



West Berkshire
Countryside Society

UPSTREAM

ISSUE 83
SPRING
2018



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Boxford Water Meadows

Water meadows are man-made, and form an important part of our agricultural heritage. There are two types. 'Catchwork' meadows date from the medieval period and were used on slopes to irrigate the hillsides. The more sophisticated 'Bedwork' system was used from the 1700s until the mid-20th century. It uses a series of dams, sluices and water channels that can divert water from a river to admit a shallow layer of water to selected parts of a meadow.

The Boxford site is a 'bedwork' water meadow. A map from 1899 showed the extent of the water meadows, stretching along the Lambourn from Weston through Boxford to Woodspeen. At Boxford, the drains, sluices and some of the water channels can still be seen.

Water meadows were an important part of 'corn and sheep' agriculture in this region – flooding the fields in a controlled way in early spring fertilised and warmed the soil, allowing an earlier and better hay crop. It also produced improved spring pastures enabling larger sheep flocks to be kept. Although very labour-intensive, it is estimated that water meadows commonly doubled the value of meadow land and were widely used in the chalk areas of Hampshire, Dorset, Wiltshire and West Berkshire. However, most water

meadows were destroyed between 1918 and 1960. With the introduction of artificial fertilisers, mechanisation and cheaper imported grain and lamb, they became uneconomical to maintain. In the 1950s and 1960s, the government even offered grants to level old water meadows to increase food production!

Boxford water meadows are rich in biodiversity – 17 species of grass, 7 species of sedge and 76 species of grassland herb have been recorded. In addition, the meadows support breeding snipe, barn owls, freshwater crayfish *Astacus pallipes* and brook lamprey. The insect fauna is diverse, with species rare in Berkshire such as the beetles *Cantharis pallida* and *Subcoccinella 24-punctata* and the bug *Neophilaeus campestris*.

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West Berkshire Countryside Society

Caring for our Countryside – Join Us and Help Make a Difference.

West Berkshire Countryside Society

The aim of the West Berkshire Countryside Society is to promote the understanding, appreciation and conservation of the West Berkshire countryside... furthering these objectives through practical conservation work and guided walks and talks from local experts. It was formed in 2012 by amalgamating the Friends of the Pang, Kennet & Lambourn Valleys; the Bucklebury Heathland Conservation Group; the Pang Valley Conservation Volunteers & the Barn Owl Group.

Upstream is our quarterly publication designed to highlight conservation matters in West Berkshire and beyond and to publicise the activities of the Society.

Chair:	Ed Cooper
Vice Chair, Webmaster & Enquiries:	Tony McDonald
Membership Secretary:	Jathan Rayner (membership@westberkscountryside.org.uk) NEW!
Upstream Editor:	John Salmon (upstreameditor2017@btinternet.com) NEW!
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Hon President:	Dick Greenaway MBE RD

Initial contact for all above and for the Barn Owl Group, Bucklebury Heathland Conservation Group and West Berks Conservation Volunteers should, unless otherwise stated, be made via enquiries@westberkscountryside.org.uk

Volunteers' Task Diary

For outdoor events please wear suitable footwear and clothing. Most practical tasks start at 10am and usually finish around 3pm, unless otherwise stated, so bring a packed lunch. However, we are more than happy to accept any time you can spare! All tools are provided. A map of each task location can be found on the website diary page by clicking on the grid reference shown for that task.

Date/ Time	Venue	Details
April 2018		
Tue 03 Apr 10:00	Winterbourne Woods. SU447 717	Hazel stool protection and other woodland management tasks. Park in the entrance to the wood.
Tue 10 Apr 10:00	Cleeve Water Meadow, Garden Cottage, Streatley. SU593 812	Ongoing maintenance of this important Thames side water meadow. Park in the recreation ground car park at the top of Cleeve Court Road.
Tue 17 Apr 10:00	TBA	
Tue 24 Apr 10:00	Furze Hill, Hermitage. SU511 739	Woodland and butterfly habitat management on this parish wildlife site. Parking at new village hall – through double gates off Pinewood Crescent.
May 2018		
Tue 01 May 10:00	TBA	
Tue 08 May 10:00	Cleeve Water Meadow, Garden Cottage, Streatley. SU593 812	Ongoing maintenance of this important Thames side water meadow. Park in the recreation ground car park at the top of Cleeve Court Road.
Tue 15 May 10:00	Hosehill Lake, Sheffield Bottom. SU649 699	Footpath maintenance with BBOWT. Parking – Fox and Hounds car park.
Tue 22 May 10:00	Rushall Manor Farm, off Back Lane, Bradfield. SU584 723	Woodland management, coppicing and ride widening. Meet at the Black Barn off Back Lane between Stanford Dingley and Bradfield.
Tue 29 May 10:00	Elm Farm. Organic Research Centre, Kintbury. SU414 654	Ongoing maintenance at the Organic Research Centre. Parking on opposite side of the road from the main building in track leading to barns.
June 2018		
Tue 05 Jun 10:00	Leyfield Meadow, Ashampstead Common. SU576 751	Meadow management and bracken bashing. Meet at The Cottage, Ashampstead Common.
Tue 12 Jun 10:00	Grimsbury Castle, Hermitage. SU511 723	Clearing invasive rhododendron from this ancient hill fort. Parking near the Estate house at the castle – by the interpretation board.
Tue 19 Jun 10:00	Grimsbury Castle, Hermitage. SU511 723	Clearing invasive rhododendron from this ancient hill fort. Parking near the Estate house at the castle – by the interpretation board.
Tue 26 Jun 10:00	Kings Copse Bradfield Southend. SU579 707	Bracken bashing on this SSSI. Park opposite the bungalow just before King's Copse House. Accessed via Jennets Hill.



Conservation Volunteers Round Up

Winter's darkest months were not at all bad weather-wise for the weekly tasks carried out by West Berkshire Countryside Society's volunteers. Even in mid-December when we braved temperatures of minus 4°C at the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology water meadow at **Boxford**, the frozen ground spared us the usual muddy trek to the site. We cleared willow, including a very large fallen one and thinned overhead growth along part of a public footpath to allow in more sunlight. On another visit to the meadows' southern end, we continued thinning and removing damaged trees, thus increasing light for underlying flora.

Having chainsaw-trained volunteers to cut up larger logs considerably increased the effectiveness of this operation, as it did at **Sulham Farm**, where we coppiced trees to increase light into and around the nearby brook. Biodiversity will increase, and along with it so should the water vole. The brash was burnt and thicker pieces were made into log piles.

The exact nature of **Hampstead Norreys Motte** is much debated and before we started work on it, Dick Greenaway, our Honorary President and acknowledged landscape authority, made a convincing case for it being a burial mound rather than a site of a small castle. It is a protected ancient monument and we needed a licence from Historic England to clear undergrowth and scrub to

make its shape more evident and to encourage wild flowers.

The first of two days on **Leckhampstead Common** was spent opening up the clearing at its northern end and cutting back vegetation along the bridleway. Two fires enabled the burning of all the cut material and a large amount remaining from our August visit. Our second day was shortly after storms had brought down trees and branches, including two large specimens that had fallen over a fence into a paddock. The landowner had asked the parish to remove these, which we happily did, along with unstable trees and vegetation on the common.

Five visits to **Bucklebury Common**, including three at weekends, saw us cutting down hundreds of small silver birch trees and removing dozens of gorse bushes. Progress is slow, mainly due to having to tackle regrowth, but over the years our activities have led to a significant difference across both upper and lower commons to make them more hospitable to other species.

Native trees planted at **Kents Down Farm, Midgham**, to provide wild-life habitat are now well established but are being challenged for space, light and nutrients by self-seeded saplings – which we cleared to encourage growth in the original trees.

Owned by Bucklebury Parish Council, **Hockett Field** is used for recreation and we cut and shaped hedging on its boundary. We also cleared self-

seeded blackthorn, silver birch and bramble from underneath several oaks – a process known as haloing – which encourages their growth.

At **Furze Hill, Hermitage**, 23 volunteers formed into four teams to maintain footpaths, including one that is being created along the old railway line.

We continued to remove invasive sycamore trees from the wood at **Holt Lodge Farm, Kintbury**, to thin out the canopy and allow more light onto the woodland floor. If not controlled, sycamores can dominate a wood and produce winged seeds that readily root and grow.

At the Organic Research Centre at **Hamstead Marshal**, we finished laying a long hedge started four years ago. The last section was so sparse that we doubted that a decent laid hedge would be possible. However, we laid tall growth lower than normal to fill the gaps, leaving a hedge that should thicken in the near future.

Terry Crawford



Footpath at Boxford

© Tony McDonald

Continued from page 1.

The ownership of the Boxford Water Meadows is split between a local resident and the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (CEH). CEH use the site to conduct long term research and monitoring of the relationship between geology, hydrology and river ecology. Additionally, they are responsible for the ongoing condition of their area, with the overall aim to enhance the biodiversity. They have identified two key objectives – to improve the habitat for Desmoulin's whorl snail (*Vertigo moulinsiana*) and in the areas where the whorl snail is unlikely to thrive, to restore the swamp and tall fen habitats.

Desmoulin's whorl snail is an endangered species and must be protected. Unfortunately, they have very specific habitat requirements, requiring wet conditions all year long with water close to the surface but without

prolonged flooding. In 1995, a large population of these snails were found at Boxford, although a recent survey (in line with other observations in the region) failed to find any.

WBCS volunteers regularly help both landowners with the restoration of the grasslands, by removing trees and cutting the meadow vegetation, stopping the site reverting to scrub. A recent survey by Natural England noted that the meadow was in good condition with a wide range of habitats available. Summer grazing is a more sustainable way of managing the vegetation – part of the site already has grazing cattle and following the volunteers work, this will be extended into the land owned by CEH shortly.

We are fortunate that a portion of these meadows still exist in Boxford – it is



© Mark Hayes-Newington

estimated that there are less than 800 hectares of this type of landscape left in the UK. With the meadows being designated as a "Site of Special Scientific Interest" and the River Lambourn being one of the best chalk streams with good water quality, it makes the Boxford Water Meadows a site of considerable importance in West Berkshire.

Janet Fuller (With thanks to CEH and Heather Luff for their assistance)

Animals wandering free...

Whilst on a walk earlier this year my wife and I came across 6 sheep wandering outside the electric fence cordoning off their prescribed grazing area. They were in danger of wandering into the roadway. I telephoned an animal welfare number I had been given years earlier and the matter was dealt with most expediently. The farmer was located, and he returned the sheep to safety. I then received a call confirming that all was well. I was impressed by this and recounted my experience to a group of volunteers on a Tuesday task. Their response encouraged me to look further into the whole subject of what to do in

the event of experiencing animals in need of help.

The number I had called was actually a department of Trading Standards who subsequently were most helpful with my research.

In relation to loose farm animals there are two points of contact that people should be aware of – Thames Valley Police and Trading Standards. *If the animals are loose on the highway then Thames Valley Police should be contacted. This is because there will be safety issues regarding road users and the loose animal.*

The law regarding animal welfare requires all farm animals to be

Public Protection Partnership | Bracknell Forest
West Berkshire
Wokingham

housed safely and securely by the animal keeper. If the animal is insecure this can raise potential issues regarding its welfare. Trading Standards look to contact the animal keeper to advise them of the issue with the aim of getting the animal back into its enclosure and secure asap. My story demonstrates how the service can ensure animal welfare by its involvement. *If members of the public are aware of any welfare issues relating to farmed animals, they should contact Trading Standards immediately.*

In relation to non-farmed animals i.e. domestic animals and horses, Trading Standards will normally direct people to contact the RSPCA or National Equine Welfare Council, but they can give advice to members of the public about their rights where the issue relates to fly grazing.

Lost and stray dogs should be reported to council Animal Warden Service.

Tony McDonald with help from Claire Lockwood, Lead Officer – Community Engagement Trading Standards.

Useful contacts:

Police **101** or **999** (in case of emergencies)

Animal Warden Service (dogs) **01635 519171** (out of hours **0844 499 6063**)

RSPCA 24-hour cruelty line on **0300 1234 999**

National Equine Welfare Council (NEWC) **01962 848350**

Highways Agency **0300 1235 000**

Public Protection Partnership Trading Standards **01635 519930** – this is a shared service provided by Bracknell Forest Council, West Berkshire Council and Wokingham Borough Council

Conservation Grazing

When I arrived at Moor Copse nature reserve at Tidmarsh on a bright frosty January morning the first signs of spring were in the air – the flourish of great tit song suggested the season to come. I was making the daily check on the condition of our short legged Dexter cattle and how much vegetation was available for them. The Dexters were just completing their meadow grazing after the hay cut in the summer. This is 'aftermath grazing': the hay is cut in July, and then the cattle are introduced to graze off the late summer/autumn flush of growth.

Grazing is a hugely important part of how the Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) manages its nature reserves to benefit wildlife. Much of our work is to either halt or reverse succession - the ecological process of habitat change over time. Whether cutting a hay meadow or removing scrub from chalk grassland or heathland, having sheep, cattle or ponies on those sites adds another dimension to the way the reserves are managed.

The animals pick and choose which vegetation to eat, leaving a varied structure to the grasses and herbs,



Dexter Cattle at Moor Copse

© Adrian Wallington

with some areas taller than others, as well as bare ground and hoof prints where seeds can germinate. All these micro-features create habitats and opportunities for a wider diversity of wildlife. Less dominant wildflowers or grasses are encouraged to flourish; and they in turn provide a rich nectar source for butterflies and bees, and a food source for caterpillars and other invertebrates.

Livestock graze 14 of BBOWT's nature reserves in Berkshire to keep the sites in good condition and fulfil any obligations we have through environmental stewardship schemes. At a further three sites graziers use their own cattle to graze for us under agreement. Different animals graze in different ways, so selecting the right stock for the site is important.

Cattle use their tongues to wrap around the grass and tear it, which creates the varied structure in the sward. We have short legged Dexter cattle, the smallest British breed. They have small hooves and don't poach the ground as deeply as other cattle. The Dexter is a hardy breed, and compared to dairy cattle, they feed on tough vegetation like rushes or tussocky grass.

This is important on Seven Barrows nature reserve where coarse Tor Grass is persistent and threatens to overwhelm the downland habitats of chalkhill blue and brown argus butterflies. Cattle

grazing, combined with mechanical cutting in the spring, reduces the vigour of Tor Grass tussocks. The Dexters I checked at Moor Copse are grazing at Seven Barrows this spring.

New Forest and Exmoor ponies eat scrub, including birch and gorse, as well as grasses, which makes them perfect for Snelsmore Common. The New Forest and Exmoor breeds are well suited to heathlands; they even grow thicker whiskers to protect their lips when eating gorse!

Sheep nibble the grass very short and are light-footed so trampling the grass is minimised, which is ideal for chalk grassland sites like Watts Bank. We have Beulah Speckled Face sheep, a native breed well suited to life out on our reserves all year around.

I'm pleased to report that my stock check at Moor Copse found all 14 Dexters in fine condition and the meadows looking good too. Thanks to the 'living lawnmowers' Moor Copse meadows will be filled with a rich variety of wild flowers this summer.

If you're interested in livestock, why not become a volunteer stock-watcher and help wildlife. Visit BBOWT's volunteer page at www.bbowt.org.uk to find out more.

**Roger Stace, Land Manager
(Conservation) Berkshire for BBOWT**



*Beulah Speckled Face
Sheep at Watts Bank*

© Adrian Wallington



Holly Blue

© Richard Carter www.ukbutterflies.co.uk

Holly Trees – not just for Christmas!

Holly trees were not held in great esteem in medieval times if our ancient copse is anything to go by. Holly was cut out in favour of commercial species such as oak, ash, field maple and of course hazel. However, there were localised craftsmen where holly was abundant in Lancashire, the New Forest, Ashdown Forest and the Sussex border where the dense even-grained white timber carved well and was made into butter prints, engravers blocks and inlaid work. Only now is holly slowly recolonising our wood and we no longer cut it out because although it may have little commercial value, it is of the greatest value to wildlife. We are fortunate to have a well established tree outside our kitchen windows, so we can watch the wildlife coming and goings.

The first excitement is in April or May when the adult holly blue appears

flying around the bush searching for suitable sites to lay her eggs, which are laid singly at the base of a flower bud. Although spindle and dogwood are also used, holly is by far the commonest species. Unlike many other butterflies, holly blues settle quietly on the holly leaves although the wings tend to remain nearly closed. These eggs produce the butterflies which will be on the wing in July and August and which then lay their eggs on ivy. It is these eggs from the autumn brood which produce the holly blues which we see in the spring. No-one knows why the spring brood favours holly and the autumn favours ivy, but flower bud size and shape must have something to do with it.

Blackbirds and song thrushes use our holly tree as a nest site and then it all goes quiet until the berries begin to ripen in October. Just when we are

thinking that there is no hurry to pick our branches for Christmas, parties of fieldfares and redwings arrive from Scandinavia. The fieldfares are very obvious, feeding in full view. Not so the redwings. All you can see is the twitch of a branch and a beak grabbing a berry, with the bird remaining hidden inside the bush, which is just as well if the sparrow hawk is about. Some years a mistle thrush will adopt the bush as his or her private larder and defend it against all comers. By early December the berries have gone and the only activity is the foraging expeditions of the short tailed field vole.

Charles Flower



Redwing © Nick Bowles

Data protection – The Society's Strategy

The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is a new EU law which will replace the UK Data Protection Act 1998 on 25th May 2018. The GDPR sets out how organisations including our Society will handle personal data from 25th May.

Although we do not gather large quantities of data we are still required to manage it within the new rules and we have been working toward defining our strategy which is described here.

Firstly, the recommendation is that a Data Protection Officer is nominated as a member of our committee. We have decided that as we only hold small quantities of data, all members of the committee will take joint responsibility for ensuring we act in accordance with the law. We will monitor this position and change it if required.

We also needed to audit the amount and nature of the various data bases held by the Society. There is an overriding principle that any data

which we hold on individuals is held with the full consent of those individuals. So, for example, all the volunteers who receive the weekly email on tasks and events have been contacted and asked to confirm that they wish to remain on the distribution list and are happy that we hold details of their names and their email addresses. This applied whether the volunteers are members of the Society or not.

With this issue of Upstream we have written to all members explaining the consent issue and we have detailed the schedule of data which we hold on them which is used primarily to enable us to post Upstream each quarter and to check that annual subscriptions have been paid. In future, new joiners to the Society will be asked, at the time of joining, to agree to us holding the data we gather from them on the application form. It is worth pointing out that the bank details

which applicants provide, to facilitate the setting up of standing orders for membership subscription payments, is not retained by the Society, the details are passed, in full, to the bank.

Similar action will take place on all other data bases. In all instances data base files are encrypted and will be held solely by those members of the committee who require access to that file to perform their function.

From time to time lists of individuals are created for a function, these lists will also be encrypted and will be destroyed as soon as possible after they have served their purpose.

Most importantly, we will regularly monitor the safeguards which are in place and the way in which we use and store information.

If you have any queries on this subject, please do email your question to: enquiries@westberkscountyside.org.uk
Your Committee

The Annual General Meeting of The West Berkshire Countryside Society

Takes place in the Oak Room,
Upper Bucklebury Memorial Hall, RG7 6QH

Wednesday 30th May 2018. 7:00pm for a 7:30pm start

In accordance with the Society's constitution, nominations are invited for the committee posts of Hon Treasurer and Hon Secretary. The current holders of both posts are willing to stand for re-election.

*Please email nominations to WBCS Hon Secretary before 1st May 2018
to: wbcshonsec@btinternet.com*

Dates for your Diary

**Sunday 29th April – 2.00pm:
Bluebells and History**

Join Charles Gilchrist and Dick Greenaway to explore the brilliant spring flowers and archaeology in the woods at Hampstead Norreys. About 1¾ miles with one modest hill. Meet and park at Hampstead Norreys Village Hall on the B4009. SU5264 7624.

**Wednesday 20 June & Wed 4 July:
Nightjars and Glow Worms at dusk**

Tim Culley leads an evening walk (8.30 – 10.00pm) looking at heathland restoration and some of the specialized wildlife associated with this habitat. Meet at Angel's Corner, by the Scout Hut on Bucklebury Common at 8.30pm. Grid ref: SU550 688.



Don't forget our website!
www.westberkscountyside.org.uk

Barn Owls 2017 – What happened to the second broods?

In 2017 the Barn Owl Group recorded 114 barn owl chicks fledging from the 188 nest boxes monitored in West Berkshire. This was our second highest total ever but it fell well short of the 173 chicks from 125 boxes that we recorded in 2014 – our record year. The average brood size in 2017 was 2.85 chicks. This parameter is a clear indication of the condition of the female prior to laying. 2017 was slightly better than in earlier years but was much lower than the 3.84 chicks per brood achieved in 2014.

In that year about one third of the chicks came from second broods, but in 2017, second broods produced none at all – so what went wrong?

Barn owls are usually late breeders laying first broods around the end of April – not leaving much time to attempt a second brood. Perhaps there was insufficient food available? But this does not stack up with the success of the first broods when food must have been available. If short-tailed voles were available for first broods then one might expect more food to be available as the summer progressed. A second theory is that the weather was



Barn Owl Chick at Westridge Green

© John Dellow

not good for hunting at the critical time. So, when is the critical time? It is difficult to find a correlation with Met. Office statistics but this looks to be an area for further investigation. Another theory, that breeding is related to “the vole cycle”, doesn’t seem to be supported. 2017 was forecast to be a peak year for the vole population and the success of first broods indicates that they were available in early summer. So where did they go? It may be that two or more parameters need to be right at the same time for

successful breeding – for example, a peak vole year and dry weather in late July. If you have a theory, please let me know.

In 2017, we installed 23 barn owl boxes at new sites and replaced or repaired several more. It’s a never ending task! We now have about 24 people involved with barn owls in WBCS. This is great but we would welcome more volunteers. If you would like to join us, please contact us: enquiries@westberkscountyside.org.uk
John Dellow

CONSERVATION TOOLS: No 2 – The Billhook

Mention of billhooks takes me straight back to my childhood in Kent and the local museum’s engravings of Wat Tyler’s peasant revolt in the 14th century. Here a gang of unruly looking peasants armed with various farming implements, including billhooks strapped to poles, are marching towards London and history. Billhooks have a relatively thick blade, designed for cutting thick or woody vegetation, with a hooked front to the blade, which prevents the edge from hitting the ground and so blunting or damaging it.

The name billhook has Anglo-Saxon roots but the origins of the billhook itself go back to the Bronze Age and for many centuries the tool was manufactured by the village blacksmith to meet the particular

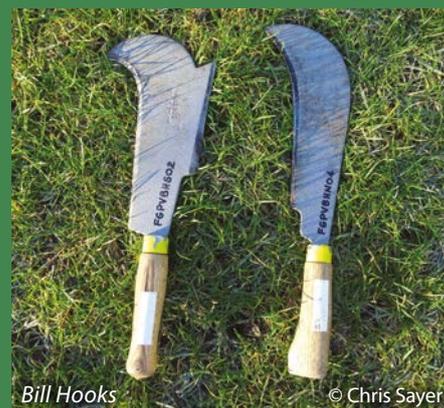
needs of the local community. The result was a plethora of different designs, often specific to a small locale or even a single village. The billhook (also known as a handbill, bill or hacker) was then an essential tool for woodland management.

Today it has fallen slightly out of favour as we now tend to use loppers and bow saws for coppicing and similar tasks. However the billhook has its advocates and it is regularly seen on the Society’s weekly conservation tasks making short work of small branches or in use to sharpen stakes for hedging.

Modern tool manufacture has standardised around a more limited number of variants. The Society uses two designs, the Newton and

the Staffordshire, the latter being double-edged with a dangerous looking rear blade. These are normally made of steel with a moderate carbon content making them easier to sharpen in the field.

Chris Sayer



Bill Hooks

© Chris Sayer