45 for a prompt 10.00 start.

#### Mon 20<sup>th</sup> October

FOLK AGM, 7.00pm Leckhampton School Hall.

### Your Executive Committee Members are:-

CHAIRMAN - Julius Marstrand (01242 518846)  
E-mail [julius@marstrand.co.uk](mailto:julius@marstrand.co.uk)

SECRETARY - Jack Shepherd (01242 515902)  
E-mail [jack.shepherd@btinternet.com](mailto:jack.shepherd@btinternet.com)

TREASURER - Anne North (01242 522767)  
E-mail [anorth@leckhampton.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:anorth@leckhampton.fsnet.co.uk)

Pam Brookes	Tony Clifford
Vic Ellis	Judy Frazer-Holland
Shelagh Hallaway	Tony Meredith
John North	Allan Wood
Co-opted Sue Barrett	

#### **Contents:**

Front Page- Editor Page 2- Grassland Management Page 3- Work Party & Moth Trapping Page 4- Spring Bird Observations  
Page 5- Roman Snails

## Grassland management: the burning issue

The burning of vegetation as a management tool is generally associated with upland moorland sites, where regular burning ensures a succession of young heather for grouse and sheep and keeps scrub growth in check.

However, some of the lowland calcareous grasslands of the Cotswolds also have a history of burning. So why is this not a management technique used more widely today, particularly with the decline of livestock farming?

The action of burning produces a nutrient input of ash which favours the growth of vigorous grass species. It is this flush of green vegetation in the

spring that suits the livestock, if they are present. If they are not present, then the encouragement of grass growth out-competes the more sensitive wildflowers and the degradation from species-rich sward to rank grassland is accelerated. Indeed, for grass seems ideally suited to burning as it stores the vast majority of its energy below ground during winter thus enabling it to put on vigorous growth in the spring. Hence, burning needs to be backed up with grazing.

Additionally, burning can be detrimental to insects, particularly those species that overwinter in the grassland. In the past, local losses of such insects could usually be replenished from other surrounding areas that were not burnt. However, with unimproved grassland sites now occupying only a fraction of the sites they used to and many insect species populations becoming severely depleted, burning could result in scarcer insects being lost altogether. Hence burning should not be used on sites with important insect populations.

The tradition of burning Cotswold grassland sites tended to be carried out by experienced farmers or land managers that knew their site and how to effectively burn it without causing undue damage. The timing and method of burning is critical to avoid scorching the ground and burning unplanned areas of vegetation. For many of our grassland sites, it is debatable as to whether this knowledge of sites and how to burn them is still there. Even if it is, then there is a risk of "copy-cat burns" on sites that have public access. The fire brigade take a very cautious line on the burning of grassland sites and must respond to fires if they are called out, even if the fire is planned. Hence, burning should only be carried out by experienced land managers and is not recommended on sites with public access.



*Shows how fire jumped footpath into dense vegetation on Charlton Kings Common*



*Scarred, but not for life*

To conclude, burning is not the answer to the long-term management needs of most of our Cotswold grassland sites. In a few cases there may be benefits to burning, particularly on difficult isolated sites where it has been proven to work. There are many issues, both ecological and others, that make burning problematical. We should not lose sight of the main method for traditionally managing Cotswold Grassland sites, that's grazing.

**Paul Hackman**  
**English Nature (Gloucestershire Office)**

Reproduced with kind permission from Grassland News

## Work Party Report Spring 2003

Late March usually means the end of any further clearance work to avoid disturbing the reawakening wildlife. We intended to turn our attention to footpath work and other, perhaps, more leisurely tasks. However, due to the fire that swept across Charlton Kings Common in the early hours of Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> April our plans have had to be changed.

As a result our work parties during May have concentrated on clearing the remains of some of the burnt scrub. We have been very fortunate to have three Cotswold Warden work parties to assist with this. Their work along the escarpment above Charlton Kings Common was a very significant contribution and was much appreciated.

We hope to obtain funding for some of the work to be carried out by contractors but a great deal of the clearance will have to be done by FOLK. We appeal to any of our members who can spare a few hours to join our work parties in the coming weeks to help remove the scars left by the fire.

### Midweek Work Parties

Thursday 10 July 2003  
Thursday 14 August 2003  
Thursday 11 September 2003

### Weekend Work Parties

Sunday 27 July 2003  
Sunday 24 August 2003  
Sunday 28 September 2003

All work parties meet in Tramway Cottage car park, Daisybank Road at 9.30am.

Allan Wood

## Moth Trapping

Last summer was a particularly poor mothing season, with most sessions spoilt by heavy rain or clearing skies. I only managed to light-trap at Daisy Bank on two occasions, and both were far from ideal: National Moth Night was a wash-out, and July 24<sup>th</sup> was clear and cooled rapidly by 11pm.

The moth species list, however, was respectable for a north facing calcareous grassy escarpment. One species, is worth a special mention - *Paratalanta hyalinalis* (B&F 1374) which was common when I visited in July, but has rarely been recorded in Gloucestershire post 1980.

*P. hyalinalis* feeds on Common Knapweed, which should therefore be protected as far as possible to encourage this moth. Little is known of its micro-habitat requirements, but in the Spring the larvae feed on the young leaves at the base of the plant before pupating in June.

Jonathan Brock

## Spring Bird Observations

There was great interest amongst local birdwatchers after 16 April when we found a most unusual CHIFFCHAFF in the hedgerow between Daisybank Field and the next field towards Charlton Kings. It looked like an ordinary Chiffchaff but its song was quite different. Starting off with a single "Chiff- Chaff" it would then accelerate its song with a greater variety of notes. It continued to appear and sing its early song into early May and kindly performed in front of the FOLK Bird Walk on 4<sup>th</sup> May. A recording has been made and passed to County Records in the hope of identifying it in due course. The Walk itself was a great success with 37 species of birds identified. A full list is on the Website.

The awful fire on the Hill in the early hours of 24<sup>th</sup> April have a bad effect on ground-nesting birds, particularly the red-listed Grasshopper Warblers and Tree-Pipits. Not only will it have destroyed nesting habitat but it will have dramatically reduced insect life and the production of seeds. One effect has been to drive two Grasshopper Warblers westwards along the Northern Scarp. Whilst this will improve the chance of a continuing food supply it will probably expose them to greater disturbance.

### *Sights of the past*



Photos courtesy of Tony Clifford. They show cubs and brownies on the lime kilns and another of cubs climbing the incline. Both were taken in 1971 and graphically show the changes that have occurred since that time.

Indeed one of them has since been heard in an area below Daisybank Road.

At least two, possibly three, Tree Pipits are still around. One has been continuing to call and display from a half-burnt tree on the Eastern Scarp, emphasising the importance of retaining any tree and scrub which still has some surviving foliage. The other two Tree-Pipits are on the Northern Scarp.

Daisybank Field has been host to a number of interesting sightings. A Cuckoo was present in the field on 23<sup>rd</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> April. Evidence of successful breeding by different species is provided by the sight of a family of twelve Long-tailed Tits on 30<sup>th</sup> May; and on 2<sup>nd</sup> June an adult Linnet feeding three young on top of a bramble bush and a group of young Blackcaps being fed in a mature tree near the new gate. In addition a family of Whitethroats have been seen regularly in the Field.

If you wish to see this variety of birds in Daisybank Field it is best to visit the area in the early morning when bird song is at its best and activity is greatest.

Tony Meredith.

## Roman Snails killed by Fire on Hill



Roman Snail Shells

One of the many damaging effects of the recent fire on Charlton Kings Common has been the death of many invertebrates which live among the grass and shrubs. Roman Snails were hit badly. *Helix pomatia*, to give its scientific name, is nationally a rare species of mollusc which is, however, locally abundant in several sites in the Cotswolds. This particular snail makes good use of the calcium salts in the limestone to build a large, tough, calcareous shell. The shell is up to 50 mm in diameter and you will have no problem in identifying it as all other British snail shells are smaller, more delicate and contain less lime.

Several writers have suggested that the Roman Snail was introduced by the Romans. Others say that there is evidence of its presence in Britain in pre-Roman times. It might well be that this snail featured in the diet of people before and during the Roman occupation as they still do today. In fact when I lived in Bristol 40 years ago I remember children collected snails for the 'snail man' who prepared them as a local delicacy. Their collection may have included the much more common garden snail (*Helix aspersa*) which, I am informed, is

not so good to eat. I remember in the seventies there was a local businessman in Cheltenham who bred Roman Snails and sold them to local restaurants to appear as 'Escargot' on their menus.

Roman snails are herbivorous and devour large quantities of vegetation during the summer months. They are most active during warm, humid evenings and nights which helps them to minimise water loss. They build up food reserves in their body throughout the summer to sustain them during their hibernation. They can also aestivate; that is to say, remain dormant during extended dry periods in the summer. In both cases they seek a sheltered spot and retreat into their shells. They then form a membrane over the opening to their shell which conserves water but still allows them to respire slowly.

Roman snails are hermaphrodite and mate in early summer. Each partner lays about 50 eggs in a specially prepared hole in the ground. This hole keeps the eggs moist and somewhat protected against predators. After about four weeks the young snails emerge and immediately eat the egg shells thereby giving them their first intake of lime to build up their own shell. A week or so after hatching they leave the hole and climb vegetation to start feeding. They are vulnerable to predation at this stage and perhaps up to 90% will not survive long enough to reproduce.

We may be lucky and find that the recent fire killed some of those snails that had already mated and their eggs were safe in their holes in the ground. It is more likely that many of the snails that perished had not yet mated. However snails from neighbouring areas not touched by the fire will move in slowly to exploit the food made available by the re-growth of vegetation. Fire is indiscriminate and damage has been done. Roman snails and many other animals have been killed. They will come back; but it may take some time.

Jack Shepherd May 2003

The views expressed in this newsletter do not necessarily reflect the views of the Executive Committee of F.O.L.K. News, views and general comments are always welcomed and should be addressed to:-  
The Hon. Secretary, Mr Jack Shepherd, Rainbow Cottage, Leckhampton Hill, Cheltenham, GL53 9QJ.