



Events for your Diary



The editor took the above photo in early October. The pink flowers caught my eye while working nearby on the monthly work party. It is probably a garden escapee of hardy cyclamen basking in the autumn sunshine.

Please note the Mill Meadows events commence at the scout hut in Greens Farm Lane @ 10:30 unless stated otherwise

8th October conservation work party Recent work parties have concentrated on repairing and replacing some of the infrastructure in time for the winter season. Can you spare a few hours to help with some pruning, sawing, hammering and other tasks.

24th October: Championing British native woodland. A talk by The Woodland Trust. At the Day Centre at 7.45pm. Talk hosted by The Norsey Wood Society



"Friendly Food"

17th November
Reading Rooms, High Street,
Billericay, 7.45pm

a talk by The Co-operative Society on how they encourage environmentally-friendly and ethical food production

5th November: Fungus Foray:

A slightly later date this year. The very popular annual hunt for waxcaps and other fungi. A local expert will be on hand to help with identification.

10th December conservation work party a chance to get some fresh air and join us for the annual toast of mulled wine and mince pies.

17th Nov: talk (see panel)

19th November conservation work party

14th January 2012 conservation work party

Keep Up to Date 24 hours a day!

Check the society website for regular updates, links to email contacts, information and pictures at

www.millmeadows.org.uk

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Chairman's Report

Now is the time to start feeding the birds to help them survive the winter.



"You ain't seen me!"

There were many signs of dormice when we were checking tubes erected on a nearby private site this year – this youngster posed long enough for B's NE's member, Elliott Hervey, to take a photograph.

I'd like to start by giving thanks to Chris, on behalf of The Society, for the progress that he has made with the Management Plan. Currently this is being reviewed by The Committee. If anyone else would like to see a copy whilst the draft is in progress please let me know asap – contact details are below. The plan shows the 'desired state' of each field, so that we know what we want in each area, giving us a balance of the range of habitats within The Meadows: the grassland in the Site of Special Scientific Interest, the ancient trees, the secondary woodland, the ponds and boggy areas, and, last but not least, the scrub that provides so much food and shelter for the fauna. The Plan will be the repository for the activities and projects that we need to maintain and improve the habitat and provide access to it. This does not mean that we will ignore a new idea if it is not in the plan – it will be considered, along with the prioritised activities that we have already identified. But the Management Plan becomes the key reference document and a key tool for allowing The Society to meet one of its objectives – "Responding to consultations and giving information and advice". Once the Plan is agreed we can look at some of the projects that The Society may be able to fund, as we still have a healthy bank balance. **This is your opportunity.**

The new pond is expected to be dug in Brickfield before the year ends. This will be funded by The Society as we will be employing a contractor to dig a sizeable hole, rather than doing it over 2 or 3 back-breaking work parties. The cost of this will be covered by this year's donations alone, reflecting the generosity of our members for which we are all grateful.

We built a small hibernaculum in Brickfield to give reptiles some shelter for the winter – you may have noticed the large bank of earth next to the scrub on the North side of the field

which we hope will shelter snakes and lizards. Another larger one will follow the new pond.

Another bit of good news is that our membership has risen this year, in spite of us losing a few members. And, since the last Newsletter we have no more significant vandalism, which is also good news (I touch the wooden desk as I type). At the committee meeting we discussed 'vandalism deterrent patrols' in the early spring, when the clocks change, which is when the vandalism seems to occur most – please see Page 3.

A bit of exciting bird news came from someone who contacted me via the web site and reported several woodcock, possibly including young, calling in early and late spring. So breeding, perhaps in one of the less disturbed boggy areas, is a possibility. Early evening vandal deterrent patrols in 2012 could be combined with woodcock-listening too, as these birds are more active at that time of day.

Outside the reserve and in our wider local Living Landscape, we have been constructing and erecting boxes for owls, kestrels, dormice and bats. We put up some dormice tubes in July on a local private farm and were delighted, early this month, when we found that 7 out of 15 of these were occupied. Otherwise, for 'LL42', it has been mainly survey work, as this was the final year for the new Bird Atlas. I'm still trying to organise at least 2 work parties for the winter, so please watch your email boxes and the notice boards for details of these, if you can help.

I wish you a pleasant autumn and hope to see many of you at our indoor meeting on November 17th.

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Ranger's report

Membership Report

As over 50% of our membership now receive the Newsletter by e-mail, it has been decided that membership renewal cards will no longer be issued to these members. Instead an "e-receipt" will be issued as this will further reduce our costs by saving on the printing of cards, an envelope and a stamp. However, if you would prefer to receive a card then please let me know.

There are still a number of members who have yet to renew their membership for the current year and I will be sending reminders direct to them with this newsletter. I sincerely hope that you all will renew as that means that we will continue to be able to maintain the Meadows for us all to enjoy

John Hathaway

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Not a whole lot to report this time. The 'Creatures of the Night' event went very well, with bats in particular being very active, especially in the lower part of Hilly Field, where it adjoins the wet area in Bottom Mead. I think the moisture that collects here encourages insects to breed, providing prey for the bats, so we all got a pretty good show of the bats (Pipistrelles) hunting around the trees. I've yet to receive a moth list from the moth trappers, but when I do, we'll include it in a future newsletter.

I've just organised the repairs to the items that have been vandalised over the last few months. This includes repairs to the kissing gates and the fencing around the ponds near the Scout Hut, but also improving the cattle fencing around the boundary of the SSSI fields. The strands of plain wire have been too vulnerable to vandalism so we're going to replace it with sheep netting (see photo for the sort of thing to expect – barbed wire will be kept to a minimum). This doesn't imply that we'll be replacing the cattle with smaller woolly animals! I'm not planning to get the work done in the near future, as I don't want to risk damage to the fence before next year's grazing season, and the other items will be cheaper to do if the contractor's only have to make one visit. It is in hand though, and I am hoping to get a session of bench replacement done sometime soon.

As, stated in The Chairman's Report, considerable progress has been made with the management plan, and I welcome comments and feedback. This should be in place in time to cover 2012-2016.

Thanks

Chris Huggins

Countryside Ranger

Norsey Wood Information Centre





Anti-vandalism Patrols could you volunteer??

As reported, we had an unprecedented level of vandalism this year. It does seem to be that, once the clocks change in March and the evenings are warmer and lighter, that small groups will start ripping up fences, lighting fires and uprooting or setting fire to benches. This often happens in the hours just before and after dusk when there are less people around to deter them.

We hit upon the idea of regular patrols by people, in groups of 2 or more. The idea is deter them by ensuring that there is a presence on The Meadows. If people are seen committing acts of vandalism, it should be reported to the police, immediately. (Whether or not anyone feels able to reason with them and prevent damage is at their own discretion).

The idea is to set up a rota for a period of several weeks after the Spring Equinox. The patrols could be less persistent after that time – as the evenings get lighter, The Meadows is used more by walkers and vandalism does seem to reduce.

If you would like to volunteer to partake, please contact The Chairman. If we have enough volunteers, then each of us would only need to do this once per week or perhaps less. We appreciate that many may not want to do this for personal safety reasons and we would never ask anyone to put themselves at risk.

I have been visiting on the meadows more regularly having recently acquired a dog that enjoys taking long walks. A few people have asked me why the cows are present. Mill Meadows reserve was formerly farmland, most of which was grazed though some fields were converted temporarily to arable use during WW2. I remember walking my previous dog on some of the fields and can confirm that occasional grazing continued up to 1991 when the council acquired the site. As part of the policy to maintain the unimproved grassland, within the SSSI fields, grazing was reintroduced so that grass and scrub do not dominate the fields and out-compete the wildflowers. Nutrients do not build up as they are removed by the cattle which convert them indirectly into their body mass. This method is also more effective than mowing which leaves behind a thatch on the ground through which plant seeds cannot germinate.

Some of the cattle were of a type I had not previously seen. They have a long body which was larger than the normal Friesian, forward facing horns curving down towards the nose, white or pale stripe along their back and underneath. The sides were a brindle of brown and black. After searching on the internet I am fairly confident that they are English Longhorns. The longhorn is a "rare breed" of beef cattle originating from Craven in the north of England. The Longhorn breed was much improved by Robert Bakewell (1725-1795). His selective breeding made the breed very popular towards the end of the 18th century. It was used as a draught animal and its milk was used for butter and cheese. The creamy white horns were treasured by manufacturers of buttons, cups, cutlery and lamps. Fine slivers of clear horn were a poor mans' glass and many a household were grateful for the end product of these elegant long horns.

The most usual method of cattle keeping in those early times would have been one or more animals belonging to an individual, kept on common grazing, which were served by a bull owned by the Lord of the Manor. It was all a most haphazard and unsatisfactory method. There was no possibility of an organised breeding programme being carried out. The peasant farmers had to put up with what the Lord provided. As a result, cattle were long in the leg, narrow bodied and coarse, ideally designed for the plough.

Robert Bakewell was a revolutionary in the field of interbreeding and became devoted to one aim - improving livestock to provide meat for the masses of people who went to work in towns in the Industrial Revolution. He took horned heifers and crossed them with a Westmoreland bull to create the Dishley Longhorn, now called the English Longhorn. Through this new and careful selection of cattle he improved the size and quality (specifically its quick growth and heavy hind quarters) of this breed which became widely produced throughout England and Ireland until it was surpassed by the Shorthorn in the 1800's.

The breed declined rapidly for nearly 200 years and was becoming rare by the 1950's and 60's. The trend for producing cattle was increasingly cereal fed, housed cattle which pushed selection of cattle with shorter horns or polled to reduce injury. Thankfully it was rescued by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust in 1980. With the efforts of RBST and interest in extensively lean grass fed cattle it has made a dramatic comeback. Longhorns have excellent milking ability and they rear their calves very well. They are excellent mothers and their docile nature makes them an easy breed to manage. Their breeding, longevity and relatively low body weight makes them very economical and inexpensive to feed and they have intramuscular fat or "marbling" within the meat that is largely responsible for succulence, tenderness and flavour – the hallmark of beef with superior eating quality. Whilst their horns may, to some, give an opposite impression Longhorns are noted for their exceptional docility.



Butterflies

"The Mill Meadows Society exists to participate with the Basildon District Council in the management and conservation of Mill Meadows"

As you know, it was another cool summer although punctuated by some bright days, one of which we managed to use for our annual butterfly survey in July, when an unremarkable 40 butterflies were counted.

The following butterfly species have been observed on the meadows this year and are included in the records for the reserve. Did you notice any that are not recorded?

- Common Blue *Polyommatus icarus*
- Green-veined White *Pieris napi*
- Large Skipper *Ochlodes faunus*
- Large White *Pieris brassicae*
- Meadow Brown *Maniola jurtina*
- Orange-tip *Anthocharis cardamines*
- Purple Hairstreak *Neozephyrus quercus*
- Ringlet *Aphantopus hyperantus*
- Small Copper *Lycaena phlaeas*
- Small Tortoiseshell *Aglais urticae*
- Small White *Pieris rapae*
- Speckled Wood *Pararge aegeria*
- Red Admiral *Vanessa atalanta*
- Small Heath *Coenonympha pamphilus*
- Gate keeper *Pyronia tithonus*

Fancy a bit of conservation training?

The Mill Meadows Society may be willing and able to sponsor someone to attend a relevant conservation course, for example, on plant or insect surveying. The Society would need to ensure a return on investment, with local surveys being conducted that make a direct contribution to local conservation work. The details of this would need to be agreed with any applicant. If you are interested, or know someone who may be interested, please contact The Chairman.

Thank you to all the people that help clear the rubbish from the meadows. The reserve is a special place for recreation close to the centre of the town. As such many people use it every day and the recent warm weather has seen an increase in the number of visitors. A regrettable downside to this popularity is the unfortunate amount of rubbish that is left behind or is blown in from the adjacent roads. Fortunately, in addition to any clearance by the council workforce, several society members pick up large amounts of litter especially after "weekend parties" during the summer. I am sure you will join me in wishing many thanks to those people that help to keep the reserve an attractive place for us all to enjoy.



Longhorn cattle – see above





What hope is there for biodiversity?

This summer we saw the publication of DEFRA's paper "The Natural Choice", also known as the Environment White Paper, which set out a strategy for the environment. We have also seen Biodiversity 2020, "a strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services". Currently out for consultation is the NPPF, the National Policy Planning Framework, which also has huge implications for our environment and is currently the subject of some controversy.

For anyone concerned about the future of our wildlife and the environment these were key initiatives. Do these offer us any hope for the future of biodiversity?

All of these papers build on a visionary paper produced last year, **Making Space for Nature** chaired by Professor Sir John Lawton CBE FRS. The paper is centred around the concept of 'Ecological Networks' (much like Living Landscapes) which, simplistically, are a collection of nature reserves and other wildlife sites linked by wildlife corridors and areas of sustainable land use. The paper also stresses that the natural environment provides us with essentials, including food, water, materials, flood defences, and carbon sequestration – known as 'ecosystem services' and that biodiversity underpins these.

The paper makes 24 recommendations. One of these is the recommendation for local councils to build ecological networks into their local development plans.

The Natural Choice has 4 themes: more local action to protect and improve nature, creating a green economy, connecting people with nature and showing international leadership in protecting natural assets. One initiative is that Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs – again, just like Living Landscapes!) will be established throughout the country. Running now is a 'beauty contest' of proposals for these, with some funding as the reward. Essex Biodiversity are entering an NIA for the Blackwater area.

The Government could never be accused of ignoring Professor Lawton's paper. Alongside the Environment White Paper, they published a response to every one of the 24 recommendations. They acknowledge it in **Biodiversity 2020** and they have also produced a strategy for ecosystem services for the future, recognising their value and the challenges in securing these in the face of growing populations and climate change.

Biodiversity 2020, concluded that England's collection of wildlife areas does not currently represent a coherent and resilient ecological network" and that "establishing such a network would effectively conserve biodiversity and ecosystem services". The Biodiversity Strategy states that we "require a shift in emphasis, away from piecemeal conservation actions and towards a more effective, more integrated landscape-scale approach".

All the right noises, but it is it only noise?

Enter the **National Policy Planning Framework (NPPF)** stated as the vehicle to "protect and enhance the natural environment."

Such has been the alarm in general to the NPPF that the government has felt compelled to respond with 'myth-busters'. The RSPB, for one, states that the NPPF, in its current form, will not reverse the biodiversity loss, which is a stated aim of HM Government and is urging its members to email their concerns during the consultation phase. There are many petitions.

But why complain about the NPPF? We are told, in 'myth-busters', that it is not an end to the Green Belt, or SSSIs, or Nature Reserves, and that the 'presumption of sustainable development' has always been there.

The following are my personal interpretations of all this:

If I were to describe the NPPF in two bullet points it is this:

1) it seeks to balance the concerns of social need, the economy and the environment 2) it empowers the local councils to do this.

Looking at Green Belt in particular, the NPPF states that its boundaries are already there and not intended to be changed. But it then goes on to give guidance and constraints about how councils can change them. That's one reason why so many organisations are worried.

To put it from a local perspective, Basildon and Chelmsford Borough Councils will need to have plans which simultaneously meet housing needs, boost the economy and identify ecological networks, and these plans are used to assess development applications. What I don't know is: how much of these plans are in place today? How long they will take to complete? And what happens in the meantime – is it a free-for-all for developers?

The good news about the local empowerment is that it is closer to home – it will be largely down to the community to take an interest in their borough plans and frameworks and follow the planning applications. I suspect that, given the shortage of housing and the state of the economy, the environment will often come third. But it may not always be that way. Conservationists need a revived economy to get funding for conservation. Let us hope that, when it comes, it is not too late for our local wildlife, and that sustainable use of resources is central to it, and not just short-term consumerism.

Neil Sumner

<http://archive.defra.gov.uk/environment/biodiversity/documents/201009space-for-nature.pdf>

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/whitepaper/>
<http://www.defra.gov.uk/publications/2011/08/19/pb13583-biodiversity-strategy-2020/>