

RECENT EVENTS

Sharps 'n' Flats: a medley of flint buildings hereabouts: a talk by Shawn Kholucy

Breckland Society members joined the Fenland & Wash Branch of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings on 11 March for a joint event at the Houghton Centre. We were treated to a fascinating lecture on building with flint, by conservation architect Shawn Kholucy.

The use of flint in buildings in Breckland and East Anglia is well known, but our talk started with a little geology and distant history. Flint occurs in chalk strata and boulder clay, both prevalent throughout the region, and the earliest known location of human habitation in northeast Europe has been dated to 700,000 years ago by flint finds at Happisburgh. Industrial mining of flint occurred 5,000 years ago at Grimes Graves and throughout the Stone Age flint was the Swiss army knife of the times.

The Romans certainly used flint and by Norman times its use was extensive in churches and a few fortified buildings. At this time flint walls were often faced with dressed stone, as at Bury St Edmunds Cathedral and Castle Acre Priory. Until the 14th century, flint was used almost exclusively in churches and religious buildings and the East Anglian landscape is peppered with its use in forms of church architecture unique to the region. Round and octagonal towers abound, and flush work, where knapped flint is used as decoration within a stone frame, is common if you look closely.

Over 200 beautiful photographs illustrated how builders of the time employed a variety of techniques: chequer work, where flint was contrasted with other material, such as brick; galleting, where flint flakes are pressed into the mortar; and bands of almost solid knapped flint juxtaposed with unknapped flint in mortar, being just three. Especially stunning examples are the heraldry at Butley Priory and the high clerestory wall at Great Witchingham Church.



Butley Priory—some fine examples of flintworking techniques

After the Reformation, flint use on more modest dwellings increased, such as on the almshouses in Thetford; and by the late 18th century the material provided a welcome additional income for farmers to whom it had long been an impediment to agriculture. Following the introduction of a brick tax in 1780, flint was used increasingly in all levels of domestic building from the smallest cottages to grand mansions. We also saw examples of flint in the amazing triumphal arch at Holkham Hall by William Kent and early 20th-century use by Arts & Crafts architects, at Voewood House, near Holt, and Happisburgh Manor. Building with flint continued through the 20th and into the 21st century both in new-build domestic properties and commercial—the EDP building in Norwich has both knapped and unknapped flint walls. And it continues in use in religious buildings, for example in the conservation work on the tower at Bury St Edmunds Cathedral.

Those of us who attended will be sure to look out more keenly for examples of the many different techniques of flint work throughout our region.

Paul Squires

Mildenhall Warren Lodge Open Day

This year, Friends of Thetford Forest Park are holding an 'open day' with a difference, as it is being combined with the annual conservation day at the site, when the building is cleared of encroaching vegetation and maintenance of the circular walk across the former warren is carried out. A section of the perimeter bank will also be fully revealed for the first time.

This is your opportunity to come inside the lodge, one of only two standing warren lodges in Breckland. There will be documents on display about its history and explanations of the work being undertaken.

The Open Day is from 11am to 4pm on Sunday 15 May. The warren lodge is situated in Mildenhall Woods, on the minor road linking the A1065 and the A11 north of the Barton Mills Roundabout. From the A1065, the minor road is signed "Household Waste Site, Elveden", and from the A11 it is signed as "Mildenhall". Turn in to the signed car-parking area. The Lodge is about ten minutes walk up the hill.

For further information please telephone 01760 755685 or the Forestry Commission's District Office on 01842 810271.

If you would like to contribute to the Breckland Society Newsletter, please contact the Editor at The Breckland Society
The Hay Barn, Hall Farm Barns
Oxborough, Norfolk PE33 9PS
Tel 01366 727813
or email liz@dittner.co.uk
www.brecsoc.org.uk

SOCIETY VOLUNTEERS TAKE PART IN SURVEY OF NEOLITHIC FLINT WORKINGS

February 19 was wet and dreary; March 5 was overcast. Such unpromising weather, however, did little to dampen enthusiasm to join the Breckland Society's two days of test-pit survey near Grimes Graves. Trowels and spades, picnics and hot drinks, waterproofs and wellies were packed in anticipation of a good dig by those who assembled at Forestry Commission Headquarters in Santon Downham on both Saturdays. Sue Pennell was one of their number ...

Breckland Society Project Manager, Anne Mason, welcomed volunteers—44 on 19 February, 32 on 5 March—and enrolled non-BrecSoc volunteers as honorary members of the Society for the duration of the dig. Anne explained that these two days were funded by the Forestry Commission and organised with the cooperation of English Heritage to extend knowledge of the Neolithic flint workings in Thetford Forest beyond the environs of the scheduled site of Grimes Graves. The survey would contribute to the research of archaeologist Barry Bishop, who was completing his PhD at York University.



During his illustrated presentation, Barry explained that flints had been mined from the chalk deposits at Grimes Graves for thousands of years and that the mines had been originally excavated in the 1870s. Until now, however, no investigations had been undertaken to establish the extent of flint-working activities beyond the boundary of the scheduled site. These two days of digging test pits was therefore breaking new ground and should provide vital archaeological information



on the manufacture of flint axes, blades, scrapers and arrowheads to the west of Grimes Graves. The results of the survey would also help to determine whether the area should be replanted by the Forestry Commission or left fallow for further research. The site had been felled and de-stumped in 2009, making it easy to dig, and preparatory ground penetration radar of the surrounding grass tracks looked encouraging.

/cont'd on page 2

WHAT'S ON

forthcoming Society events
www.brecsoc.org.uk/news-and-events

Friday 13 May

AGM: Oxburgh Hall. Doors open 6.30pm.
7pm A talk by Sharon Hearle on butterflies and moths, followed by the AGM at 7.30.
This will be followed by a ploughman's supper with wine – members will have received notification under separate cover.

Friday 17 June 6.30pm

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

Saturday 2 July 2.30pm

Herb walk at Houghton with Andrew Chevallier.
See page 3 for more details.
Members £5, non-members £7.50.

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

Volunteers were to work in teams of two, and record their excavations and findings according to archaeological standards. Volunteers were reassured that advice on these conventions would be available, not only from Barry but also from other professionals, including Tim Yamell, head of archaeology for the Forestry Commission, and David Kenny of English Heritage.

Once on site, volunteers found their allotted marked area. Teams measured a precise one-metre square before the digging and recording began. It was expected that there would be three distinct layers of deposits to work through. First, a dark brown organic forest soil, followed by a loose yellow sand-blown layer and, finally, an artefact-rich layer that lay above flint-free orange silty sand. Each layer was to be dug and recorded separately. The sides of the test-pit were to be kept straight and tidy—not easy for amateurs unused to using trowels! A brief description of each layer and what finds were present were recorded on a context sheet before starting to dig a lower layer.

Each and every stone, worked or natural, from each layer, was to be removed from the soil and placed in labelled bags for off-site analysis. And there were dozens of flints in every layer! Indeed, Barry Bishop reports that he estimates that the test-pits yielded



several thousand struck flints, and probably around a ton of natural flint pebbles and cobbles. Two shards of pottery were also recovered. Once the pits were dug to the orange sand layer—some pits were over a metre deep—they were drawn to scale, photographed and back-filled.

Thanks should be extended to English Heritage for the invitation to Grimes Graves that gave volunteers an insight into the complexities of flint production and into the conditions in which the Neolithic miners worked. This short visit and the hands-on experience of an archaeological dig, supervised by experts, made for an educational, exhilarating and inspiring two days for volunteers. Hopefully the final results of the survey will be as rewarding for Barry Bishop's research.

Rachel Riley from the Forestry Commission also requires a special mention, not only for her cooperation with Anne in planning the logistics of the survey, but also for her Health and Safety advice: "Remember, before you continue to dig your test-pit, please check for adders"!

And last, but certainly not least, the volunteers—Breckland Society members and honorary members—who learned of the survey through an article in the *Eastern Daily Press*, by email or by word of mouth, must surely wish to thank our own Anne Mason, who project-managed the survey on behalf of the Breckland Society, for alerting them to the dig and for her efficient organisation on both days. It was an experience that many volunteers would wish to repeat.



Latest wildlife sightings

The warm southerly winds of mid-April brought in a rush of summer migrant birds, with Swallows and House Martins arriving in the Brecks and Cuckoo calling locally from at least 19 April. Warblers such as Chiffchaff, Blackcap and Willow Warbler were also in evidence. However, the month was perhaps more notable for its butterflies, with great numbers of Orange-tips in particular. Their abundance is not so much a statement on this year's conditions as those of last year, when the adult butterflies we are enjoying at the moment would have fed up as larvae and then pupated over winter. The cold winter probably helped by killing off many of the pests that would otherwise have predated them. Meanwhile, other butterflies on the wing right now include Holly Blue, often seen in gardens, and Green Hairstreak, best looked for in scrubby areas with broom or hawthorn.

Garganey

Photo: Graham Catley



Green Hairstreak

The warm sunshine of recent weeks has prompted reptiles out of hibernation, with large numbers of Grass Snakes seen along the Wissey and Adders at Brandon Country Park. Meanwhile, Toadwatch, a group of volunteers who go out on wet nights to rescue toads and frogs trying to cross busy roads near their spawning sites, has saved over 4,000 amphibians this spring at Cranwich, Oxborough and Cockley Cley! Finally, there has been a spate of good birds at RSPB Lakenheath Fen (see opposite), with Black Terns, Garganey, Nightingale and Hobbies all recorded in the last two weeks.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Society outing to RSPB Lakenheath Fen, Friday 17 June

On Friday 17 June, there will be a Breckland Society evening walk at Lakenheath Fen, starting at 6.30pm.

Prior to 1995, the one square-mile area now covered by the Reserve was arable fields and poplar plantations, but in that year the RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) was given grants from WREN (Waste Recycling Environmental) and the Heritage Lottery Fund to create a mosaic of washland, wet reedbed, ungrazed fen and wet grassland. The Reserve was designed and the work supervised by Norman Sills, who has been with the RSPB for 36 years and was responsible for Titchwell Reserve too.

In just ten years, there has been an amazing increase in species of birds, plants and insects. Birds include seven pairs of Marsh Harriers; 150 pairs of Bearded Tits and 130 pairs of Reed Buntings, as well as Bitterns, Hobbies and Cetti's Warblers. Every year, one or two pairs of Golden Orioles nest in the poplar plantations, the only regular nesting site in the whole country. Only a day or two before the opening of the new visitor centre in May 2007, RSPB wardens carrying out a routine survey

Cranes on Lakenheath Fen



of the site discovered that a pair of Cranes were nesting there, the first time in the Fens for over 400 years. This year, the Cranes returned at the end of January and we may see and hear them on our visit.

Lakenheath is part of a network of other fenland nature reserves, including Wicken Fen, Chippenham Fen, Woodwalton Fen and the washlands of the rivers Great Ouse and Nene. Together they are helping to restore the region's original wetland character and biodiversity.

Please meet at 6.30pm in the car park at Lakenheath Fen. Clothing and footwear need to be suitable for a two-hour evening walk which may include long grass and marshy ground. Please bring insect repellent and binoculars. The cost is £3 for members of the Breckland Society and £5 for non-members.

Directions: From Lakenheath village, travel north on the B1112 for about 2 miles. Go over the level crossing and after 200m turn left into the reserve entrance as signed. From Hockwold village, travel south on the B1112 for nearly 1 mile, go over the river bridge, and after 200m turn right into the reserve entrance as signed.

Introduction to herbal medicine, Saturday 2 July

The renowned Norfolk herbalist, Andrew Chevallier, will be coming to Houghton Barns on Saturday 2 July to lead us on a walk, and give a talk, on the medicinal trees, flowers and herbs found in the surrounding land.

We shall be exploring hedgerows, meadows, woodland and riverside, walking slowly for between one and two miles, identifying and learning about the medicinal qualities of over 20 plants, including willow and lime trees, self-heal, burdock, wild rose, comfrey and much more. There will also be some orchids. Andrew will also be bringing his best-selling books, tinctures and ointments.

Please bring shoes, suitable clothing and protection for the gloriously unpredictable English weather (boots or stout shoes, trousers in case of nettles, rainproof or sun-proof headwear, water to keep you going, etc).

The cost is £5 for members, and £7.50 for non-members—tea and cake are included.

Please let Sue Whittlely know if you are coming (01366 328190), so that we can make sure there will be enough tea and homemade cakes!

