

SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



HELPING TO PROTECT MILL MEADOWS
LOCAL NATURE RESERVE

Issue 44.
January – March 2009

Check the society website for regular updates, information and pictures at <http://www.millmeadows.org.uk/>



Events for your diary

Saturday 24th – 30th January: **photographic display** in the **Billericay Library**. Our display boards will be on view in the Library publicising the presence of the society and hoping to attract interest from prospective new members.

**** Volunteers are requested for the above. If you are interested in attending the display for an hour or two during this week – especially the week-end of 24th/ 25th January - to tell people about Mill Meadows then please get in touch using the chairperson's contact details below.**

Thursday 23rd April: Annual General Meeting (AGM). We are in the process of arranging a speaker on behalf of the Essex Wildlife Trust to talk about Living Landscapes. Exact details of the speaker and venue will be in the next newsletter.

Walks

Sat 9th May: Bird Walk. A walk around Mill Meadows to see and hear the breeding birds. Starts at 6.30 am

Sat 11th July: Wildflower Walk. A guided walk where we identify and learn about the flowers on Mill Meadows. Starts at 10.30 am

*For the above walks, meet at the **Scout Hall**, Greens Farm Lane. Duration is 1-2 hours. Advance booking via Countryside Services is preferred so that we can gauge numbers.*

Work parties

Jan 10th hedge coppicing near Chaffinch Crescent.

Feb 14th : clearing sycamore and creating small clearings in Boggy Piece.

Mar 21st fencing the pond in Wantsfield

Apr 11th tbd

The **Norsey Wood Society** have an open meeting entitled "In celebration of trees" on Monday 26th January in the Day Centre, Chantry Way at 19:45.

Leaflet Distribution by email

Just a reminder that you now have the option of receiving your newsletter by email. If you would like to do so, please advise our Membership Secretary, John Hathaway:

john.hathaway@hathaway.co.uk
subscription by email is entirely voluntary.

Chairperson's Report

If you have received this rather late it is because we were trying to complete arrangements for events in the first half of the year before going to press. Unfortunately we do not have an indoor meeting in the first quarter of the year but the Annual General Meeting in April promises to be good.

We have set the dates for our regular guided walks on the Reserve and have in hand arrangements for

guided visits to Langdon Hills Nature Reserve and one of the local RSPB reserves. Additionally we will host a bat and moth evening during the summer. Dates for these events will be published on the website once we have them, and in the next Newsletter.

2009 will see the start of the work to be carried out to improve the fencing around the SSSI areas. Actually, you may recall that we said this in the last Newsletter!. Work had been delayed, other than marking of the trees where the fence line will go around the southern boundary of the SSSI (see map at the end of this Newsletter). We expect work to start soon and indeed it may have started by the time you receive this.

It's pleasing to report that some of the donations we receive have been used for hedging plants to thicken the restored hedge in Oakfield. We planted these in our last work party of the year and were again assisted by the Air Training Corps. It was a cold and wet day but any discomfort from the conditions was alleviated by Frances bringing us mulled wine and mince pies.

Some other pleasing news is that Ross Holland, our Web Site Administrator, has joined the Management Committee. We're pleased to welcome Ross, who has done a fine job on our Internet presence.

There are still vacancies on the Committee so please let me know if you are interested or perhaps consider putting yourself forward at the AGM.

A New Year always prompts resolutions or objectives. One objective for 2009 is to improve the wildlife in the non-SSSI areas. We intend to get wildlife experts to give advice on how we can improve the conditions to give us more diversity of, for example, butterflies and other insects.

Another objective, one that applies every year, is to grow, or at least sustain, the current membership level. Ideally we'd like to meet achieve 200 households, a number that we have approached in the past but it has always alluded us.

Some new members were recruited following our display at Hanningfield Reservoir Visitor Centre

to see our display boards. What was particularly pleasing was that some of the non-committee members attended the display and promoted Mill Meadows to visitors. My thanks to Margaret Smith, and to Robert and Janet Masters, for their support. Similarly, we are looking for help with the display at the Billericay Library on 24th – 30th January.

Finally, may I wish all members and other readers a happy, healthy and successful 2009. Many of us are going into the New Year with trepidation, given the state of the economy. I hope the Mill Meadows continues to be a refuge on our doorstep where we can all enjoy nature and seek peace from the problems.

Neil Sumner 01277 630849
chair@millmeadows.org.uk

Ranger's report

Habitat management

Since the last newsletter the clearance of the scrub and bramble from the SSSI fields has taken place. I was very pleased with the result and the meadows do seem to look a bit more like meadows now. I've had a few favourable remarks from various people, so hopefully it's been seen as a success. There are still a few isolated clumps, particularly in Cumborrow towards the field gate, but hopefully these can be removed gradually. We will also need to make sure that the bramble doesn't just grow back again. The cows should help, but we may need to go over it again with some sort of machine in subsequent years.

We have also begun to improve the hedgerows in the SSSI recently. Successive work parties have trimmed the hedges in Oakfield in order to thicken it up, and then planted some new hedge plants (purchased by The Society – thank you) to make it wider. Unfortunately some of the other hedgerows are probably too overgrown to allow this approach, and I'm still pondering what's best to do with these. I'd like the long-term result to be well-defined grassland, with good quality hedges between.

We should also be beginning to think about cutting the hedge margins (the longer grass next to

the hedge) on a rotation, but we're a little way off that at the moment. I've also contacted the council parks department about cutting the boundary hedges along the Southend Road and in Greens Farm Lane below the scout hut this winter and I'm hoping this will happen in January or February.

We had a successful walk around the new fence line last month and I think everyone who attended was reassured that the impact wouldn't be too drastic. I've since spoken to the contractor about the clearance involved, and again I'm hopeful this will take place before the spring.

The Fungus Foray held in November was reasonably well attended. Unfortunately, the waxcaps were a bit thin on the ground. This may be due to the timing, or a temporary reduction as a side effect of the scrub management. It's hard to tell, but as the mycelia will still persist in the ground regardless of the lack of fruiting bodies, I'm hoping for a better show next year. The grazing and scrub removal should help in the long term as they create the conditions these fungi thrive on.

I'm in the process of putting together the events for 2009, with aim that something will be happening in the meadows on the second Saturday of each month. This could be a work party or a walk, survey etc. In addition to the items in the Chairman's report we should repeat the popular Fungus Foray. Watch this space (or the notice boards or council website for details).

I'm also hoping the council's education team will be able to involve local youngsters a bit more. These could be formal school visits or less formal events that local children can attend. The team have already visited the site and are very enthusiastic about trying to get something moving. Again, more news later...

All the best for 2009

Many Thanks

Chris Huggins

Countryside Ranger

Norsey Wood Information Centre

01277 624553 chris.huggins@basildon.gov.uk

Dog fouling on Mill Meadows

Since the last Newsletter, Clifford Mullet of the Norsey Wood Society has written to Basildon Council on this issue and kindly included a lobby on behalf of Mill Meadows. As yet we have received no reply. The Ranger has added more signs.



Sightings from near and far

Little to report that is out of the ordinary. At this time of year a cautionary tale is often mentioned concerning hedgehogs. In this instance a friend who lives adjacent to the reserve was clearing out the shed in preparation for winter. During the proceedings a hedgehog was uncovered that had decided to make the shed its' winter residence. Please make sure you check any outbuildings or under leaf piles in case you have additional guests. Locally the hedgehog is in decline and I only had one sighting of a hedgehog the whole year!

Marginal Species Survey

No new records of interest have been received. This was last year's 'project' which didn't solicit as much information as we had hoped, apart from some encouraging news from the adjoining Gatwick House area. We will continue with it but may change the moth species that we are targeting.

Birds in and around the reserve

There are no signs of last winter's 'bird bounty' being repeated. Winter visitors are much lower this year, despite the cold weather. The Goldcrests and Long-Tailed Tits are plentiful. On 3rd January I managed to count into double-figures but they are well spread out. With the latter, 3 flocks totalling around 30 birds in late October seems to be indicative of numbers. A flock of around 40 Goldfinches seem to have moved off the reserve and favoured the local gardens or the area at the south end of Greens Farm Lane. Also on 3rd January, 6 Siskins were in the alders, a Missle Thrush was around the mistletoe in Old Mill Hill and 23 Lapwings passing overhead was an unusual surprise.

Otherwise there were very few finches and none of the wintering thrushes.

The Great Spotted Woodpeckers are now in their best breeding plumage and exhibiting the first signs of establishing territory, taking to drumming occasionally and chasing each other through the upper branches.

A Tawny Owl has been calling on some evenings and the blackbirds and robins scolding at dusk indicate its presence. We erected two Tawny owl nest boxes in Greens to try and encourage them to breed. A pair of kestrels passed very close to one of the boxes in late December which was encouraging as these birds of prey are declining. Kestrels will sometimes use Tawny Owl boxes but they may need a more private area than we have provided.

Off the reserve, a Buzzard was seen over Devils Wood, which is just to the east of Norsey Wood. This is reportedly one of 2 that regularly spend the winter in the area.

Bird Atlas 2007- 2011

You may recall this being described in Issue 41 of the Newsletter. In summary, a bird atlas is a set of maps that show the distribution of each bird species at different times of the year. They are the basis of the distribution maps that we have in our bird books as well as helping ornithologists and conservationists to understand trends and influences in bird population. An update from the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) website gives some remarkable statistics on the coverage after the first year:

62 million birds recorded,
478 species recorded
65.6 thousand timed tetrad visits conducted
a further 1 million records submitted
9,768 bird-watchers have submitted records online.

Mill Meadows crosses three tetrads (2 kilometre squares) and I've signed-up for two of these. The surveys have to be representative of the habitat so cannot be confined to the Meadows. Some

discreet walking through the built-up areas is also needed.

The Timed Tetrad Visits are supplemented with 'Roving Records', which are simply any record of birds at any time during the period. This completes the picture of which species are present in each tetrad. It will be really useful to get some of your garden or other local records included. Once the surveys are completed I'll publish the results and ask the 'birders' amongst you if you can add any species to these.

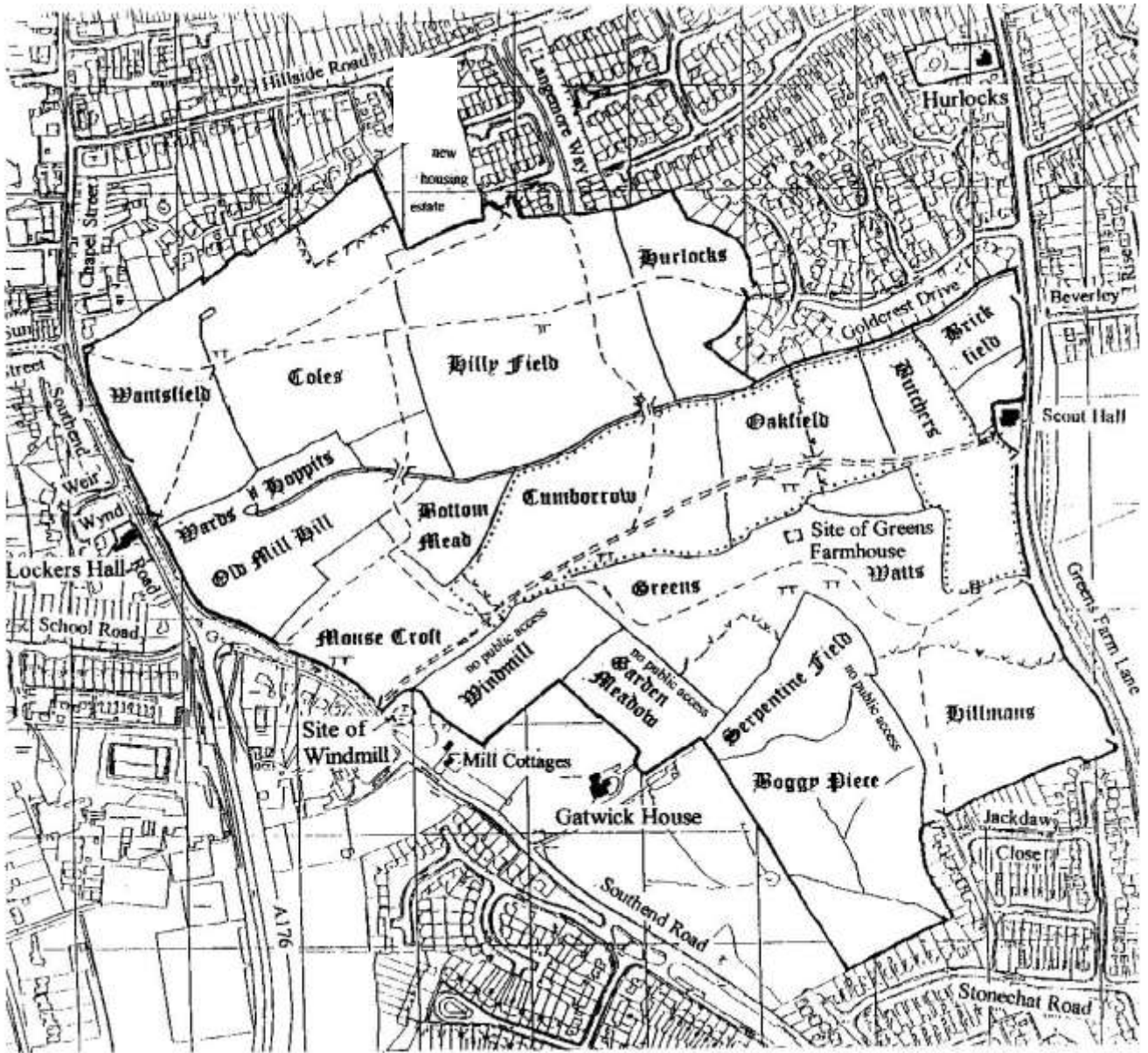
Neil Sumner

December Work Party

I was especially looking forward to this workparty and not just because of the special refreshments that were provided after we had depleted our energy reserves. A lot of the management on the reserve requires removal of encroaching or unwanted species that would eventually dominate the whole reserve. This work is often performed by the members of the workparty but on this occasion we were spending some of the society funds and planting over £100 worth of saplings. They arrived bare rooted and once unwrapped were approx 2 to 3 feet (60 – 90 cm) in height. We quickly cleared the planting areas within the existing hedgerow in Oakfield. Next the spades were used to create a planting trench and the roots were laid in the trench and the trench heeled-in. To allow for possible losses the planting spacing was deliberately closer than you would in a garden environment. During the next growing season the gaps in the hedgerow will fill-in with the new planting and eventually we hope to have a complete hedgerow that will be a vital habitat for the invertebrates and birds. The saplings purchased included the following species and nearly 200 were planted -

Field maple
Dogwood
Hawthorn
Spindle
Blackthorn
Guelder Rose

We've included a copy of the Mill Meadows map, in response to some requests and because we haven't done so for a while. You can obtain a much better map in the Marked Trail leaflet. We are currently in short supply of leaflets but will be refreshing our stock in time for the display in the Billericay Library.



Base Map from the Ordnance Survey, reproduced by kind permission of Basildon District Council

Scale 1 : 5,000

100metres

KEY

- Boundary of Local Nature Reserve
- Boundary of Site of Special Scientific Interest
- /— Gate
- == Statutory footpath
- - - Track
- TT Seat
- v—v— Barbed wire fence
- Stream
- Bridge
- ▢ Steps
- Coles Field names adopted by the Mill Meadows Society



Mill Meadows Local Nature Reserve Billericay