

Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke Newsletter Number Twenty Two August 2006

Hail and Farewell

In July, **Naomi Brookes** resigned as Green Belt Project Officer in order to take up a job with English Nature. She will be the Biodiversity Co-ordinator for the West of England, working with Donna Radley. We were all sorry to see her go, and wish her well in her new job. The Wildlife Trust is committed to continuing the conservation and community work undertaken through the Green Belt Project. However, it is likely that the name of the project may change, though the focus of its work would remain the same. A large bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund has been submitted, which if successful would secure funding for Naomi's post for three years and would allow her successor to spend more time working on projects and less time trying to fund raise. Meanwhile **Laura Watson** has been appointed on a short term contract to work on some of the projects with which Naomi was involved. **Iain Webb** will continue to be the officer in charge of work on the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke, with **Martin Baker**, Conservation Officer for the Wildlife Trust, in a supporting and strategic role.

James Fisher, the Devil's Dyke Project Officer, who was coming to the end of his contract this year, has been appointed by the Peterborough Green Grid Project to work on a variety of environmental schemes there. The Friends' Committee have benefited from his experience in producing leaflets and notice boards, putting up dog bins, finding ferreters, hydro-seeding, and sheep grazing, to name but a few of the things wildlife conservation officers need to know about!



Update, August 2006

In August, Julia wrote to Tim Barfield at English Nature, asking him to summarize the current plan of work on the section of the Roman Road which was cleared so drastically in February of this year. Tim replied as follows.

Proposals for Work on the Roman Road by Tim Barfield, Conservation Officer, Cambridgeshire, English Nature

At the last steering group meeting we agreed a way forward on the section of the Road which was recently cleared. This was:

1. I accepted that foliar spraying of blackthorn regrowth may be needed, but with the proviso this has to be done very carefully in calm conditions with an appropriate biodegradable herbicide.
2. Peter Grubb confirmed the value of leaving wood chippings in situ until restoration works (see 3 below) were to be carried out. He emphasised the temporary value of a chipping mulch in preventing invasion by undesirable plants.
3. I agreed to discuss with our grassland specialist the possibility of sequentially reseeding this stretch with *Bromus erectus*.

(cont.)

You may be aware that there is a moratorium within English Nature on any new spending; so currently I do not have any funds to draw on for management works, in particular for the foliar spraying of areas of blackthorn regrowth.

Bromus reseeding should be okay, but we need to be sure the Bromus is of local origin and also that unwanted species are not introduced. Martin Baker was going to find out from James Fisher what stock of Bromus we have and whether some can be used along this section of the Road. Before this can be done, the area we want to seed will need to have the wood chippings swept off and removed.

As to future management. The way forward now is to draft management plans for both Roman Road and Fleam Dyke which incorporate

- (i) a map of their current state,
- (ii) a map of the desired state
- (iii) annual work programmes.

In this way everyone will be clear about what we are trying to achieve and what will be done each year.

I hope this helps.

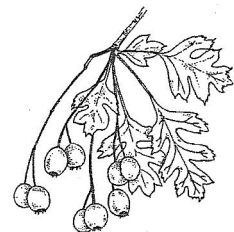
Tim Barfield



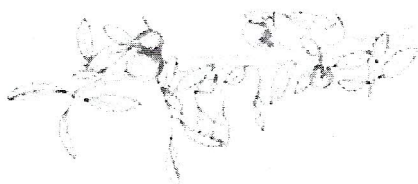
Comments from Friends and other Members of the Public

This leaves various problems unresolved, and we hope to provide more details in the next newsletter, after the next meeting of the Steering Committee for the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke

- The sections of the Roman Road cleared with our Lottery grant in 2004 and 2005 and the area of good flora near the Hildersham Road need to be removed from the general plan to flail the recently cleared area three times a year. As it is, the flowers which were coming into bloom in July were cut, and all the arisings were left lying on site, covering any new seedlings with mulch and enriching a stretch of verge on which we have spent time and money trying to reduce fertility.
- Three 20 metre lengths have been marked off with orange posts as places where scrub will be allowed to regrow in order to replace the habitat lost during the clearance. In its former state this section of the Roman Road was an important nesting habitat in a landscape of arable fields, and the abundance of autumn berries attracted flocks of small migrants. Local bird lovers would like to know the reasons behind the choice of location, and the reason why it was felt that only three blocks of scrub were all that was needed.



The answer to these and other points will become clear when the management plan is drawn up. The Friends are most grateful to Professor Peter Grubb for offering to attend these meetings and give us the benefit of his extensive knowledge of chalk grassland restoration projects. The sad truth is that areas of the Devil's Dyke which were, by mistake, cleared of scrub in the 1970's are still rough grassland of no conservation value.

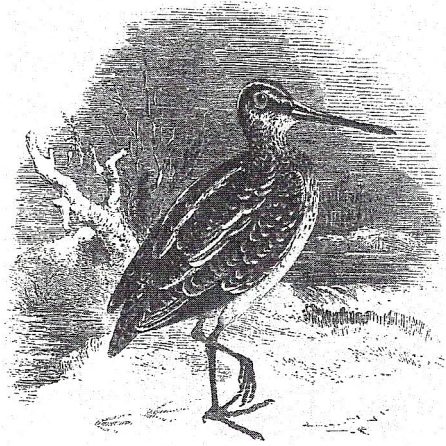


Thanks to English Nature for the drawings of hawthorn and blackthorn

Fleam Dyke in the 1920's by Alec Sadler

Before 1939, the rural scene had changed little. It was still a world without man-made fibre optics and clothing, and, for many, a world without electrical and mechanical power. The domestic scene was labour intensive, heating was limited to the front room open fire. It was a very different childhood from that of children today.

Occasionally, on a Sunday, I would have to accompany my parents on a picnic, and their favourite spot would be the railway cutting between the dyke, long before the earthen bank across the cutting built for the Home Guard shooting butts in the early years of the 1939 - 45 War. With friends from the neighbouring villages, we played cricket as the favourite game after the meal. There was never any litter left or evidence of a picnic.



Snipe

For the two ten-year-old boys, the date could have been 1133 AD not 1933 AD. Both mischievous, looking for adventure, one with thick auburn tousled hair, the other dark, both as thin as rakes, born into the countryside within sight of Fleam Dyke. One the son of a groom, the other of a game keeper, each had developed an almost instinctive knowledge of country lore. Born on an isolated farm, nearly two miles from the nearest village, there was less than a month between their birthdays.

Ever with an eye for advantage, for new ways to find the limits of behaviour, to overstep the boundaries of property and dare each other to take risks, adjusted to physical pain and punishment, they saw fear as a challenge. How far removed were they from their primitive forefathers when deciding their excursions for further exploration along Fleam Dyke? Standing on Mutlow Hill, they would have watched for robbers progressing along the turnpike, (now the A11) hoping for some advantage or material gain, and guarding their position. But a favourite stimulus for this small band of primitive tribesmen was the approach of the Fulbourn fraternity, who shared a similar tribal outlook.

The ideal defence position for the two farm boys was the abandoned railway cutting through the dyke. For the Fulbourn gang, any advance beyond the cutting meant descending onto the cutting floor, allowing our two farm boys to subject them to a furious hail of stones and clods of earth.

Lest it be thought their minds were always preoccupied with visions ahead, their instincts were being subconsciously trained to note the sounds, vibrations and sights in the wildlife around them. Their sharp eyes and hearing missed nothing, feeding their naturally inquiring minds with experiences such as the sight of a hare giving birth and screaming at the sudden presence of its human enemy. They observed how the barley was eaten to less than an inch above ground twenty or thirty yards from the dyke, compared with the fully grown crop of about eighteen inches. Both of the boys could catch, skin and prepare a rabbit, which would be a major meat dish in those days.

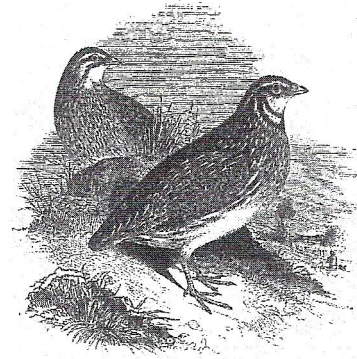
Further exploration along the dyke would take them to Shardlow's Wells, and in the summer to pick water cress from the then unpolluted ditches, hearing the drumming of the snipe plunging at speed, and all the time with their senses alert to other sounds and sights, and possibilities of trespass.

One thrill was to take ourselves by Fleam Dyke cottages by the A11. We loved watching the Hawker aircraft practise landing, just clearing the dyke on the Balsham side within the horse jumps. We used to jump some of them ourselves. There was little danger in crossing the A11, as so few vehicles travelled along it, - the silent countryside noting a noisy motor from some distance. In late January 1305 King Edward I and his entourage travelled back from Scotland to attend the parliament which he had summoned to Westminster on 28th February 1305. Could there have been two such boys watching as he passed through Fleam Dyke?

Quail heard but not seen, as usual by Bruce Martin

On the 14th August at around 15.30 BST, Jack Harrison heard a quail calling on the south side of the Roman Road at approximately TL521: just north of Worsted Lodge. The Quail is our only migratory game bird, wintering mainly south of the Sahara although some birds do winter in the Mediterranean region. It is about the size of a partially grown juvenile Partridge, which sometimes are mistaken for Quail.

They are mainly found in arable fields (usually wheat) but are very difficult to see. Fortunately the male has an often repeated and very distinctive tri-syllable call, written as 'wet-my-lips'. But as the call is ventriloquial it is almost impossible to pinpoint it. In over thirty years bird watching in the UK I have only ever heard them. But I did nearly step on one once during a winter visit to Bulgaria!



Quail

They usually arrive in May, (sometimes from mid April), though it is believed that the young of birds breeding in Europe may sometimes disperse north, arriving in Britain in August. Quail are an uncommon summer visitor to Cambridgeshire with the highest concentrations found in Fenland and along the chalk escarpment. Due to its secretive nature, breeding is rarely confirmed.

An average of 13 individuals per year was recorded in the County in the years 2000 –2005, although in irruption years numbers can be higher, as happened in 1989 when 75 birds were recorded.

Juniper and Beetle News

Recently, Iain Webb found another seedling Juniper beside the female bush which is lying prostrate near the top of the bank, bringing the total back up to four small plants. Iain has also seen quite a few specimens of the Juniper Shield bug, *Elasmotethus triastratus*, on two of the female trees. He writes:

The larvae feed on the two-year old fruit that are still on the tree. It was once quite scarce, for obvious reasons, but with the increased availability of Juniper from garden centres and the fact that it is able to survive on Lawson's Cypress means that it has spread. The bugs on Fleam may well have been there as long as the Juniper colony itself, or they may have spread from garden Junipers or Lawson's Cypresses nearby. However or whenever they got there, they are a native species on a native species and are really rather attractive to boot. The larvae are visible in June and July. The adults are present through until the following spring, and not hard to see.

On 22nd August, also on the Fleam Dyke, Iain saw the Lesser Bloody Nosed Beetle, *Timarcha goettingensis*, a unusual beetle which has been reported before from the Fleam Dyke, the Devil's Dyke and the Cherry Hinton chalk pits, and which is probably under recorded.

Green Hairstreak News

On May 10th, Trish Agnew, Vince Lea, Roger Lemon and Val Perrin, met at the Fulbourn end of the Fleam Dyke to do the first Transect Walk on Fleam Dyke, as proposed by Sharon Hearle at the A.G.M. They saw a total of 10 Green Hairstreaks flying or basking on the top of the bank between Fulbourn and Mutlow Hill. On the section near Mutlow Hill, the caterpillars feed on Rock Roses, but beyond the disused railway, there are almost no rock roses, so the females must be laying eggs on the leaves of Purging Buckthorn, Bramble and other shrubs.

If you see female in action there, please let me know.



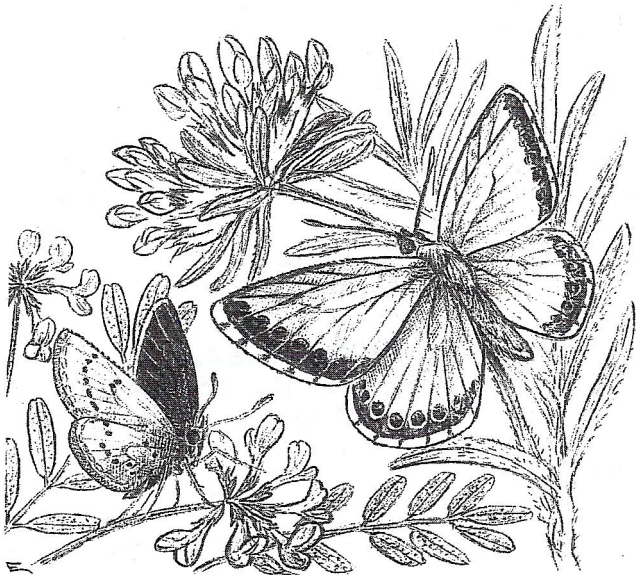
Drawing by Graham Easy

On 9th May 2005, Iain Webb saw a single Green Hairstreak on the northern end of the Roman Road, parallel with Wandlebury Nature Reserve. This was the first sighting of a Green Hairstreak on the Roman Road for 27 years! This year he saw two in the same area. Clearly, we need to hold a Green Hairstreak Hunt there on a sunny day in May 2007. Fixing a day is impossible because we cannot arrange the weather, but if the forecast is good, it would be easy for me to email or make a phone call to those butterfly lovers who don't have email. I have email addresses for the usual suspects, but you don't have to be a regular butterfly recorder to join us. If you are interested, let me know.

Many thanks to Roger Lemon who organised the Transect Walk on Fleam Dyke, and who is collating the results for Val Perrin, the Butterfly Recorder for VC29

Chalkhill Blues on Fleam Dyke again!

On 3rd August, John Dawson went to see if the Chalkhill Blues had reappeared on the eastern section of Fleam Dyke. He did not see any until he spotted a female, egg laying near the Bedford Gap.



On Sat. 5th Aug. Roger and Stella Wolfe wrote: "Beautiful day for butterflies. Saw lots, including 2 possible CHBs in sector 7, between old railway and Mutlow Hill (1 male; 1 female).

Definite CHBs (all male) east of the A11, beyond the juniper bushes, especially below the top of the dyke on the NE field boundary. Possibly also 1 female. Different behaviour from last year when they were being persecuted; now they seemed to be holding their own!"

On 6th August, Jack Harrison saw 8 Chalkhill Blues in the same place as last year: 7 males and 1 female

Trish and Sam Agnew also saw several during their August transect, which makes a good start to Trish's new career move.

Julia recruited Pete Towers, who is active in Madingley Toad Rescue and an enthusiastic naturalist, to join the Transect walkers. We went on the only vaguely promising afternoon of a wet fortnight, but the wind came up, the temperature fell, and we saw very little. However, the next day, 6th September, turned out to be wonderful, Vince Lea seized the moment to do his walk and saw all the usual late season butterflies and several Chalkhill Blues sheltering on the north side of the Fleam Dyke, A11 - Bedford gap section.

Correction!

This drawing, by Graham Easy, is of a Chalkhill Blue male and a Small Blue, **not** of two Chalkhill Blues, as I wrote in the last newsletter. Thanks to all who did not write crushing comments!

And on the Roman Road!

On 2nd August, Patrick Daunt emailed to say that he had seen two or three blues which looked like Chalkhill Blues. Was this possible? Yes, indeed it was, as there were huge numbers on Therfield Heath and on the Devil's Dyke. John Dawson went to look on 6th August, but did not see any. However, he was also looking for the larvae of the little seen Pimpernel Pug, which he did find. I was not able to go until 8th August. The flowers were almost over, and there were not a lot of butterflies anywhere, with the exception of the beautiful Painted Ladies, many newly hatched. Then, as I was approaching one of the last good clumps of Greater Knapweed, I noticed a different 'blue'. Large and silvery with a dark edge to the upper wings, it was unmistakable, though I caught it and potted it carefully to make sure before releasing it. What a delight!

Congratulations to Patrick Daunt, who is the first person to record Chalkhill Blues on the Roman Road since 1978. (Nature in Cambridgeshire, Butterflies of Cambridgeshire by Val Perrin, 1994)

A Traveller's Tale

by Julia Napier

One very hot afternoon at the end of July, I set off to check the state of bollards and traffic restriction signs on the Roman Road. There was a Roman Road Project meeting the next day, and this exciting item was on the Agenda. The sign at Hildersham Road junction was all present and correct, but at Worsted Lodge and Mount Farm the central bollards had been removed. The two local landowners had reacted by installing ingenious and impressive anti-tank defences.

The last stop was the entrance above the Beechwoods. I was circumnavigating the massive puddles in the track, when I saw the caravans were back. I considered the chances that I might cease to be me and become "Pensioner killed in savage attack on the Roman Road"; discounted it, and pretended to be out for an evening stroll. I said 'Hello' to a small boy and 'Good Evening' to a man with wild grey hair, wearing shorts and a grubby T shirt, who appeared and called off the curious dogs. He said nothing, but followed me in order to steal my valuables? No, to clear smouldering remnants of the fire out of my way and keep the dogs under control. One of us said, 'Lovely weather' and then, as we stood by the embers, with the sky turning gold, he told me his story in a pleasant Scottish accent.

'We've always been a travelling family. My grandmother had a beautiful wooden caravan, like the ones you see at shows. But I haven't always lived in a caravan. I had a house in Aylesbury, because I wanted the children to go to school. We lived there for 18 years; but then I had a stroke. I said to my wife, 'Let's go back to the caravan. I don't want to die in a house. They've always been nice to us at Fulbourn. Let's go there.' One of my first was born on the Roman Road. So we belong here really, you see. Can you understand me? I can't speak properly since the second stroke. I was paralysed all down this side, but I am getting better.'

He said they had rubbish organised tidily under the trees, with black bags for everything - he was too polite to say what was included in 'everything'. He took the bags to the Milton tip once a week. 'The Lady from the Council said we must not have a fire on the path, but we can have a fire on this bit of grass, as long as we don't go beyond that post there.' I learned later that this was Jessica, the Travellers' Social Worker. She had obviously insisted that tidiness was good hygiene and good publicity. There was indeed no rubbish around, except an old mattress and such like, that 'someone else left there. We are waiting for the Council to come and take it away'. A loitering car further down the track caught his attention, and he said. 'They have that bit, the homosexuals, and we have this bit. They don't bother us and we don't bother them.' Further conversation elicited the fact that one of his daughters had just graduated as a teacher from the University of Kent, at Canterbury. She was going to come home and teach the grandchildren. A dour looking teenager was doing wheelies on a nice bike. 'He has a computer from the Council. He is really good and understands it all. He is making his own computer. He is doing really well.'

At this point, two women came to see what was going on. Both were immaculately neat and quietly fashionable. The older woman had dark hair streaked with grey, drawn back severely onto the nape of her neck. For some days I could not think who she reminded me of, and then it came to me: my Latin teacher. The younger woman was blonde, with discreet gold jewellery and a highly visible, imminent baby, as was this summer's mode. They both looked at me coldly. The bubble over their heads said, "What does SHE want?" Then the older woman looked at her husband and said, "Look at you, you're filthy!" and he murmured excuses about the bonfire. It occurred to me that they were a long way from water. So I asked and his reply was, "I get it from the tap in the churchyard at Fulbourn. But not on Saturdays and Sundays, of course. I get it from my brother then." What gentle consideration for the feelings of others!

The small boy reappeared: a little brown berry in the latest wide-bottom breeches with a cuff below the knee. He was hopping up and down, demanding my attention for something. Then he hitched up one trouser leg and displayed a sparkling clean white dressing. I had to go and admire it, and then follow him to a spot where there was blood on the sand, if you looked very closely. 'My cousin's boy. He loves being here. It is so free.'

It was time to go. A few days later they had moved on. I wished they could have stayed there: trying to conform to our standards; living and letting live. But the County Council cannot make exceptions and anyway a week later, they or another group had returned to the pitch under the beech trees, half way from Lodge Farm to Worsted Lodge. They then left or were moved on again quite quickly. Meanwhile, another group of

caravans arrived at the Shelford Road entrance track. More damage to the edge of the Road, more work for everyone, more rubbish to be removed when they go. However, there is a ray of hope. Chris Tucker, the County Rights of Way Officer has found a crock of gold somewhere, and is hoping to install heavy duty gates at key entry points. This is exactly the sort of suburbanisation of the countryside that Patrick Sadler wrote about so sadly; but there seems no other way to solve the problem.

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What's in a name?

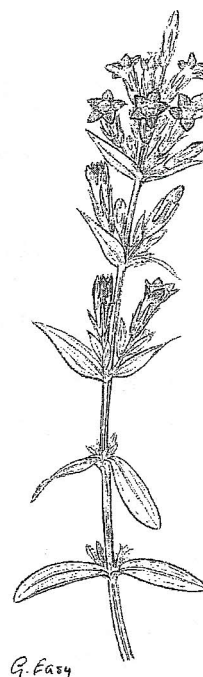
The road between the Beechwoods and Fulbourn is known locally as Shelford Road, and is so named on the Explorer Ordnance Survey map. Mr Worts, the eighteenth century public benefactor who paid for a causeway across the marshy land at the bottom of the hill, had an s on the end of his name, and therefore the causeway should be with an apostrophe + s, but is not so written on the map. So is the Cambridge end of the Roman Road to be found at Wort's Causeway, or Worts' Causeway, or is it on Shelford Road after all? My thanks to Allan Bringham for this clarification, or muddying of the waters.

Autumn Gentians

One of our members, Rachel Gray, visits the Fleam Dyke regularly to see the changing pattern of flowers. As she tends to make an annual visit to see the Autumn Gentians, we decided that she should become our official Gentian Watcher, rather on the lines of David Clarke's job as Juniper Watcher in the seventies and eighties. As this assignment is not a very arduous one, we have added in the job of Orchid Watcher.

Rachel reports that there are usually about 20 Autumn Gentians between Mutlow Hill and the Disused Railway, alone or in twos and threes along the path. They are there in the first half of September, but she says that once they have flowered they seem to disappear completely. On other sites they can grow quite tall, but on the Fleam Dyke they are only a few inches high. Although it is obvious that only one section of the Fleam Dyke suits these beautiful flowers, I was intrigued to learn from Peter Grubb that while several chalk grassland plants were found in the 1970's to have micorrhizal associations, Fairy Flax and the Autumn Gentian are utterly dependent on one particular kind of soil fungus.

In 2005, the Pyramidal Orchid flowered well on the eastern section of the Fleam Dyke last year, with a total of 12 spikes seen by David Harthill. However, orchids, also dependent on soil fungi are not consistent performers. Only 4 were seen this summer. If you saw any more, please let us know.



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Credit where Credit is due

For years I have been asking around for a n out-of-copyright source of black and white line drawings of birds. Then I came across a second hand copy of 'Wordsworth's Birds' by Stanley Finch. I cannot share Stanley Finch's enthusiasm for many of the lines quotes, but I was stunned to learn that The Bard of Grasmere had managed to refer to 196 birds, including Snipe and Quail, and even a Great Bustard. The illustrations come from 'A History of British Birds' by William Yowell, London 1843, but the name of the superb wood engraver is not given. Anyone?

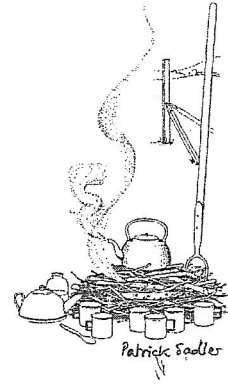
The newsletter mailing team are most grateful to Angie at Cambridge Electronic Design who found us a supply of A5 envelopes at affordable prices, and again, my very sincere thanks to Peter and Mark Bishop of Copy Studio for their patient help with this newsletter, and other small publishing jobs.

Julia Napier, September 2006

The Mid-Week Conservation Programme

The Mid-Week Conservation Volunteers will be working on the Fleam Dyke and the Roman Road this winter, as well as on other areas managed by the Green Belt Project. Good exercise in the fresh air/rain, and pleasant company over a picnic lunch.

Please ring 01954 713500 if you intend to come, in order to check the meeting place.



Other Work Parties and Events

Sunday, 1st October

Helpers Wanted for work on Fulbourn Nature Reserve

Can you find an hour or two to help keep this beautiful reserve in good condition? Work Parties are held on the first Sunday of every month until March. They last from 10.0 am to 12.30 or so. Meet at Stonebridge Lane. Contact: Nigel Copeman, e-mail: ncopeman@tinyworld.co.uk, or phone Julia Napier.

Sunday, 8th October

Friends' Work party on the Roman Road

Meet in Wandlebury Nature Reserve car park at 10.0am to share transport to the site. We hope to clear a bit of scrub back to the hedge, and to mow and rake off in areas where there is still good chalk grassland flora, including patches of our rare Purple Milk Vetch.

Sunday, 19th November

Friends' Work Party on the Fleam Dyke

Meet at Stonebridge Lane, at the entrance to the Nature Reserve, to share lifts to the site. Mowing and raking as usual.

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Talks Organised by the Cambridge City Group of the Wildlife Trust

These talks are held in the Gilmour Building of Cambridge University Botanic Garden. Please note that the entrance is via the drive beside 47 Bateman Street, **NOT** at the Bateman Street gate of the Botanic Garden. All talks are at 7.30pm. Entry: £1.50 for members of the Wildlife Trust, £2.50 for non-members

Thurs 28th Sept

The Great Bustard, and attempts at a reintroduction

Illustrated talk by Bill Jordan

Thurs 26th Oct

The Altai Mountains - Snow Leopard Country

Illustrated talk by Christine Newell

Thurs 30th Nov

Form, Structure and Content: what makes a place good for invertebrates

Illustrated talk by Peter Kirby

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