

Barnham Cross Common field trip

Society members who joined us on Friday 1 June at Barnham Cross Common enjoyed a wonderful walk expertly guided by Nick Gibbons. Nick is an excellent interpreter of all things related to the Common, especially the many plant species to be found there.

The Common, a Site of Special Scientific Interest, is a mini wildlife haven, bisected by a busy main road and bordered by woods, water-meadows and the river. It is a fine example of Breckland grass heathland, extending to 72 hectares (180 acres) and containing almost equal areas of both acid and chalk soil types

The chalk soils support such plant species as black knapweed, Yorkshire fog and purple stemmed cat's-tail. Common broomrape may be found where glacial striping has produced bands of acid and chalky soils. We also saw some good specimens of the rare tower mustard along the roadside. Species such as sand sedge, meadow saxifrage and Breckland thyme can all be found on the acidic soils located to the east of the A134.

Part of the Common lies adjacent to the Little Ouse river and visitors may spot species such as banded damselfly, darter and hawk dragonflies and perhaps the occasional kingfisher. On other areas the green hairstreak butterfly may be seen, as well as cuckoo, green woodpecker, lapwing and roe deer.

Fire destroys celebrated tree on Knettishall Heath

A landmark tree on one of the Brecks' most important tracts of heathland was recently destroyed by fire.

The old Scots pine stood on top of Hut Hill, a Bronze Age burial mound dating from 2400-1500 BC and evidence of the long history of human occupation in the area. All that now remains of the tree – shown here in happier days – is a stump and charred trunk. At the time of writing, the cause of the fire had not been established but arson must remain a strong possibility.

Knettishall Heath has been in the ownership of the Suffolk Wildlife Trust since the beginning of 2012 and is home to a variety of rare and localised heathland flora and fauna. August is an especially good time to visit, as the heather is in full bloom and butterflies such as small heath and grayling are in the wing, weather permitting! Birds include woodlark, nightjar and hobby. We are hoping to organise a Society field trip to the heath in the future.



The iconic tree, photographed in 2010



Wild violas on Barnham Cross Common

Part-time courses in Archaeology, Historic Environment and Local History

The University of Cambridge, Institute of Continuing Education (ICE) is offering undergraduate-level Certificate, Diploma and Advanced Diploma courses in Archaeology and Historic Environment, and a Diploma and Advanced Diploma in Local History. The courses are ideal for professionals, researchers, volunteers, those working their communities, and anyone with an interest in the field.

Certificate courses are open to all, and you don't need any special qualifications to apply. Diplomas offer the opportunity to study your subject in greater depth, while Advanced Diplomas are research-based courses of supervised independent study, so can easily be studied at a distance. All courses lead to full University of Cambridge awards. See www.ice.cam.ac.uk/awards for course specifications and more information on how to apply.

The Certificate and Diploma in Historic Environment are now taught over a small number of linked weekends, rather than weekly classes, enabling students from all over the UK and beyond to study.

Advanced Diplomas are now offered over two years rather than one, giving extra project-based support and making it easier for students to combine study with other commitments.

There will be a number of bursaries offered to self-financing students. Applicants who are new to ICE, or who are state-funded teachers, will be eligible to apply. The deadline for course applications and bursary applications is 10 September 2012. This year for the first time you may also have access to part-time student loans if you are studying for your first university qualification.

See www.ice.cam.ac.uk/funding for more information.

The Course Directors are all University of Cambridge academics who are actively engaged in research.

- ◆ Archaeology: Dr Gilly Carr
- ◆ Historic Environment: Dr Susan Oosthuizen
- ◆ Local History: Dr Samantha Williams

See www.ice.cam.ac.uk/people for full biographies, including research interests and publications.

Contact marketing@ice.cam.ac.uk for a leaflet.

If you would like to contribute to the Breckland Society Newsletter, please contact the Editor by email at lizdittner@tiscali.co.uk or tel 01366 727813

GREAT NEWS FOR THE BRECKS!

The exciting news came through late last month that the bid for Heritage Lottery Fund Landscape Partnership funding for the Brecks had received first-round approval.

Pitched amid intense competition from other outstanding bids, both within East Anglia and across the country, the Brecks bid was for a total of £2.1 million towards history, heritage and landscape projects in a core area of the Brecks across four main categories:

- ◆ conserving or restoring the built and natural features that create the historic landscape character of the area;
- ◆ increasing community participation in local heritage;
- ◆ increasing access to and learning about the landscape area and its heritage;
- ◆ increasing training opportunities in local heritage skills.

The Society is leading on six projects – Flint in the Brecks, Internal Archaeology and Lodge Sites of the Warrens, Sheep in the Brecks, Military Heritage of the Brecks, The People's History of Thetford Forest and The Brecks Heritage Trail. Each project will provide extensive opportunities for Society members and others to carry out research and fieldwork into a range of different heritage subjects and thereby help extend knowledge and understanding of the area's history and important features.



Military heritage: Snarehill camp in 1912, with Royal Flying Corps biplanes

The next stage of the process will see the appointment of a Development Officer, who will develop and finalise the individual projects, secure the commitment of delivery partners – such as the Society – and the necessary co-funding over the coming 12 months. A final decision on the implementation funds will then be taken by the HLF and, subject to approval, the projects will begin, for completion within three years.

WHAT'S ON

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

Friday 12 October 7pm

A talk by Oliver Bone, curator of Ancient House Museum in Thetford, on *A History of Thetford*.

Ancient House Museum, King Street, Thetford. Members £3, non-members £6, to include refreshments.

Friday 14 December

Society Christmas party. See October newsletter for venue and other details.

We are currently preparing an interesting and varied programme of events for 2013. Subject to confirmation, we shall be visiting West Stow Hall, the churches at Lakenheath and Icklingham to see the wall paintings, and Cressingham Mill.

We are also hoping to have speakers on stained glass conservation, Boudicca and the Iceni and Witchcraft in the Brecks.

Following the success of our Natural Inspirations workshops two years ago, and the recent field trip to Barnham Cross Common, we are planning a Breckland Flora study day for June next year. This will be led by leading local botanists and will enable participants to have first-hand experience of two of the Brecks' top sites for wild plants.

If you need any further information about events, please contact Delia Cook on 01842 820663.

CPRE: Problems with your footpaths?

The unseasonal rain during much of this spring and early summer has brought with it unusually lush vegetation growth, and many Norfolk footpaths are already becoming blocked by rampant brambles and thickets of nettles. As a result of council cuts, the maintenance and management of footpaths is being reduced and concern is growing over the impact this will have on access, ever a thorny issue (no pun intended!). As expected, we have had lots of support for our new Protect our Paths campaign, which is designed to raise awareness of the cutbacks and encourage people to value and use their local rights of way. The next stage of this campaign will be to run a Footpaths Information Workshop, which will look at all manner of footpath-related subjects, such as Rights of Way legislation, health and safety, landowner rights and obligations. It also give practical advice and support and will run in the autumn at two locations in the county. It is primarily aimed at existing or potential footpath wardens or those who have specific problems with footpaths in their parish. To join the mailing list and to receive an invitation to the workshops, please email our Planning and Campaigns Manager Caroline Davison, at carolined@cprenorfolk.org.uk.



The campaign will focus on such problems as damage to or loss of finger posts

LATEST WILDLIFE NEWS FROM THE BRECKS

Hard times for butterflies and moths

This summer's persistent cool and wet weather has had a clear impact on wildlife and been nothing short of disastrous for butterflies in particular. With only two consistently warm and sunny weeks all summer so far – one at the end of May, the other at the end of July – butterfly flight cycles have been severely disrupted. Unable to fly for much of the time, the ability to find a mate and procreate will have been severely curtailed for many butterflies – which could mean a poor showing next year too. Some species – such as the common blue and brown argus – are in very short supply, and only in the last few days have normally abundant species like the meadow brown been seen in anything like decent numbers.



photos by Sue Pennell



Forester moth

Mother Shipton moth – can you see the witch's face?

Moth numbers also appear to be well down, but some interesting species have been noted lately in the Brecks. These have included two day-flying species and local specialities, the forester and the intriguingly named Mother Shipton. The latter is so-called after the resemblance of the pattern on its forewing to the traditional hook-nosed representation of the 16th-century witch Ursula Southeil, also known as Mother Shipton and who allegedly foretold the death of Cardinal Wolsey in 1530! The iridescent forester moth may lack such associated folklore but is surely one of the most dramatic of all moths. Barnham Cross Common is a good place to look for it, nectaring on scabious – up to 35 were seen there in July.

Swifts are suffering too

This summer's cold and wet weather has also had a disastrous effect on the breeding season for swifts, according to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Although the Brecks still has a healthy population, the total number



Swift populations are suffering as insect numbers fall and buildings offer fewer nesting sites

of swifts that come to the UK every summer to breed is said to be nearly a third lower than it was in the mid-1990s. The poor weather this year has resulted in fewer flying insects for swifts to eat, with signs that many have failed to breed and are returning to Africa early, putting population levels further at risk. Swift problems are made worse by a lack of nesting sites in the roofs of buildings, as old properties are renovated and new homes built with no access or space for nests.

RSPB conservation director Martin Harper said: "The ability of swifts to nest depends on our buildings having spaces for them. They fly as many as 6,000 miles each spring to get here from Africa to breed, only to find that changes in the way we're building and renovating means there are fewer nest spaces." The RSPB is urging the public to submit details of swift nests to www.rspb.org.uk/thingstodo/surveys/swifts to encourage developers and local authorities to consider the needs of this vulnerable species.

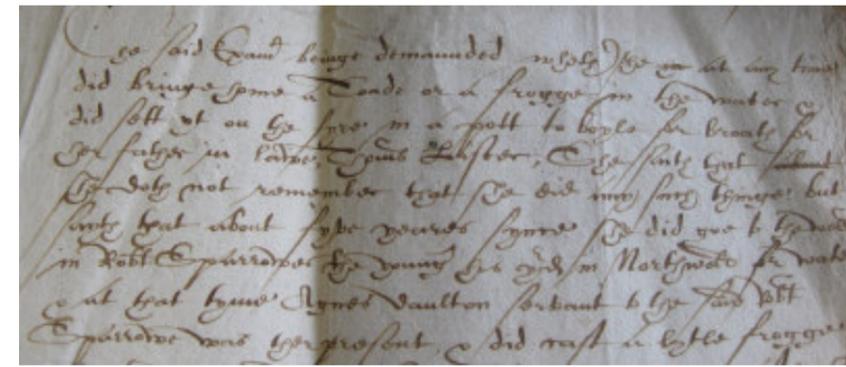
Meanwhile conservationists say they have become aware of adult swifts pushing unhatched eggs out of their nests because a lack of food has meant they have not been able to feed themselves sufficiently, incubate eggs and feed their chicks. Edward Mayer of Swift Conservation said: "We fully expect to see a decline in the breeding figures this year. People are telling us that the number of swifts that arrived here several months ago was pretty consistent with last year, but after that they disappeared again as they flew away to wherever they could find food."

WITCHCRAFT IN BRECKLAND!

Two sheets of hand-made paper are stored in a box in the Norfolk county archives. These sheets, written in early seventeenth-century script with a quill pen, briefly record the feud between two Breckland families. Sue Pennell has been researching the story.

On 2 March 1602, Alice Lyster, probably in fear and trepidation, left her village home to travel to Mundford. Alice had been summonsed to appear before the Leet Court at the inn—probably on the very site where Breccoc members enjoyed their Christmas social last year.

We do not know Alice's age, or whether she was married or a widow. Probably she was an elderly and vulnerable woman who lived alone, with no one to turn to in her hour of need. And Alice Lyster certainly needed help and advice—her Northwold neighbours were accusing her of witchcraft. Should their evidence be deemed sufficient to send her to trial, if she was found guilty, she could be condemned to death under the Elizabethan Witchcraft Act of 1563.



One of the documents recording the feud that led to the accusation of witchcraft

Alice was asked how she knew that Thomas Bennett of Northwold would die and that Physician Bowde from Swaffham could not save him. Alice said she "did not knowe yt neyther did use any speaches to that effect onely she said that he was like to have a great sore w[hic]h Bowde sayd he then had and ... that she hoped that then he should doe well, other speaches she used not".

In his evidence against Alice, William Palsey said Dr Bowde asked for whom the church bell tolled. On learning it was for Bennett, "Bowde sayde that he never knewe a man makinge so sownd a water dye so sodynely and further sayd that Bennett was bewitched by a witch in Northwold & dyed therof ...". Palsey also testified that Alice had done some "mischefe to his cattayle, for she had given evill wordes" against him and his cattle had died. The final witness was Adam Carter, who stated that he too had had "sondry unkyde & straunge losses of cattell" after he had fallen out with Alice.

Three weeks later, on 20 March 1602, the court reconvened at Mundford to examine Elizabeth Bennett, also from the troubled village of Northwold. She is recorded as a "spinster", a reference perhaps not to her marital status, but her occupation of spinning wool for the village weavers. She was related to yeoman Thomas, who died in 1600 and whom Alice Lyster was accused of bewitching. Now Elizabeth was being accused of witchcraft by the Lyster clan.

The court asked whether she had at any time brought home "a toade or frogge in the water and did sett yt on the fyre in a pott to boyle for Broath for her father in lawe, Thomas Lyster".

Elizabeth could not remember exactly, but recalled that some five years previously she had gone to the well where the servant, Agnes Daulton, did "caste a lytle frogge" into the water. Elizabeth carried the water home before being sent to get bread. While she was absent, the frog was removed from the water and porridge was made for Thomas. She denied that she had said that she herself would be making Lyster's porridge.

Agnes Daulton testified that she remembered the incident, but said Elizabeth Bennett had desired her to "putt a frogge into her payle w[hic]h she did", and that Elizabeth had said the water was to make broth for her father.

The final statement was by William Palsey, who had also spoken against Alice Lyster. He had visited Thomas and found him not well,

with "skurffe on this face & heare goinge off his heade". Lister told Palsey that he "could not tell the cause therof: but that he did never lyke synce he had a frogge boyld in his broath".

What happened to these two women? The records do not say. But if the court felt they had a case to answer for casting spells, no doubt they would have been transported to gaol, either to Thetford as Elizabeth Crowne and Ellen Julian of Brisley were in 1675, or to prison in Norwich to await their trials, like Margaret Francis of Hockham in 1600.



The day wherein Thomas Bennett of Northwold dyed the bell did ringe for him

If poor Alice and Elizabeth were found guilty of witchcraft they could be burnt to death, as so many other women in East Anglia were during the seventeenth century. We just do not know, but let us hope the court dismissed the accusations of these feuding villagers from Northwold.

A special thanks must go to David Fox, without whose expertise the documents could not have been read.

Original documents may be seen on request at the Norfolk Records Office, Norwich.

(The last woman in Britain to be accused of witchcraft was Helen Duncan in 1944. The Witchcraft Act was repelled in 1951)