

MONMOUTHSHIRE MEADOWS

Aim - To conserve and enhance the landscape by enabling members to maintain, manage and restore their semi-natural grasslands and associated features.

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Membership

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From the Chair. By Stephanie Tyler

I am delighted to say that our membership is growing well with a spate of new members joining during the summer. Initial survey and advisory visits have been made to most of these including two sites over the border in Herefordshire, a site at Catbrook and three sites near Devauden. We held another successful Open Day in June, organised hay-cutting and grazing at several sites, obtained a grant from the Countryside Council for Wales, organised a stand at Monmouth Show and have arranged two autumn meetings.

Open Day

Our Open Day in mid June was a success with the weather holding out till the end of the afternoon. Perhaps having six sites open was too ambitious as people could not get round them all and

the sites described at the end of our attractive leaflet received very few visitors compared to those mentioned first. Despite this, the Open Day generated a lot of interest, some new members and some income from the gate fees. My thanks to all those who opened their land to the public and to all those who helped out with identification, talking to visitors, giving general advice and providing teas. Teona Dorian-Smith at Upper Red House reported "a lovely day for it and our immediate neighbour kindly laid on some orchids for us too

good, the sun shone quite a lot. The rain began just as the last visitors were leaving. We had about 10 sets of visitors. I was very happy with the whole day and glad to be able to share my luxury surroundings with people who really wanted to see them.

Jill Featherstone at Llanvapley reported a busy day with lots of interest and visits by local farmers. Pam Lloyd manned the stall and Jill showed people around. A successful day with several enquiries.



The New Trackmaster funded by CCW

which he invited people to go and see. Several did. I had about 40 people, about a third wearing labels already. Steady flow all day and some nice comments. Some came from Cardiff, including Mary Gillham whose friend got worried when she thought MG was lost. She soon turned up. The result was £56. A good day."

Ann Eggleton at Little Mill Farm said that it was great fun - Bill and Caroline were wonderful guides, the fields were looking really

Gill Pollock at Mitchel Troy emailed "Just to let you know that we had a very successful open day with around 18 visitors in total but there was a steady flow all day from 12- 5pm with people staying for 20-30minutes. I thought people would find our modest meadow a bit of a 'let-down' compared with the others but much to my surprise everyone was very impressed with our meadow

because of the variety of plants and they found it very different to others they had seen. They thought it was very delicate and dainty. One lady commented that the pignuts look as though they were suspended in the air. The helleborine was a big hit with one lady saying this was the highlight of the whole afternoon. The orchids looked splendid and many people commented on how tall they are and with such large flower heads so the visitors were delighted. I managed with all the identification of the key plants so I would feel more confident next time.

I did enjoy myself and what was very satisfying was to meet people who appreciate the same things in life and are genuinely interested in our little haven for wildlife. I even met my neighbour Jane and up until then I don't think we've ever spoken just waved to each other if we drive past. Now Jane and I have a new interest so I'm popping over to see her garden and hunt for helleborines. In fact with Barbara, Mary, Helen and Jane we may have a splinter group - Mitchel Troy Meadows!

Glynis Laws at Far Barn, St Maughans reported very few people visiting - just six payers, plus a few who came on having visited other meadows first. These included one family from near Abergavenny who were members but had not come to any MMG events before. I don't think that there were any other members - perhaps having the Open Day over this side discouraged the Trellech/Wye Valley members from supporting the day or maybe we were in competition with the GWT event? Only one lady came in the morning - she was keen to establish her own wild flowers as she is going to take up bee-keeping. This seems to be an 'after-Sunday lunch' event - would more people come in the morning if the day was held on a Saturday?

Although the numbers were small, I still felt it was worthwhile. The people who came seemed genuinely to enjoy the beauty of the meadow and were very appreciative of the chance to get into it and see it close up

Jeremy and Clare at Hollow Ash didn't have a large number of visitors but felt it was worthwhile with lots of interest. Most people who came had already been to other sites.

Hay making with MMG tractor

The attempts at hay-making despite Bill Howard's, Lindsay Tyler's and Martin Fenn-Smith's best efforts at tractor driving have

grazing for several years. Here they grazed with two other ponies for three weeks before being moved to the Kymin for a week or so, then Tymawr wet meadow near Penallt and a pasture at New Mills above Whitebrook.

Hay Rattle Seed

Seed was collected from Hay (Yellow) Rattle from various meadows and packets of seed sent to six members who wanted to establish this semi-parasitic plant to reduce the vigour of grasses.



Monmouth Show – Andrew Blake, AONB

Officer examines the swards!

not gone smoothly. Tractor problems, bailer problems and tedder problems have all beset us, as also the turn in the weather at the end of July.

We are really sorry to have let people down.

Ponies

Steph and Alan Poulter have kept an eye on our two Exmoor ponies during the spring and summer. They went onto the heathland restoration area at Broadmeend near Trellech until June when they were moved to an SSSI on Barbadoes Hill near Tintern where there has been too little

Grant from CCW to help Shriill Carder Bees

I am pleased to be able to tell you that the Countryside Council for Wales has given us over £4,000 for a mower to cut bramble and scrub in overgrown fields, especially in the area from Shirenewton to Caerwent and Five Lanes; this is a buffer area for a rare bumble-bee (the Shriill Carder Bee that has a stronghold in the Newport and Cardiff area on the low-lying Levels). We hope to carry out some publicity and promotional work for the bee in this buffer area with a talk on bumble bees and another in

Monmouth scheduled for November.

Monmouth Show

By the time you receive this newsletter we will have had a stand in the Countryside tent at Monmouth Show. My thanks go to Glynis Laws for organising the rota of volunteers and to Bill and Caroline Howard and to Pam Lloyd for work on our display and its setting up.

Autumn meeting

This will be held at the Priory in Monmouth on 18 November with the usual gourmet meal provided. We will also be holding a meeting at Shirenewton Village Hall the next day.

Our speaker at both events will be Dr Pippa Rayner of the Bumble-bee Conservation Trust.

Hay Making 2010

By Bill Howard

We cut hay on 8 members' fields, spread quite widely across our area. Initially there was not much demand from members to have their hay cut using our machinery.

In order to obtain some experience in hay making we cut hay on four member's fields at MMG's expense with permission to sell the hay to recoup our costs. We came up against two problems: the weather and the problems with our machinery.

The bailer was particularly difficult to operate. We are working with one tractor, which has to return to Penallt to pick up the next piece of equipment, when one operation is finished.

We started hay making on July 27 and finished in early September. The hay making team consisted of Lindsay Tyler, Martin Fenn-Smith and myself. We all went on a course at Usk College to learn how to drive a tractor and pick up different pieces of farm equipment with the three point linkage. Martin has written an

account of the course in this newsletter. We advertised the hay for sale on our website which brought in a few inquiries, one from Lincolnshire.

On the financial side we spent £1233 adapting the tractor to use with our equipment, including converting the hydraulics on the tractor to control the baler, and providing weights to make it possible to tow the mower which is long and heavy. We also purchased consumables like netting to wrap the bales. From selling hay and cost recovery on work done we made £487, which gives us a deficit of £746, which is less than the capital sum that the Parish Grasslands Project gave us last year at the transfer of the tractor and equipment.

My recommendations for the future are:

- *Identify a focal area where we concentrate our hay making efforts;
- *Contact members in the focal area and convince them of the need to pay for our services;
- *Make a concerted effort to sell the hay and cover costs;
- *Obtain permission from Heritage Lottery Fund to sell the Galignani baler and buy a second-hand old-fashioned conventional baler (Bamford 58).
- *Widen the team that works on the tractor, training newcomers ourselves on the equipment that we are using.

Tractor-driver Training Martin Fenn-Smith

The damp grey skies of April 29th this year found three intrepid volunteers exploring the Usk campus of Colleg Gwent in search of our appointed instructor for a nine o'clock class. Various experienced and all un-trained, we were all eager to learn what

tractor-driving in the 21st century was going to be about.

Within the hour my head was spinning from what I'd been told about 'things you have to remember' when driving a tractor. There was no time (nor need, in truth) for classroom stuff, we were straight out being told what we should be wearing - overalls without flaps to catch on projections, steel-toed boots, gloves too to ward off grease, then given a guided tour of a tractor similar to the MMG Massey-Ferguson to learn about the daily checks - oil, water, fuel, hydraulics, tyres.

Tractor controls are rather more elaborate and differently arranged from those on a car, but nothing very startling - split brakes, one for each rear wheel, latch them together when you're on the road - two gear boxes - high-ratio for road work, low-ratio for the fields - and a dual-action clutch - half-way to select a gear, all-the-way to engage the power take-off. Next some simple safety rules, aimed at making sure we didn't trap ourselves or one another between the different bits of the equipment when changing implements.

Then it was out in the yard practising - backing trailers round corners and through gateways (not hard, but needs concentration) and changing a mounted implement (much more difficult - you have to align the tractor - with its slightly dodgy brakes and lumpy tyres, on rough ground - to within an eighth of an inch at two places. Needs concentration. No time to be thinking about anything else). We all seemed to be about equally good at it, thank goodness, but we needed to operate in pairs, at least to start with. Some of the jobs are a lot easier with two - like changing implements - and it's useful to have one supervising what the other does when there are hazards around - like buildings and gateways.



Lindsay Tyler honing his tractor skills!

On the second day we were introduced to a more modern tractor – many more controls to make life simpler(!), easier, less uncomfortable; many more facilities to cover a wider range of jobs. Implements are more often powered from the tractor-engine nowadays, rather than from their own wheels, and then there are hydraulics to lift and adjust things without having to stop and dismount.

After that we were given some actual road-driving and field-work experience. Driving a tractor on the road with a wide implement behind requires more vigilance and consideration for other road users. Working in a field means

doing a little mental risk-assessment before one starts – ditches, deep dips or hidden mounds? Low power-lines or tree-branches? Steep slopes? Wildlife? All need to be assessed.

By the end of the two-day course we had all had our consciousness and awareness raised.

We hadn't managed to mow a meadow or bale a bale, but we were sufficiently sensitised to the risks and foibles of the equipment we were going to be working with to feel confident we could tackle the job in prospect.



...and tedding and raking

OPEN DAY as seen by the invaded at Little Mill Farm

As a new member, I had no idea what to expect on opening my meadows to an eager – or would it be not-so-eager? – public. I understood that much wider advertising was being done this year; would this result in a flood of strangers navigating up and down my 2-mile-long single-track lane, coming to blows at the bends like old-time stage-coach drivers? I spent several hours (good on the time-sheets) liaising with neighbours to make sure they knew about the invasion, and were aware of the tentative one-way-in, two-other-ways-out system that seemed to make most sense. By the time Saturday evening arrived I was hoping for a torrential downpour that would deter all but the most determinedly keen.

As it happened, it was a glorious June day right up to 4pm; the one-way system worked a dream; and only the most determinedly keen people turned up. From my point of view, it was an unqualified success.

Much of that success must be down to Bill and Caroline, who walked untiringly round the steep fields with party after party. (To inspect the three 2.5-acre fields thoroughly took 15 to 20 minutes, it emerged.) There was one party before lunch; then we all three had time to refuel; after that more and more people turned up. After about the fourth party, they had to go round in larger groups. The only difficult moment of the day occurred when Bill and Caroline were out in the fields with a group of seven – being three parties; I had also started round with a fourth party; and just as the tiny steep front yard was completely full with vehicles, another three turned up. My mother, who is a very sparky 90 years old, coped wonderfully with organising all the backing and nine-point-turning that was required; the only people

to back out of the situation altogether had allowed 15 minutes for their entire visit, so would hardly have been able to stay anyway!

Most people stopped for a cup of tea and a piece of one of Caroline's wonderful cakes (one nut-free, one wheat-free, and one guaranteed fully naughty). We charged £2 for that and made quite a lot. We hardly had to charge anyone for entry – most had been to other meadows first. It was puzzling to find, afterwards, what variation there was in the numbers recorded at each meadow: I had about 30 people, Teona had 40 at Upper Red House, Glynis at St Maughans had only about 10; each of those is only about 5 miles from me. All my visitors were either members of MMG, or professional ecologists who had heard about the day on the grape-vine – sometimes a bit roundabout, but none of them seemed to have been brought by the publicity in Wye Valley Life, the Beacon, etc. Everyone who made the effort to get down the lane seemed to think that the chance to see so many good old meadows on one day was well worth while. I shall be glad to have a break next summer and take the opportunity of the Open Day to see some other meadows – but (apart from nerves about the access beforehand) I really enjoyed the chance to share and to show off what I am lucky enough to have the care of for a while.

**Monmouth Show
Glynis Laws**

The Monmouth Show was rather a damp occasion but, thankfully, all that rain was falling after most of us had finished haymaking. Monmouthshire Meadows Group had a stand in the Countryside marquee along with other environmental groups. The theme for 2010 was Biodiversity, illustrated perfectly by our

samples taken from meadows under different management regimes. These contrasted the richness of plant species available in a hay meadow managed for wildlife with those heavily grazed or fertilized. We did not have hordes of visitors but a steady trickle of interested people kept us busy most of the day. For some, the photo boards sparked memories of hay meadows they remembered from the past. Others were more interested in how they could achieve their own wildflower meadow, so hopefully we will welcome a few new members and see a few more acres of hay meadows in flower in the near future.

**A Meadow at St Mary's
Priory Church, Abergavenny
Jill Featherstone**

Over the last few years a group of volunteers headed by Velia Ellis and Christine Scott have been re-



Scattering seed at St Mary's

establishing the Abbots garden at St Mary's Priory Church, Abergavenny.

Their latest addition to this garden has been the inclusion of a small area in which they hope to establish a traditional Wild Flower Meadow. With the help and advice from MMG and some hard work by their volunteers, local wild flower seed harvested by GWT and MMG was sown on the site in time for the Abergavenny

food festival. We look forward to monitoring the meadows development.

If anyone would like to volunteer at the gardens, they can contact Velia via email at enquiries@stmarys-priory.org or telephone 01873 858787

**Reptiles in your Meadows
Dave Green**

This article is the first in hopefully a number highlighting groups of wildlife that may or do occur in your meadows. In the Monmouth area four species of reptile can be found: Adder, Grass Snake, Slow Worm and Common Lizard. Although you may never have seen any of these species on your land, it is likely that some do occur.

Each species of reptile inhabits different if somewhat overlapping habitats. Both the Adder and the Common Lizard are commonest on acid (heathy) dry ground. They prefer areas that provide basking sites and places where they can hide in easily, such as old dry-stone walls and boulders amongst heather and bracken. This means that these two species often occur around the boundary walls of a pasture. The Adder hunts small mammals such as mice and shrews, whereas the Common Lizard survives on a varied diet of flying and terrestrial invertebrates.

Grass snakes love water. You can find them in the vicinity of streams, ponds or in damp meadows, and they often hunt through beds of nettles. They have a more varied diet -not only small mammals but, at certain times of the year, herpetiles (frogs and newts). The Slow Worm (a legless lizard) is a species of rough grassland. They usually occur on the fringe of meadows and prefer dry grassland. Their prey is ground dwelling invertebrates.

How do you know if you have any reptiles in your meadow? One way to find these elusive species is by setting up a number of reptile refuges.

These consist of sheets of corrugated iron or similar sheet material. The principle is that reptiles are attracted by something that gives off heat and also offers shelter. A number of these refuges are put down in suitable locations and left *in situ* for two weeks undisturbed, then visited daily. The refuge is carefully lifted up and any creatures sheltering underneath can be observed. Care is needed: Adders are not common and are usually shy, but if they are disturbed they can strike out.

If any members know that they have reptile species on their land, I would be happy to lead a workshop on monitoring reptiles in 2011. Please get in touch

Pony Grazing

Please remember that any Member is welcome to use our ponies for grazing. Any member hosting the ponies should check them daily and in the winter months give them some nuts by hand daily. Once the grass has been grazed down, Steph Poulter or Steph Tyler should be contacted to move them so that they do not go without grazing or over graze the field.

This is a free service but a donation towards costs of transport and all the hard work done by the Poulters is always welcomed

At the moment there are ponies at Ty Mawr also looking for moment there are ponies at Ty Mawr looking for autumn/winter grazing for ponies in this area. Please contact Andrew on 07790191544. He will pay a small amount for grazing.



PONT's Welsh Mountain Ponies at home in Forest Coal Pit

Many of you will have heard that Ida Dunn, our oldest member with the most lovely of meadows, had a stroke recently. In true Ida style, she has recovered sufficiently to return home

We are very sad to announce the sudden death of Mike Sayce of Shirenewton. Mike talked at one of our meetings about the Shirenewton Community Fields Venture in whose development and success he was so influential. He will be very much missed.

Welsh Mountain Ponies are also available on permanent or short term loan from the Welsh Grazing Scheme PONT.

After an enquiry we have helped friends take several Welsh Ponies to graze their SSS1 meadows in the Black Mountains. They are delighted with the 4 mares, two of which were pregnant and have since had foals.

Dates for your diary

Autumn Meeting

Monmouth Priory

Thursday, November 18th
7.00pm

Dr Pippa Raynor of the Bumble Bee Conservation Trust will give an illustrated talk on

'The Importance of Managing Grassland for Bumblebees'

This will be followed by home made supper

Friday November 19th
7.00pm

she will give the same talk at Shirenewton Village Hall

Membership from Pam Lloyd

Thank you to everyone that has returned their membership form to me and a little reminder to those that have not - please could they do so! Then we can maximise our gift aid claim

The committee would also like to extend a warm welcome to the following new members who have joined us this year: Irene and Robert Brooke; Lynne Coulthard; Cecilia Davies, David Emerson; Liz Pescini; Nigel and Jane Seabourne; Stevie Godivala; Dr Dorothy Whitcomb; Monica and Mark Barlow.