



Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke

**November 2011
Newsletter Thirty Six**

**Small Scabious or *Scabiosa columbaria*
by Marjorie Powell**

In the June newsletter, I appealed for photographs of chalk grassland flowers. Thank you, photographers, for these lovely photos, which will be used from time to time in the newsletter and in due course added to the website. A few weeks later I also received a large envelope with a remarkable drawing of Common Knapweed and a note from Marjorie saying that she was not very good with cameras, but would a drawing do instead? A week or two after that another marvellous drawing arrived, and has unfairly taken precedence because it is such a brilliant solution to a visual problem, and so very pretty. Also, as the days draw in, it makes me think of snow flakes and a star in the east.



The drawing was accompanied with a note apologizing that the drawing was: “a bit lopsided due to the fact that the flower was on a side shoot, presumably because the plant was cut off by mowing. I thought about pretending it was the crown flower but as these sometimes differ in symmetry or size, I left it the way it was”.

Marjorie also apologized for other aspects of the drawing which did not represent exactly what she had been looking at, and for substituting this imaginary dissection of a flower head because it was impossible to show the detail of the flower head any other way. I think you will agree that there is nothing to apologise for.

Field Fleawort on the Fleam Dyke – an update by David Barden

Regular readers of this newsletter will know that we have on the Fleam Dyke a colony of Field Fleawort (*Tephrosia integrifolia*), in one of its two sites in the county. I provided a summary of what I knew about the colony in Newsletter 27 (November 2008), and said then that I'd be carrying out a more thorough survey in 2009. That indeed took place, and was so successful that I repeated it in 2010 and 2011, with help from a few enthusiastic volunteers (Monica Frisch and Steve Hartley in particular).

Following much hands-and-knees botanising, I can now report that we have a grand total of 24 plants between the A11 and the Bedford Gap, nearly all in the very short turf next to the path along the top. Some plants have more than one rosette, making 33 rosettes in all. However, in 2011, even though 27 attempted to put up a flowering spike, only 3 had reached flowering stage by 28 May. Sadly, at that point it looked likely that even these would be too feeble to make it to seed.



Photo: David Barden

The reasons for this seem to be multiple. Firstly, the exceptionally dry weather this spring was probably responsible for over half of the flowering stems shrivelling up before doing anything. Two-thirds of those that did put up a spike were nibbled off by rabbits (who also seem to be responsible for eating off the young leaves of a number of plants). Finally, the occasional plant gets trampled, although as they're quite tough leathery things, they seem to be able to recover from a light squishing.

However, it's not all bad news, as several more plants have been found in each of the three years I've done the survey, meaning that the population is actually much stronger than I first suspected. The plants, even when flowering, are pretty inconspicuous, and it takes a bit of practice to spot the non-flowering leaf-rosettes. I aim to continue the survey in future years, and hope to discover in the process a bit more about the plants on the dyke – such as how long they live and how often plants make it to seed. It is possible that the plants on the top of the dyke are at the limit of their ecological tolerance, and that reproduction by seed has always been a relatively rare event.

Farming on the Roman Road

by Peter Bennett, Land Manager for Babraham Farms

It has been a very difficult year for farming on either side of the Roman Road, but farmers would say that!

Last January/February saw one of the coldest winters for many years, and although most of us got our sugar beet out of the ground, some were left with a very little rotting in the ground. If that wasn't enough, the frost prevented any real winter growth of wheat, so that when spring came the plants were less vigorous and were unable to survive the drought of March, April and May, when only 0.5 inches were recorded over the three month period. During this time tillers (first shoots) died on any light land, and from then on any rainfall was too late. Oilseed rape crops were able to survive better because of their deep tap root.

Sugar beet was drilled into ideal seed beds and despite the lack of rain the young plants grew well, along with the diverse weed population which, because of the dryness, were partly unaffected by the herbicides! Potatoes, on the other hand, have grown well this year with irrigation water controlling the growth and quantity.

Farmers are never satisfied on all counts. Harvest yields of cereals in our area are abysmal, whereas on heavy land the comments are quite encouraging. Cereal prices are much improved from 2010. Although volatile, they are being propped up by the US corn market and low yields in France and Germany.

All in all, it was a year when farming along the Roman Road is best forgotten, and one can only pray for a return to a wet May and June in 2012, an open autumn, and not the appalling frosts of January 2011, so that our beet comes out of the ground unfrosted.

The farmer's lot is never a really happy one!
October 2011

Ragwort, Friend or Foe?

In late July I received queries about ragwort being pulled up on the Fleam Dyke. I have always loved the bright golden flowers of Ragwort, and the black and yellow cinnabar moth larvae with their amazing Hungry Caterpillar capacity to strip a plant of every single leaf. I am glad to report that my dentist's small daughter is a new fan. While waiting for an injection to take, he also told me that Cinnabar is an orange-red mineral mainly found in mines in China. It is essential for the colour known as Chinese Red, the red of Emperors as well as of the People's Republic. Why do dentists know these things? Because mercury is a product of cinnabar.

Iain Webb, the Green Belt Officer for the Wildlife Trust, replies:

On Wednesday 27th July, I took the Mid-week Volunteers to the southern section of Fleam Dyke to remove Ragwort. Three years after this area was cleared of scrub in 2001, Ragwort was present at high densities and so was removed to aid the development of chalk grassland and to make it possible for a grazier to bring his flock of Norfolk Horns onto the site. The grassland has developed really quite nicely, as have some areas previously covered in thick scrub. Ragwort has always been a small part of the grassland community. However, over the past couple of years Ragwort has increased on this section and it has been removed from the slopes of the dyke in order to keep it in check.

Ragwort is still present on the site. I did not want to remove it completely due to its value for invertebrates. It is, of course, part of our native flora. Ragwort has not been removed from the western ditch bank where there is very little grassland interest. It is also found in the field edges adjacent to the site. Invertebrates do not respect man-made boundaries, so the resource is still available, albeit at a reduced level, as it had been for several years prior to this year.

I do not believe that if grazing could again be arranged on this section of the Dyke that the presence of some Ragwort would be an issue. I feel the way that Ragwort has become public

enemy number one is deplorable. As Buglife and other charities so rightly say it is an essential component of our flora.

The Wind Farm money

When consulted 2009, the Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke did not approve or object to the plan for a wind farm. One could not claim the plan would damage the Fleam Dyke, but it is sad that another unspoiled view over green fields has been lost. On the other hand, the Friends are a very 'green' society. I doubt if any members still question whether climate change is upon us. Alternative sources of power must be found.

Developments within the Green Belt have to be approved by the area Wildlife Trust and the developer is required to pay compensation under Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act of 1990. Therefore, Martin Baker, Conservation Manager for Cambridgeshire, was able to secure legal agreement for a substantial compensation payment.

As a result, the RES Community Fund have a 5 year agreement to pay for Iain Webb's work on the Devil's Dyke, the Fleam Dyke and the Roman Road. In addition RES will contribute £10,000 for work on the Fleam Dyke. This is to be paid in 3 instalments: £4,000 one year after planning permission, £3,000 one year after commencement of electricity generation and £3,000 three years after the commencement of electricity generation. The first £4,000 has paid for the control of Clematis on Mutlow Hill and the clearance of scrub on the Fleam Dyke in 3 places in order to expose the structure of the Saxon dyke. In addition two work parties from RES management have done very useful clearance work on the Fleam Dyke in the area around the Junipers.

RES, Renewable Energy Systems, is part of the Sir Robert McAlpine group. It was set up in 1982 to research and develop wind turbines, and built the first wind farm in 1992 using the Danish Vestas turbines. It now has wind farms world-wide. The headquarters at Kings Langley are in the formerly derelict Ovaltine Egg Farm, built in the early 1930s in the style of the Arts and Crafts movement, echoing the consciously rustic farm built by Louis XVI for Marie Antoinette. This model Poultry and Dairy Farm was strictly practical, with high standards of hygiene and a unique rearing house built in the form of a horseshoe, in order to catch as much sunlight as possible, with minimal need for electricity in the rearing parlours.

The abandoned buildings were repaired with a grant from the Three Rivers Authority and the European Union.

Christmas Quiz question: From which three rivers in Hertfordshire, does the authority take its name? 'I'm going to have to hurry you now.'



Photo: from RES website

Work done by the Green Belt Project Officer and the Friends

Iain Webb continues to manage the best areas of the Fleam Dyke and the Roman Road bringing his band of Mid-week Volunteers 6 or 7 times to various key sections during the winter. The Friends have done 4 winter work parties a year since 2001, and in the last three years have done several summer work parties, pulling up the long stems of Old Man's Beard and brambles, which can blanket the flowers which we want to encourage. However, the roots are still there, of course. Now we are hoping to be able to afford systematic chemical treatment of cut stumps and roots. The increased subscription and many extra donations, added to the £1,300 made on 14th April, have given us the money to do this.

In the last newsletter, I described the clearance and treatment of scrub south of Copley Hill. This cost £1,000. In early October, Bernard Hunt returned with 3 helpers to retreat any clematis and brambles which had re-emerged. He then tackled the unauthorized clearance, as you can see from the red paint used in the chemical to mark what has been done. The drought finally broke in September and he was able to burn the arisings from the earlier work. This work cost another £1,000, leaving us with an equivalent amount to use on the northern section of the Fleam Dyke. This has been used to try to roll back the sea of clematis that has swamped the area just north of Mutlow Hill which was cleared in 2001, but could not be maintained.

Wildlife Area to link Fulbourn Nature Reserve and the Fleam Dyke

Richard Townley, the owner of Fulbourn Manor and the surrounding land, is implementing a plan to turn into sheep pasture the three fields alongside the final section of the farm track which leads to the path to Fleam Dyke. The grassy track leading up to the Fleam Dyke will be included in the plan as will the Townley land on the Fleam Dyke which covers the bank and both slopes for 3-400 yards. The whole will be fenced for sheep, and there will be a holding area at the corner of the existing fallow field for management of the sheep. The ruined building on the track to the Dyke will be removed. The track to the Dyke will be fenced. This will provide a very useful wildlife area, although some details seem problematic. There is a plan for several ponds, but will the water table be high enough? The low-lying fields are likely to be extremely rich in nutrients especially after so many years of fertilizer use. I believe that the seed used was from the Lincolnshire Wolds, which seems strange. The Townley section of the dyke is to be planted with seed brush-harvested from Therfield Heath, as has been done with some success on the Devil's Dyke. Success on the Fleam Dyke will require thorough treatment of existing brambles and ruderal weeds, power seeding with hemp to stabilize the seed, and wetter springs than we have had for some time. I cannot see the north end of the Fleam Dyke providing good sheep-grazing for many years. However, I hope to be proved wrong, as the basic aim is so good.

The Mystery Mower

You may remember that following the clearance of a section of low scrub south of Copley Hill, there was an unwanted flailing of an equivalent section. The Mystery Mower had also cruised down to Worsted Lodge, mowing the verges which for skilled management by Iain Webb's Mid-week team and the Friends. Neither the Countryside Access officer nor the three adjoining landowners knew anything about it. However, the bush telegraph put me onto David Davison, the contractor for footpaths and byways. Given more details, he suddenly realized that the culprit was a young machine driver who had a tendency to ignore the finer details of his instructions. The culprit will be moved to a less sensitive route, and the flowers that bloom in the spring, tra-la will be left to do so, we hope.

Major clearance of the Roman Road near Balsham

In the spring I was told of extensive clearance of a section of the Roman Road near Balsham. Who by? On a lovely August day I went to have a look at the flowers at Mark's Grave and walked up towards Borley Wood. The track was mostly in good condition, which suggested that the Seasonal Traffic Restriction Order had been fairly effective during the winter, but I was surprised to see that drainage pipes had been installed under the track and that the numerous trees which had grown up on the verges had been felled and removed. Someone had picked up a very large bill!

The clearance has removed the secret woodland path quality of this part of the track, but instead there is an open sunny walk with an eruption of Tufted Vetch and Common Knapweed along the south facing verge. (Tufted Vetch is the food plant of the Black Neck moth, which is grey with a

black 'neck' and listed as Local rather than Common.) I wondered how these new wide verges were to be maintained. By a happy coincidence, David Davison supplied me with the answer. The work was paid for by the Countryside Access Department. Previous attempts to maintain a satisfactory surface by surfacing with road scrapings (not ideal) had led to flooding in the corner of a field belonging to Yole Farm. It is hoped that proper drainage, better ventilation and sunlight will help the heavy clay soil to dry out faster.

Flora note: there used to be some native Honeysuckle, growing in the southern hedge. Let me know if you see any. For optimists: Honeysuckle is the food plant of the White Admiral butterfly.

Perse School Work Parties, our gain the City's loss

Once a fortnight, on Monday afternoons, David Pickstone, Biology teacher at the Perse Main School, brings a work party to help us. This unexpected bonus has come to us because the City Council felt obliged to do without Ellis Selway, who has for ten years maintained and improved wildlife sites around the city. A part-time junior officer has been appointed instead.

So, every other Monday afternoon, 15 sixth form boys have arrived in a nice white bus, picked up gloves, clippers and saws, and set about pulling up brambles, dealing death to clematis and cutting back overgrowth from hedges. Initially, I had a vision of large lads with lots of muscle, but some of them are remarkably small, and not all are entirely dedicated to the job. The school motto, *Qui facit per alium facit per se* or 'He who does things for others does them for himself' was not at the forefront of the mind of the boy who put a worm down his friend's neck. Or said he had.

November 27th, Excursion to Birmingham Museum

Unfortunately, I fell foul of one of the season's bugs and was unable to go; but several people emailed to say how well Elfrida Heath had organized everything and what a good day it had been. In particular, Elfrida had prepared a very clear itinerary with a map showing other places of interest which could be visited, such as St Chad's Roman Catholic Cathedral, a handsome Pugin building, the famous Burne-Jones windows in St Philip's Church and the Christmas Market. Tickets were priced at £20 so that we would not lose money if only 25 people could come. In the event, Elfrida sold another ten tickets so we made a profit of £250.

Olympic Torch Bearer

You may have seen, heard or read about the remarkable achievements of the people who have been chosen to carry the Olympic Torch up hill, down dale and over water all around these islands, particularly many wonderful children (and their supporting parents). So we need not feel too dashed that Sam Agnew was not chosen. It would have been fun, though, wouldn't it?

Our newest supporter, see photo, Alberto Sciretti responded: "Sometimes in the life the dreams remain dreams but they are still wonderful!"

Work parties in 2012

Sunday 19th February. Mowing and raking off the flowery bank opposite the Golf Course.

Meet 9.45 at Wandlebury Car Park

Sunday 18th March. Clearing privet on the Fleam Dyke. Meet at 9.45 at Stonebridge Lane to share transport to the site. **Please use the Recreation Ground car park** beside the Townley Memorial Hall.

**With best wishes for Christmas and the New Year,
Julia Napier 12th December, 2011**



County Council clearance work. The Roman Road near Yole Farm. Borley Wood to the left.



Tufted Vetch.
Photo: Jack Harrison

Sept 25th 2011

Our annual mow of the long flowery bank on the Roman Road, south of Worsted Lodge. Front Row: Richard Fowling, Helen Chubb, Sophie Janacek, Cathy Goss, Matthew Wallis. Back Row: Iain Webb and a new recruit, John Austen.



20th Nov. 2011 Viva Italia!

Damiano Fracassi and Alberto Sciretti joined Helen, Richard, Tim Moore and me in yet another assault on brambles on the north verge of the Roman Road. Copley Hill in the background. Damiano and Alberto are newly qualified lawyers who are here to learn English, hoping for the job market to recover in Italy. They have joined the Friends and are keen to help on work parties. How did this happen? Do read Alberto's delightful blog, which has some lovely photographs.

<http://www.inesplorazione.it/2011/11/correndo-sulla-storia-della-roman-road.html>



Photo: Oggie Tomic

Who's Who on the Committee

Back Row, left to right: Edmund Tanner, our Chairman; Elfrida Heath our new Events organizer; Nigel Copeman, Voluntary Warden of Fulbourn Nature Reserve; Professor Peter Grubb, our Patron. Front Row, Christine Newell, website; Julia Napier, Secretary and Mike Albutt, Treasurer. Unfortunately, three committee members are missing from this photo taken at a committee meeting: Roger Lemon, organizer of the Butterfly Transect recording and the Long Walk Project; Jane Robson, Membership Secretary, and David Seilly, Work Parties.

Eleventh Annual General Meeting

Wednesday 28th March, 7.30pm at the Six Bells Public House

All welcome. Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke free. Non-members £3

Guest Speaker: Professor Ian Newton, Chairman of the Council of the British Trust for Ornithology.

Professor Newton has been an expert from boyhood on finches. He is famous for his work on birds of prey, particularly on pesticide damage to Sparrowhawks, on the ecology of bird migration and his 27 year study of a Sparrowhawk colony.

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