

RECENT EVENTS

Flint-processing day! 11 June

A small group of volunteers enjoyed a beautiful sunny day sitting in the former walled garden of Lord Cadogan's country estate at Santon Downham ... washing flints! Helaine Wyett was one of them ...

We had been primed beforehand by Barry Bishop, who is doing his PhD on the wider landscape of Grimes Graves, into what to look for when processing some of the many bags of flints collected during the two test pit digging days earlier in the year.

Each person took a bag of flints to wash and then lay the pieces out to dry in a tray. Once we had all nearly completed a bag, Barry gave us some instruction and handouts to help us identify what might be a worked piece of flint or what was purely natural. Fortunately, he and Sarah Poppy and Colin Pendleton, Suffolk County Council Archaeologists, were on hand to provide much-needed help as we puzzled over what might be a striking platform, a bulb of percussion, a Hertzian scar or radial fissures! As someone

commented, our vocabulary was decidedly extended that day! Barry did reassure us, however, that even after much experience it was often difficult to identify worked flint in its early stages—as these pieces were; there was no chance of finding a perfectly formed arrowhead among our bags! He added that it was likely that Neolithic and Bronze Age people were mining flint in our test pit area and creating rough shapes to take away for refining later, perhaps into axeheads, arrows, cutting blades and scrapers. Despite this, we found some very finely flaked pieces which were extremely sharp and quite useable as cutting implements. I found it particularly interesting that Bronze Age people made much less refined flint tools, despite there having been a couple of thousands of years of practice since the Neolithic! I assume this was because they were, by then, preferring the new metal tools.

There was a general hubbub of conversation throughout the sunny day as we washed, sorted, then weighed and sorted again the natural flints into size and shape categories, before discarding. Barry would be taking away the bags of worked flint for further analysis, but there are still plenty more bags yet to be processed ... so we await the call!

The pharmacy in the hedgerow: 2 July

On 2 July a group of Society members gathered at Houghton Barns, by kind invitation of Oliver and Lucinda Sells, to meet Andrew Chevallier, a practising medical herbalist, for a walk through the surrounding land, looking at the trees, flowers and herbs that would at one time have been the source of remedies for most of our ailments.

A pot of Sweet Woodruff (a plant related to Madder and coffee) stood outside the door—it would at one time have been sewn into cotton bags and placed among clothes to stop them smelling musty, but our ancestors would also have used it to treat kidney stones, strengthen the heart and gladden the spirits.

A short walk down the lane and we are standing under a Linden tree at the very height of its flowering season—it was a splendid sight and the scent was heady and intoxicating. Andrew assured us that just inhaling that scent was beneficial, helping to ease tension and induce calm. An infusion made with the flowers has long been used to treat fevers and colds, and as a general aid to well-being.

As we walked along the lane Andrew expounded on notable plants in the hedgerow—burdock, comfrey, blackberry, horehound and many more. Down in the damp meadow at the end of the lane we found meadowsweet. A source of salicylic acid, it was used to bring relief to stiff, sore and aching muscles and joints.

Oliver and Lucinda's labyrinth and herb garden at Houghton Barns



Andrew points out a bee orchid in the meadow

The herbs in our own kitchen gardens, as well as giving savour to our cooking, can help keep us out of the doctor's waiting room: sage for sore throats and mouths, and even to help ward off Alzheimer's disease; oregano has antiseptic and antifungal properties; and basil, as well as being excellent for the digestion, has antibacterial properties.

Back at the barns we were treated to excellent cake and restorative cups of tea, with time to chat to Andrew for some extra nuggets of the old wisdom of plants.

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POTENTIAL LOTTERY FUNDING FOR THE BRECKS?

During the past few weeks the Society has been involved in discussions, led by the Brecks Partnership, around the possibility that a bid can be made for a Heritage Lottery Fund Landscape Partnership grant of up to £2 million for the Brecks. James Parry looks at what this might mean for the area and how the Society can contribute.

Despite some achievements in recent years, the history of landscape protection in the Brecks is sadly one of near-misses. Back in the immediate post-Second World War era, there was the real possibility of the Brecks becoming a national park—something that clearly did not happen. Later on, the Brecks also missed the boat in the scramble to become an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Then, much more recently, there

wildlife sites and SSSIs to National Nature Reserves, Natura 2000 sites and the Breckland Environmentally Sensitive Area, through which farmers are subsidised to manage their land for the benefit of wildlife and landscape conservation. ... cont'd on page 2



A derelict shepherd's wagon, a disappearing aspect of the local farming heritage

has been discussion about the creation of a Brecks Regional Park, an option that is now well and truly on the back burner, if alive at all, thanks to uncertainty over funding and early signs of resistance from certain entrenched interests.

However you look at it, Breckland is a special place. It may not be as chocolate box-like as the Cotswolds or the Yorkshire Dales, but landscapes of the Brecks are every bit as distinctive as more famous tracts of scenery elsewhere in the UK and, as we know from the recent Biodiversity Audit (see January 2011 newsletter), for flora and fauna the Brecks are second to none. It is natural history interest that has prompted most of the protective designations that do apply to the area—and there are a plethora of these, from county

WHAT'S ON

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

Friday 14 October 7pm

"Hidden Oxburgh": a chance to discover some unexpected aspects of this magnificent 15th-century moated hall, visiting areas not normally open to the public and delving into the dangerous world of Tudor politics. Members £13, non-members £15, to include refreshments. Numbers strictly limited so please book in advance with Sue Whittle, on 01366 328190.

Friday 18 November 7.30pm

"Writing Bridgham's History": a talk by David O'Neale. David will speak about *Village Life*, the highly-praised book he wrote with Tony Dobbin on the history of Bridgham, and which stands as an exemplar of a local history project. Bridgham Village Hall. Members £3, non-members £5, to include refreshments.

Friday 16 December

Society Christmas event: full details in October newsletter.

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.

LIVING AND BELIEVING IN THE BRECKS



A Norfolk Horn, once a common sight on the Breckland heaths.

In some respects, one might argue that the Brecks seem “over-designated”. Yet in terms of landscape value and protection the picture is confusing and disparate, and there remain problems over local identity and a lack of coherence over land use and how the area is “presented”, both to local inhabitants and to those visiting from outside. Certainly, there are few obvious opportunities to take a holistic view of what the Brecks might mean culturally, socially and environmentally.

The other “near-miss” is over community engagement. The Brecks Partnership has done some good work in this area, but it is under-resourced and its staff overstretched. The Society’s projects on vernacular architecture, warrens and flint pits have shown the interest, dedication and commitment of local people to learning more about their environment when they are given the chance. This is where a

BRECKLAND BIRD NEWS

As summer appears to be drawing to a close, wildlife is already preparing for the busy season of autumn. The woods and hedgerows are currently teeming with birds, often family groups of tits and finches. Goldfinches and Greenfinches are especially prominent right now, the latter species apparently enjoying a respite from the ravages of trichomonosis, a disease that has locally decimated some finch populations in recent years.

The dry spring made conditions tough for ground-nesting birds especially, which found it hard to find enough insects to feed their young; Blackbirds and thrushes also struggled to dig out earthworms in the parched soil. July’s downpours helped improve things considerably and since then most birds have been able to rear large broods.

Breckland specialities such as Stone-curlews are doing well and already gathering in flocks as a prelude to their autumn migration south—51 birds were seen together near Hilborough on 8 August. Birds of prey are also worth looking out for now, as young birds fledge from the nest and start spreading out. Red Kites are noticeably increasing in numbers, moving into the Brecks from their strongholds in the Midlands. Birds have been seen recently at Cockley Cley, Ickburgh and Castle Acre. An even rarer bird, the Honey-buzzard, has also been wandering through our area—two were seen, together with a Marsh Harrier, near Beachamwell on 16 July.

Heritage Lottery Fund Landscape Partnership for the Brecks could provide an unparalleled range of opportunities.

Landscape Partnerships are expected to achieve four objectives:

- ♦ conserve or restore the built and natural features that create the historic landscape character;
- ♦ increase community participation in local heritage;
- ♦ increase access to and learning about the landscape area and its heritage;
- ♦ increase training opportunities in local heritage skills.

Based on our previous projects and our teams of volunteers, the Society is very well placed to play a leading role in delivering all four of these aims. We also support the idea of a Landscape Partnership as a means of helping cement a sense of Brecks identity and encouraging local authorities and people alike to develop a greater sense of awareness of why the Brecks environment and heritage are worth protecting and cherishing.

These are early days and the road to securing HLF funding is a long and demanding one. So far, potential participants such as the Society have been invited to make expressions of interest in projects that they would like to see as part of a longer-term bid for funding. The Society has identified several areas where it could help; these include projects on Breckland’s military heritage, on flint, on sheep and shepherds in the Brecks, on warren archaeology and on the creation of a Brecks Heritage Trail that would link points of interest right across the area. At this stage it is impossible to say whether any of these will go ahead, but see future newsletters for news on progress!



Look out for the forked tail and white wing flashes of the Red Kite

CRANWICH CAMP: A TRANQUIL HAVEN FOR NATURE

Set amid Forestry Commission plantations are the 49 fenced acres beloved by local dog-walkers as a safe and quiet place to exercise the pooch. To find Cranwich Camp you have to be in the know—it is not signed from the road and it is miles from anywhere (Grid Ref: TL775 942). However, a “Google” search reveals not only a history that brought people to Breckland in the past but also that today it attracts enthusiasts from far and wide. Sue Pennell writes ...

Cranwich Camp arose out of the 1930s recession, when Nissan huts were erected by the Ministry of Labour to house the unemployed. The men had to work in the newly-planted Thetford Forest and to build roads in the Brecks. A strict regime of “no work, no dole” resulted in riots and mutiny.

During the Second World War the Camp was home to the 5th Regiment of the Royal Horse Artillery. The gunners trained on the Stanford Battle Area, on Swaffham Ranges, attended courses on mines at Didlington Hall and were inspected by the King at Hilborough Hall before departing for Normandy. The Camp passed to American GIs in the 1950s before being abandoned to revert to heathland.

Today Cranwich Camp is a protected Site of Special Scientific Interest where Red Data Book (endangered) plants and insects thrive. The Forestry



Ringlet



Small Skipper on Viper’s Bugloss



White Musk Mallow



Proliferous Pink

Commission, which owns the site, promotes conservation management in such a way as to encourage rarities, often unique to Breckland, to flourish. The flying flock visit the camp regularly to graze the herbage

and recently, in conjunction with Natural England, areas of grass have been removed to leave bare earth. These areas will be allowed to regenerate slowly to provide seedbeds for Sand and Spanish Catchfly, and larval food for Lunar Yellow Underwing and Tawny Wave moths. Similarly, newly-built earth banks beside the perimeter fence will create additional habitats for rare plants and insects.

Some nature lovers are aware of this conservation work and of the national importance of Cranwich Camp. Recently a group of botanists came from Sussex, Surrey and Kent to photograph the Spanish Catchfly, the tiny Proliferous Pink and the beautiful white Musk Mallow, and the hope of seeing rare butterflies and moths lured lepidopterists from the West Country. Other visitors simply delight in the colourful variety of flowers and grasses, and in the large colonies of butterflies, including Small Heaths and skippers, criss-crossing the site.

Cranwich Camp, once the place of riots by the unemployed and of training for warfare, is now a tranquil haven for rare flowers and insects. It is a place that is worth visiting for quiet enjoyment of our beautiful natural world. Do go and explore this corner of Breckland for yourself—with or without the dog. You do not need specialist knowledge as an information board explains all.

All photos by Sue Pennell, at Cranwich Camp, 11 June 2011.

COMMITTEE VACANCIES: ARE YOU INTERESTED IN HELPING TO RUN THE SOCIETY?

Members who attended the AGM in May will recall the announcement that two members of the Society’s Committee will be standing down in a few months’ time. Our treasurer John Davies and secretary Sue Whitley have held their respective posts ever since the Society was founded in 2003 and much of our success through the years has been thanks to their hard work and commitment. We are very sorry to see them go, but understand how they might want to spend more time on other things! Both John and Sue have kindly agreed to stay in post until the 2012 AGM next spring, which will hopefully give us enough time to find worthy replacements for each of them. So how about stepping in? Both posts offer the opportunity to join a small and friendly committee and help decide on the Society’s direction, what sort of events we hold and other aspects of what we do. If you are interested in finding out informally more about what’s involved, then please contact James Parry on 01366 328676. **The Society will continue to thrive only if its members play an active role in its daily administration, so do please consider helping us.**