

RECENT EVENTS

The Society Christmas Party



The Society Christmas Party was held on Friday 10 December at Beachamwell Hall, at the kind invitation of Mrs Jane Bonning.

Nearly 50 members and friends were given the warmest of welcomes by Mrs Bonning and her staff, and on arrival were treated to home-made punch and canapés around a majestic Christmas tree. The dreadful weather outside was completely forgotten!

Mrs Bonning donated a magnificent ham and a salmon, both beautifully cooked and presented in great style by her chef – the serving table looked wonderful. Each of the tables in the dining areas had been individually decorated and contributed to a great festive atmosphere. Lucinda Mackworth-Young led us all in singing carols after supper, for a rousing finale.

Warmest thanks to Mrs Bonning from the Society for a very special occasion. We are very pleased to make a donation of £300 to Mrs Bonning's nominated charity, the National Hospital Development Foundation.



A talk on building with flint by conservation architect Shawn Kholucy.

We are delighted to be collaborating for the first time with the Fenland & Wash Branch of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings on this joint event.

Flint architecture is an integral of the local Breckland scene, as many members discovered during our Vernacular Architecture Project. Flint has been used for thousands of years on all types of building, from castles and abbeys to modest cottages, and it requires particular skill to produce the high level of decorative detail that is visible on some local churches, for example.

Friday 11 March at the Houghton Centre, South Pickenham. Admission £6, to include a glass of wine. No need to book – all welcome. Doors open 7pm, talk starts at 7.30.



SEETHING OBSERVATORY

On Thursday 10 February Breckland Society members will have the opportunity to visit Seething Observatory, home to the Norwich Astronomical Society. The observatory sits on a two-acre site to the edge of the Seething Airfield, near Thwaite St Mary, about eight miles south of Norwich.



The observatory has occupied the Seething site since 1994. Most of the observatory facilities are on one half of the site, surrounded by lawns and footpaths, while the other half has been largely left as a managed wildlife area.

The Herschel Dome, one of the oldest Society buildings at Seething, was once based at Colney Lane on the outskirts of Norwich, but an arson attack had made it unsafe for use for many months. When it was moved to Seething, the observatory dome was re-used but the rest of the building was rebuilt to higher security and safety standards. The facility was officially re-opened by John Herschel, the great-great-great-great-great-grandson of Sir William Herschel, discoverer of the planet Uranus. The Dome now houses a 15cm (6-inch) refracting telescope that provides stunning high-resolution planetary and lunar views.

The Genesis Dome is home to a 35.5cm (14-inch) Meade LX200 Schmidt-Cassegrain telescope. This telescope is fully computer-controlled, making it much more straightforward to find any celestial object you wish from a database of 64,000 objects. A webcam attaches to the telescope and, with a fast ethernet network running across the site, images can be beamed directly back to the clubhouse for viewing. The Genesis Dome and telescope was installed back in 2002 as part of the Genesis Project, which cost £15,000 to complete. Many organisations donated funds to the project.

A number of members of the Norwich Astronomical Society have their own telescopes and regularly bring them to Seething to observe the skies, free from light pollution. The site has 12 concrete pads where members can stand their own telescopes. Six of these pads have electricity points allowing for computer-controlled telescopes or even laptop computers to be plugged in.

See norwich.astronomicalsociety.org.uk for details of the history of the Society.

**If you would like to contribute to the Breckland Society Newsletter, please contact the Editor at The Breckland Society
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BRECKS REVEALED AS THE UK'S TOP BIODIVERSITY HOTSPOT

A recent UEA study has revealed Breckland to be the most bio-diverse place in Britain. In a ground-breaking survey of all the living forms found in the area, scientists from the University of East Anglia have logged up an extraordinary total of 12,500 species living among the woodland, heaths, farmland and wetlands of the Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks. James Parry looks at what has been discovered and why it is so important.

Forget the Amazon rainforest, Great Barrier Reef or Serengeti plains. One of the greatest wildlife spectacles is here in our own backyard, according to a report published a few weeks ago by UEA. The Breckland Biodiversity Audit saw over 200 naturalists collate almost one million wildlife and plant records from the smallest gnat and tiniest beetle through to birds, plants and mammals. The study is believed to be the first of its kind to consider every single species found in an entire region.

The results have been quite remarkable. The researchers were astonished to discover that 12,500 different species occur in the Brecks, of which more than 2,000 are deemed to be of

report provides a manual for land managers, showing them what can be done to restore and conserve the unique biodiversity of the Brecks.

The study was led by Dr Paul Dolman of UEA's School of Environmental Sciences, who explained the significance of the survey: /cont'd on page 2



Marbled Clover moth, photographed in Brandon

"conservation concern", ie either rare or endangered. An extraordinary 28 per cent of the UK's rare species are found here, all in a region that covers just 0.4 per cent of the UK's land area. Sixty-five species are largely restricted to Breckland and rarely found anywhere else in Britain. These include the plants Spanish catchfly, field wormwood and Breckland thyme, as well as rare insects such as the brush-thighed seed-eater and the basil-thyme case-bearer moth.

The team went on to analyse the ecological needs of the 2,000 rare species, which allowed them to identify novel approaches for managing habitats to restore and protect this biodiversity. The

photo by Graham Austin

WHAT'S ON forthcoming Society events

Thursday 10 February 2011 7.30pm

Visit to Seething Observatory (8 miles south of Norwich) for a guided tour of this fascinating place and, weather permitting, a look at the constellations through telescopes. FULLY BOOKED.

Friday 11 March 7.30pm

Sharps 'n' Flats, a talk on flint buildings in our region by SPAB's Shawn Kholucy, see back page for details.

Friday 15 April 7.30pm

A talk by the Forestry Commission's Terry Jennings on the management of Thetford Forest. Members free, non-members £2. Please call Sue Whittlely on 01366 328190 for venue.

Friday 13 May

Society AGM; see next newsletter for details.

Friday 17 June 6.30pm

A guided visit to the RSPB reserve at Lakenheath Fen in search of orioles and cranes. Members £3, non-members £5.

If you are concerned about driving in the dark, or simply need a lift to a Society event, please contact Sue Whittlely, as it may be possible to arrange transport with other members.

“These exciting findings demonstrate beyond doubt what conservationists have long suspected—that Breckland is a unique region and vitally important hotspot for rare and threatened species, making it a key area for conservation within the UK. Although much of what conservation has achieved is excellent, new approaches are urgently needed or we risk many of these species drifting towards extinction.”

As Breckland was one of the first places in England to be settled and farmed, its unique



Photo by Simon Harrop

Spanish Catchfly

biodiversity remains dependent on people. The “brecks” and lightly cultivated fields became crucial to many of the species unique to the area and their continued survival will depend on these

THETFORD FOREST UP FOR SALE?

Concern is mounting over proposals announced by the Government that could see the disbandment of the Forestry Commission and the partial or even complete sell-off of the nation's forests.

Under the Public Bodies Bill, which is currently being debated in the House of Lords and will move to the Commons in June, ministers will have the power to authorise the sale of public land currently managed by the FC in England and its transition into private hands. Such a sale could have a dramatic effect on public access to vast swathes of what is at present publically-owned land, including Thetford Forest, enjoyed by many thousands of people every year. A public consultation on the proposals began on 27 January and runs until April.

A petition against the proposed sell-off on the campaigning website 38degrees.org.uk had already attracted 286,000 signatures as this newsletter went to press. Locally, the campaign against the Government's plans is being led by the community volunteer group, Friends of Thetford Forest Park. Formed 15 years ago, the FOTFP works in partnership with the Forestry Commission and has raised over £90,000 for improved facilities and amenities in Thetford Forest. “Our main concern about the proposed sell-off is over the likely reduction any sale would see in free public access”, said FOTFP chair Anne Mason. “We firmly believe that the Forestry Commission is the best body to manage our forests on

conditions being maintained and expanded. Many are dependent on disturbed soil and special stewardship schemes will be required to ensure they do not decline towards extinction.

Conservation managers are therefore being encouraged to create areas of bare ground and complex mixtures of grazed and ungrazed vegetation. Heather, long thought to be an icon of heathland sites, is actually less important than disturbed ground. “We need to put the brecks back into Breckland,” said Dr Dolman, “and we shouldn't be scared of getting machinery in and making a right mess. Physical disturbance isn't always bad—in fact, it is essential for many plants and insects.”

Meanwhile, the wild plant conservation charity Plantlife has launched a new project to tackle the needs of threatened wildflowers and other plants in Breckland through targeting conservation work at around 30 sites and taking forward recommendations from the biodiversity audit. The Forestry Commission's Thetford Forest—now potentially at risk from the Government's proposed sell-off of public forests (see below)—is one of the most important sites for rare plants and wildlife. Although the original planting destroyed important habitats, the forest now has a rich biodiversity that includes rare plants such as tower mustard, smooth rupturewort and red-tipped cudweed; insects such as the marbled clover and grey carpet moth; and declining farmland birds like yellowhammer and linnet, as well as more famous species such as woodlark and nightjar.

Neal Armour-Chelu, Ecologist with the Forestry Commission (one of the UEA's partners in this project, along with Natural England, the Norfolk and Suffolk Biodiversity Partnerships, the County Councils, the Brecks Partnership and Plantlife) said: “This work is going to help the Forestry Commission conserve the rare wildlife of Breckland. UEA has brought together the knowledge of hundreds of experts about the ecological needs of literally thousands of species. This report is vital as a manual for the conservation of wildlife across Thetford Forest. For the first time, we have a comprehensive insight into what we can do to help the conservation of what is one of the most wildlife-rich areas of the UK”.

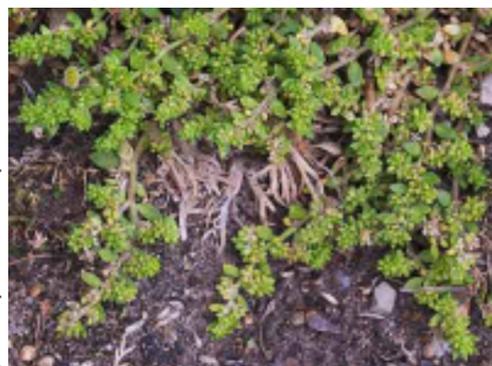


photo by Simon Harrop

Smooth Rupturewort



behalf of the public.” With the FC successfully managing a diverse portfolio that combines commercial forestry with wildlife conservation, archaeology, leisure and recreation, it is difficult to see how private owners would maintain such a balance across the board.

And all this in 2011, designated the International Year of the Forest by the United Nations...

Visit www.fotfp.org.uk and 38degrees.org.uk for more information.

DISCOVERING STONE-AGE ARCHAEOLOGY

A new Breckland Society survey in partnership with the Forestry Commission and English Heritage

Following the success of the Society's Warrens' Project, the Breckland Society has now been asked by the Forestry Commission and English Heritage to undertake a short project to research possible Neolithic (Stone Age) flint-mining sites in an area close to Grimes Graves. The objective is to discover more about the extent of the original workings.

The project will involve digging a series of test pits in the light, sandy soil on two Saturdays: 19 February and 5 March, from 10am to 4pm, with two people working on each pit. There will be an introductory session on the 19 February and a full explanation of what to do and how to do it before going on site. This survey is highly important as it will add to our existing knowledge of Neolithic flint mining in Breckland and can be undertaken now because harvesting operations have cleared the area of trees and sensitive birds such as woodlarks are not yet nesting.

Thirty people are needed on each day to dig 15 pits to a depth of approximately one metre! You can come for one day or both days and you will be asked to sign a volunteers' agreement.

To register your interest and for further details, please contact Anne Mason on anne@providence28.fsnet.co.uk or tel 01760 755685.



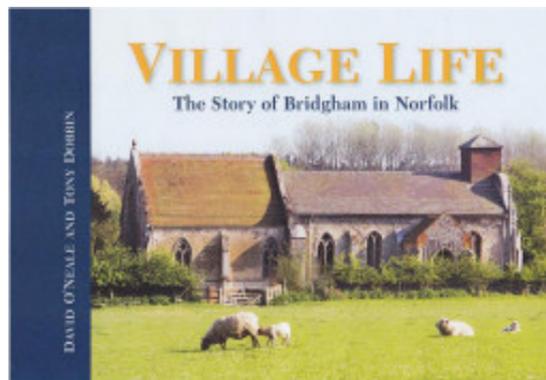
The flint mines at Grimes Graves (above) were excavated by Neolithic people using picks made from deer antlers (below).



BOOK REVIEW

Village Life: The Story of Bridgham in Norfolk by David O'Neale and Tony Dobbin

378pp incl 900 photographs. £25.



Breckland Society members who participated in either our Vernacular Architecture Project or the more recent Warrens Project will appreciate the mountain of work that was involved in researching and writing this wonderful book about a village in South Norfolk.

The authors have covered every conceivable aspect of village life, from the earliest records right up to the activities that sustain it today. It tells of the social structure of the village, and of the day-to-day gruelling work that remained largely unchanged through the centuries until relatively recently. It is a splendidly rounded portrait of a community through the ages.

There are intriguing details about the Battle of Ringmere against the Vikings, and about the Normans and the Domesday Book in the eleventh century, the Black Death and the Peasants' Revolt in the fourteenth century, and so on through the centuries up to recent times. We learn the history of the local school, the church,

village shops and life on the land – there is a list of the old field names. We read about the two World Wars and their effect on the village. We are told about the sport enjoyed by Bridgham people, and the wide-ranging hobbies, including birdwatching, pigeon racing, beekeeping and music, and about the local sculptor, William Fairbank, who carved the village sign. And there are some superb wildlife photographs. It would seem that Bridgham most certainly has talent!

To quote Kevin Crossley-Holland, who wrote the foreword, “To open this lovely book is to draw very close to the pulse of England”. With its 900 photographs, it is beautifully illustrated and a joy to read. Although supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the authors have subsidised the project out of their own pockets. Their dedication and enthusiasm have paid off: the book will surely be a source of great pride for all the villagers of Bridgham for a long time to come, as well as serving as a model for others to follow. It is a magnificent achievement and a valuable local record and social history, of great interest to anyone living in a Norfolk village.

Books can be ordered directly from David O'Neale (david.oneale@btinternet.com or 01953 718266) and may be collected from him, or customers can pay for their order to be posted (£6 for one book, and additional £2 for each further copy). Alternatively, books may be purchased at Jarrolds in Norwich or FL Edge & Son, butchers, in East Harling. If ordering from David O'Neale, please make cheques payable to Bridgham Millennium Group and send orders to David O'Neale, Mill House, 66 The Street, Bridgham, Norfolk NR16 2RS.