

Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke



January 2019
Newsletter 54

Happy New Year to everyone!

No harm in hoping, and you never know what might turn up. Meanwhile, we have our

Eighteenth Annual General Meeting

Saturday, March 16th, 2.45 for 3.00pm – 5.30pm in the Meeting Room of the Fulbourn Centre, 31 Home End, CB21 5BS on the corner of Stonebridge Lane



Business meeting as usual, with illustrations of the wildlife and work done

30 minute interval for tea or coffee, cakes and savouries, in the Committee Room, followed by a half hour talk with time for questions to our Guest Speaker

Stephen Tomkins, Chairman of the Cam Valley Forum

**The River Cam: its History, Natural History, Present State
and Possible Future**

All welcome

Members free

Non-members £3

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www.frfd.org.uk

Work on the Fleam Dyke

As you will know if you have walked along the Dyke during the last year, there has been extensive clearance of scrub from the Fulbourn end up to the edge of Mutlow Hill itself. The first section, where the dyke rises up from the fields, formerly the fen, belongs to Townley Farms was cleared several years ago. The area was seeded with Upright Brome. It has been grazed for limited periods by sheep for two years. See below left.



From the gate of this area southwards, the slopes have been cleared with treatment of stumps, as far as that is possible without poisoning everything. The area near Mutlow Hill was hand-seeded by Iain Webb with seed from local sources, and the rest hydro-seeded with Upright Brome seeds in a mulch of cotton waste fibres. This technique is regularly used with success on the verges and embankments of new roads. However, in such places the surface is newly made.

Roger Lemon took this photograph showing the newly cleared area between the disused railway and the pumping station on 8/1/2019. The Butterfly Monitoring reports last spring recorded sightings of only a few Green Hairstreaks. Should we blame the weather, or the clearance, or perhaps a parasite?



These slopes need annual mowing, ideally with removal of arisings. It was hoped that a robotic mower would be a good solution. One producer claims that its machine can mow on a 55 degree slope, and another claims success on a 45 degree slope. Unfortunately, the one tried on the Fleam Dyke failed an experimental trial, although the Dyke is 'only' a slope of 38 degrees, which is the natural tipping point of a pile of loose material, as the Saxon builders knew.



The Land Manager for Wilbraham Farms is said to have been hoping to run Romney sheep. This seems extraordinary, since Romneys are famous for their thick fleeces, which can easily get tangled in brambles. They are usually put on marshland, because their hooves are resistant to foot rot, and they tend not to suffer from liver fluke. Previous talk was of hill sheep, which can cope with sloping sites and are able to reduce scrub growth by eating the new shoots. Moreover, they have horns with which they can deter dogs, but there is little profit in these breeds. It may be possible to erect electric fencing to keep the sheep

away from brambles, but this surely requires annual clearance of the brambles behind the electric fences.

A great deal of public money has been spent on the design and execution of this plan so far, without a clear prospect of success because the plan requires maintenance by the land owner. It is possible that sheep will be brought onto Mutlow Hill this spring. The footpath will have to be maintained. The photo above taken on January 18th 2018 offers a picture of what the Fleam Dyke north of Mutlow hill might look like if the plan succeeds.

Let's take a Side Trip to Schleswig Holstein.

During Dr Sam Newton's talk on the Wuffing Kings at our AGM in 2007, there was a reference to the Danish 'Great Dyke', which was built across the Cimbric peninsula from Hedeby to Schleswig. The *Danewerke* or *Grotewerke* lies on the border between the Germanic linguistic and cultural area and the Danes. This was said to have been built by the tenth century king of the Danes, the legendary Harald Bluetooth; but more recent archaeological work suggests that the present Danewerke is much older, as it was definitely in existence in 500 AD, and probably originated in Neolithic defence embankments, as did our East Anglian defence banks. It was last used as a military defence in 1864, in the Second Schleswig War, which we had better not go into. Sam Newton said that the Great Dyke was regarded in both World Wars as a fall back



position, linking it to the 'Fleam', from the verb 'to flee'. A quick skim through the Wikipedia article takes you to the near destruction of much of the Grotewerke in 1940 to make a tank trap. The man in charge of military defences was SS commander, Heinrich Himmler, who was also in charge of the Office for Ancestral Heritage. Hearing of the plans, the Danish archaeologist, Søren Telling immediately phoned Himmler himself and argued strongly against the destruction of an important remnant of "Aryan civilization". Himmler authorized him to stop the construction of the anti-tank trench. He informed Telling that a written order would be dispatched but that it would take several days to arrive. Telling then drove to the site and ordered the commanding Wehrmacht officers to immediately stop the construction process. When the local Wehrmacht commander refused, Telling threatened him with reprisals from the SS. Construction was called off and Himmler's written order arrived two days later. Søren Telling later settled near the site and considered himself its custodian until his death in 1968.

Work on the south end of the Fleam Dyke, A11 to the Bedford Gap

The continuing uncertainty about Brexit has led to a reduction in the income of many charities, including that of the Wildlife Trust, as businesses take a cautionary approach to coming events, reducing donations and sponsorship. As a result, Iain Webb will not be able to bring the Mid-Week Volunteers to work on the Fleam Dyke at all. This means that there may be no annual management work on the south end of the Fleam Dyke, although it is the best section for chalk grassland flora and for our Chalkhill Blues. We very much hope that Butterfly Conservation will repeat their donation of £500 for clearance work to conserve these butterflies, and perhaps lure back the Dark Green Fritillaries, 3 of which were seen last summer Three? or just one speedy operator?

Dark Green Fritillary,
on Greater Knapweed
Photo by Roger Lemon



Chalkhill Blues back on
on the Fleam Dyke .
photo taken by Roger
Wolf. 9th Aug. 2005



Let's take a break from all that hard work.

Life is full of surprises

by Bill Clark, formerly Head Warden of Wandlebury Nature Reserve

There is a small pond in one of the resident's gardens at Wandlebury, and considering the lady of the house dug it out by hand it's not so small! The actual water area is about 3m x 4m x 2m x 4m, and 1m at the deepest point. It was plastic lined and planted up with a mix of wild and decorative plants, and kept topped up by two down-pipes from the house roof. From the front door of the house you cross some 2m of paving to stand against small, double, wrought iron gates, flanked by short sections of wooden rail fence. The slabs are set on a 1m wall, with a planted 30cm wide ledge 30cm above the pond surface. A rockery planted with ferns takes up the right-hand corner and a 30cm walled bank containing shrubs drops down to a 15cm walled bank around the far end containing one shrub. The left-hand side has a soil bank sloping into the water and covered with a mix of perennial garden plants and grass. Until recently I looked after the house and garden during her frequent times away, spending free time observing the wildlife. Name a bird, and it's probably been seen there! And if I didn't see the animals, I probably saw foot-prints or faeces. There are grass snakes swallowing frogs and toads, toads snapping up drinking bees, newts catching frog tadpoles, and just about every insect I would expect to see near water.

But a couple of years ago I did get surprised. Whilst leaning over the gates I heard a plop below the fern leaves, and saw a bright silver mouse swimming in a zig-zag fashion some 30cm below the surface. It swam near 4m before disappearing into the grass bank. I was trying hard to remember all I saw. A definite blunt 'vole' nose - not a short tail - and certainly the silver was air trapped in fur. I was about to give up any hope of a further sighting, when a friend came looking for me. I stayed and spoke of what I had just seen - he too is a countryman spending much time boating - and as I said, "I don't expect I shall see it again", we heard a slight splash, and there it was, on its return journey at the same depth! Two days later I was entertained to a third pond crossing, and decided that we were right in assuming it was a bank vole. Despite my visiting most days since and seeing bank voles around, no one else has have seen one in the pond.

In the 'Handbook of British Mammals', G B Corbet and H N Southern 2nd ed.1977, despite a meticulous history, make no mention of the habit. Only two of my many natural history books briefly mention that bank voles swim. Yet is there an animal that cannot! It was my wife, Wendy, of course, that went straight to the correct volume. We still have our children's 'Observer' library, and on page 111 of Maurice Burton's, 'Wild Animals', is the sentence: The bank vole is much more agile than the short-tailed vole but less given to jumping or burrowing. It may be seen in sunny situations at any time of the day, preferring warm, dry places, but is also found in wet places. It is a good swimmer and diver.
June 2016

Work on the Roman Road - Worsted Lodge to the Hildersham Road

We are grateful to Monica O'Donnell, Natural England, for again securing funding under the current Grassland Conservation and Enhancement Scheme. Quinton Carroll, an archaeologist with Historic England, is the official budget holder for this money, and he has arranged for Green Willows Associates, contractors used by Cambridgeshire County Council, to mow the grassland verges from Worsted Lodge to the Hildersham Road, and to remove the arisings. They have also done some work on the hedges. Fordham Estates, who have done a good job on this section for many years, did not submit a quotation. However, Green Willows have worked on the management of other sections of the Roman Road, and are reported to have done a good job. Some of the work was done before Christmas according to the Natural England protocol, when there was a great deal of rain. I am glad to say that the new contractor, Stephen Parnwell, decided not to bring heavy vehicles onto the site in order to collect the arisings. Unfortunately this leaves a mulch of long grass cuttings to be collected when the ground dries out, after which walkers and runners will be trampling the chalk grassland flora, in order to avoid the muddy puddles on the track.

Copley Hill clearance, April 2011 – 2018

Thanks to your subscriptions, the Friends were able to pay £1,300 to Hunts Wildlife to mow, and rake off the wide grassland verge south of Copley Hill and the remnant of chalk grassland opposite the Golf Course as usual in April 2018. Even in the very wet summer there was a marked reduction of fertility in the central stretch of the Copley Hill site and a minimal regrowth of blackthorn and hawthorn, although brambles, especially Dewberry continue to be a problem.

The trouble with boasting about our success is that flower-rich grassland is not particularly eye-catching at its best, and even then the tall feathery heads of *Arrhenatherum* – Wild Oats, dominate the view, but if you scroll down you can see the list of the rare calcareous flora which can be seen there, mostly in some abundance. All but four of these species were visible either immediately after the clearance in April 2011, or as soon as there was some rain. They had been clinging on under increasing scrub and thick moss. A few more years and they would have been gone. With the clearance of scrub, and hand removal of the moss, they re-emerged and spread. Particularly striking were the bright yellow flowers of large patches of Common Rock-rose, previously unrecorded there. Photo by Jack Harrison



Hunts Wildlife will be back on Copley Hill in April to continue this work. This site does what the Friends set out to do eighteen years ago: **to conserve and enhance the flora and fauna of these Sites of Special Scientific Interest**. In addition, the project had another aim, which was to show that systematic annual mowing and removal of arisings, together with eradication of the roots of unwanted scrub and brambles cuts the cost, enabling other work to be included for the same sum. For example, the invisible but essential continued eradication of Hemlock at Mount Farm.

Mount Farm. Triumph of Weeds over Optimism?

In theory the clearance of brambles and clematis on the wide verge at Mount Farm, begun five years ago should have been crowned with the similar success, but we were defeated by the nature of the little wilderness there: too long established, too damp, too full of happy rabbits and tough weed species, particularly Mugwort which has developed herbicide resistance. What should we do? If we give up, we throw away many years of hard work and let the weeds and the wilderness return, knowing that in a few years time the scrub will have to be cleared again.

October 2018, Bernard Hunt and Aaron resume the battle, returning to finish burning the mountain of green weeds. While the pile of cut material burned on the standard sheet of corrugated iron, they cut, raked up the verges all the way to up the work done by Iain Webb and the Midweek Volunteers, giving a clear view of the bank and ditch structure of a Roman Road.



Our Seventeenth Annual General Meeting, 2nd May 2018

It was of course my intention to report on this event in a subsequent newsletter, but 'due to circumstances beyond my control' – a wonderful catch-all excuse, - this did not happen. It is possible that you have not noticed this omission, but just for the record, a meeting was held in the Meeting Room of the Fulbourn Centre in the presence of the 45 members and supporters.

Professor Grubb chaired the meeting on behalf of Edmund Tanner who had not been well. Thanks to Christine Newell, Julia discovered how amazingly easy it is to put some slides on power point, thus enabling Iain Webb to illustrate the work he had done on both sites during 2017. A second series of slides illustrated the work done by Hunt's Wildlife at Copley Hill, the Golf Course bank and Mount Farm. Roger Lemon gave an illustrated report on the surveys he runs on both sites for the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme for which he also does a great many survey walks himself, along with Sam and Trish Agnew, Mike Gittos, Vince Lea, Rosemarie Neusel, Marion Jackson, and John Peregrine. Roger collates all the reports expertly, and Christine has put them on our website. www.frrfd.org.uk

As usual, our Treasurer, Mike Albutt, gave a very brief account of a very great deal of tedious work ensuring that all the columns in the financial statement agree. Each year they are approved by a Chartered Accountant, Kevin Harris, who very generously checks and approves our accounts free of charge. At the close of December 2017, the Friends had £1760 86 in the Natwest Bank. Finally, the committee was re-elected unopposed, the meeting having resisted the invitations to throw us out selectively or collectively.

After a brief interval, the meeting resumed and Professor Grubb introduced **Bill Sutherland, the Miriam Rothschild Professor of Conservation Biology, at the University of Cambridge, Fellow of St. Catharine's College, President of the British Ecological Society.** Professor Sutherland's research is directed towards predicting the consequences of environmental change. He is known for his research on integrating science and policy, particularly in the area of evidence-based conservation. In his talk he discussed how we can use evidence, including his website to underpin practice, <<http://www.conservationevidence.com>> This sounds rather abstract, but could be expressed as 'because we did this last year, should we do it again this year?'

Conservation in a post truth world?

He began his lecture with a portrait of Sir Richard Hawkins, one of the 'sea dogs' of naval history; the hero of "Westward Ho" for those of us old enough to have read it. In 1593 he bought 'The Dainty', one of the small, light Tudor ships designed by his father, Sir John Hawkins and set off for the Spanish Main to try his luck in the family business of exploring, piracy and slave trading. On these long sea voyages, the majority of sailors suffered terribly from scurvy caused by the lack of Vitamin C, with many dying on each journey. Various cures were tried. In his book "A voiage to the South Sea", 1622, Sir Richard noted that 'sower lemons and oranges' were 'most fruitful, and I wish that some learned man would write of it' but his suggestion was not taken up until in 1747, when James Lind, a surgeon with the Royal Navy, carried out the first controlled clinical trials recorded in medical science, which proved that even a week's dose of lemon juice produced an improvement. However, it was not until the 1860s that citrus fruit was officially included in the provisions, and even then the fruit specified were limes, because they were grown on the British Barbados. Unfortunately for the sailors, limes were later found to be half as rich in Vitamin C even when fresh, but it does explain why Americans call the British Limeys, not Lemonies.

Bill Sutherland gave us other dismal examples of our general preference for sticking to old habits: Josph Lister's successful experiments with sterile surgical treatment were criticised and even derided in many quarters for almost a decade after their introduction in 1867; Australian doctors were using a combination of antibiotics to cure stomach ulcers a decade before this was generally adopted in Britain, and several decades of parenting advice to put babies to bed at night on their faces, despite alternative research conclusions, led to thousands of infant deaths before the Back to Bed campaign transformed the tragic statistics: an average of one in 250 infant deaths a year dropped to one in every three thousand.

But what has this to do with our conservation of wildlife? Too much, it seems. Bill Sutherland referred to the continued use of out-dated methods of dealing with predators, or the continued introduction of Bat Gantreys, which do not deal with the problem. A researcher said, "One only hopes that the bats know what they are for." His extensive studies have led to the troubling conclusion that most wardens, paid or unpaid, know only about 60% of the possible solutions to a problem on their site. They are unlikely to have read primary studies of the problem, and even when they have, they are unlikely to change! As my mother's old gardener said, when in desperation she showed him her RHS gardening book, "I don't hold with that book."

In an attempt to provide better answers, Bill Sutherland has developed a programme in which experts in a particular field come together to decide on key questions and agreed solutions. In addition to publication in specialist journals, these conclusions have now been assembled in a handbook for practitioners, "**What works in Conservation,**" Open Book Publishing: paperback £24 95, hardback £34 95. Thanks to funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, the Natural Environment Research Council and other donors, it is also available free as a pdf or EML, so you could take a look now and read scientifically tested methods for the conservation of bees, bats, and birds. The chapter headings include questions such as: What is the best means of reducing illegal hunting of primates? Does changing the type of livestock benefit heathland vegetation? Does removing the upper layer of peat enhance peatland restoration? Is flame treatment effective for dealing with invasive floating pennywort?

Unfortunately for us, Bill Sutherland's team have not yet covered the conservation of chalk grassland, and the restoration of chalk grassland lost to varying years of scrub and brambles.



Thanks to Mrs Killander, we enjoyed another marvellous visit to **Pampisford Arboretum** on Sunday 2nd August, followed by tea in the Conservatory. If you have a magnifying glass you will be able to identify from the left: Freddie Killander, Tom Christian, conifer expert, Mike Gittos, Peter Grubb, Elfrida Heath, Mike Albutt, Anne Grubb, Ann Waldock, Julia Napier, Trish Agnew, Sam Agnew, Helga Tomkins, Stephen Tomkins, Ruth Haynes and Alan Parks. Photo organised by Elfrida Heath, who banked £250 for the funds.

**Chalk Grassland Flora noted on cleared central section,
Copley Hill in April 2011, August 2011 or after first heavy
winter rain in 2012**

Astragalus danicus	Purple Milk Vetch 2013
*Achillea millefolium	Yarrow
*Agrimonia eupatoris	Agrimony
*Briza media	Quaking Grass
Campanula glomerata	Clustered Bell Flower
Campanula rotundifolia	Harebell
<i>Carlina vulgaris</i>	<i>Carlina Thistle</i>
Centaurea nigra	Common or Black knapweed
Centaurea scabiosa	Greater Knapweed
<i>Cirsium acaule</i>	<i>Dwarf Thistle</i>
Clinopodium vulgare	Field Basil
<i>Euphrasia nemorosa</i>	<i>Eyebright</i>
Festuca ovina	Sheeps Fescue
Filipendula vulgaris	Dropwort
Galium verum	Lady's Bedstraw
Galium mollugo	Hedge Bedstraw
Helimium nummularium	Common Rock-rose
Hippocrepis comosa	Horseshoe Vetch
Hypericum perforatum	St John's Wort
Knautia arvensis	Field Scabious
<i>Linum catharticum</i>	<i>Fairy Flax</i>
Pastinaca sativa	Wild Parsnip
<i>Pilosella officinarum</i>	<i>Mouse-ear hawkweed</i>
Pimpinella saxifraga	Burnet Saxifrage
Plantago media	Hoary Plantain
<i>Potentilla reptans</i>	<i>Creeping Cinquefoil</i>
Primula veris	Cowslip
Prunella vulgaris	Selfheal
Reseda lutea	Mignonette
Rumex acetosa	Common Sorrel

Subscriptions, the same old story. **Thank you very much for paying the full subscription of £15.** If you are paying £10 a year, we are still very grateful, but could you possibly increase it to £15? If you have decided to withdraw from the society, **Please let me know.** Whatever the case, we are very grateful for all subscriptions whether you have supported us since 5th April 2001, or only for a year or two.

Finally, a very big thank you to those of our members who give more, and sometimes a lot more than £15. You really help us to balance the books.

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