

MONMOUTHSHIRE MEADOWS GROUP

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

Contents

1. From the Chair.
2. Poisonous Plants and Grazing Animals
3. Haymaking 2009
4. Peter Chard. Memories of a friend.
5. Umbellifers in Monmouthshire
6. Our Carbon footprint
7. Tribute to Catherine Sainsbury
8. Work Tasks
9. Dates for your diary
10. Welcome to new members.
11. Calling all members

Membership

To join contact Maggie on 01989 750740 or e-mail Maggie at monmouthmeadows@aol.co.uk or Bill at williamhoward142@btinternet.com or Steph Tyler at steph_tyler2001@hotmail.com

From the Chair.

By Stephanie Tyler

It seems no time at all since I wrote a piece for the spring newsletter. Where did the spring and summer go?

At the time of writing, your committee is busy organising the open day for 2010 and applying for grants for grassland management!

The Open Day in 2009 despite appalling weather before and after it did keep fine but the weather forecast, dark clouds and rumbles of thunder unfortunately kept

visitor numbers rather low. Despite this the event was much enjoyed by those who did brave the elements.

Two popular sites – the orchard and meadow at Ty Mawr convent and Ida Dunn's flower-rich fields at Maryland were open to the public again but we also had three 'new' sites on show. One of these was a series of small fields and adjacent woodland owned by Walter Keeler at Penallt where a fine show of spotted orchids including hybrid Common Spotted x Heath Spotted were in evidence as well as Southern Marsh Orchid. Our President Trevor Evans was on hand much of the day to explain how to differentiate these tricky orchids. A lucky few visitors also had a tour of Walter's pottery workshop and saw some of his fine work. The other two sites were Barbara Newby's triangle of grassland on Lydart Hill; although quite small it is very rich in flowers with abundant Meadow Saffrons and Barbara had a display at the entrance of the field of plants growing in the field. Opposite this site was a very different damp pasture at Yew Tree, Lydart owned by Lynne Harper. Here visitors could admire the abundant Ragged Robin, Meadowsweet and other species.

Our sincere thanks go to the Keelers, Newbys, Lynne Harper, Sister Gillian and Ida Dunn for allowing visitor access to their lovely fields and inevitable trampling of precious plants and also for being on hand to talk about their meadows and pastures.

The awful July weather made **hay-cutting** difficult yet again. A lucky few had their hay fields cut in late June or early July and managed to

sell the hay bales but most fields weren't cut until the end of August or into September. Some of your grazing pastures benefitted from Ron Shear's sheep or our own two Exmoor Ponies. Other activities by members of the committee included facilitating Bracken spraying at two sites on Lydart and moving 90 bales of hay at Ty Mawr under cover.

Surveys of new members' fields and provision of advice take up time too. We have surveyed grasslands in the Whitebrook Valley, at Far Hill, Cwmcarvan, at Mitchel Troy common where a member had a lovely flower-rich bank in her garden, at Rockfield, at White Castle and at Llancloudy across the border into Herefordshire.



Stephanie Tyler surveying in Llanishen

We also visited Cwmbran Community farm where they are developing a meadow. A possible site was selected on an earlier visit and then livestock were removed by the end of March and the grass and flowers then allowed to grow from late March to June so that we could assess what was there already. The field turned out to be

already very species-rich so no further intervention was necessary other than promoting an annual hay crop in mid July with some grazing in the autumn or very early spring.

We gave advice to staff and pupils at **Trellech School** on the management of a small hay meadow that has been developed with our help within the school grounds. One afternoon Bill Howard, Amanda Copp and Steph Tyler led a 'bug' hunt in this patch of grassland helping the children find beetles, spiders and all sorts

We also organised and manned a **stand at Monmouth show**. We had lots of interest from potential members at the latter, and our stand looked attractive with the array of photos on the display boards, our MMG banner, plots from grasslands of varying types and a range of meadow flowers to identify. We also had yellow/hay rattle seed and mixed wildflower seed for sale, thanks to the work of Tim Green collecting seed from Pentwyn meadows with our jointly owned Gwent Wildlife Trust/MMG seed harvester.

The autumn meeting and supper on November 4th at Devauden Village Hall was a great success. As usual, the cooking team led by Caroline Howard and Maggie Biss provided some gourmet food and wine at a very reasonable price. Jill Featherstone, Elsa Wood and Lindsay Tyler all made much appreciated contributions. There was of course an array of good speakers to entertain and inform you.

Trevor Evans gave us an impromptu botanical talk on umbellifers, members of the carrot family (see below) that have small white or yellow flowers in flat umbels, such as the familiar Cow Parsley or Queen Anne's lace *Anthriscus sylvestris* along our lanes and roadsides in the spring.

Mike Sayce then talked about the efforts of Shirenewton community

to buy and manage some interesting fields for their biodiversity and for the enjoyment of the residents of Shirenewton and Mynydd Bach. He compared and contrasted the work of the MMG with that of the group running the community project at Shirenewton.

Then followed a beautifully illustrated presentation by Lyn Jones, with help from her husband, Robert. They showed us some of the plants and animals – large and small – that live in their small pasture at five lanes near Caerwent and that give them so much pleasure. Amanda Copp showed us photos of her patch – 80 acres of grassland and woodland at Far Hill, Llanishen – and described some of her management headaches and successes. By reducing grazing pressure and managing some fields for hay many plants and butterflies have appeared. She envied though Lyn Jones' small and manageable area of grassland because she and her husband Peter have to spent many hours every week working in their woodland or elsewhere on the property!

Snippet

If you need scrub or brambles cleared this winter please contact Steph Tyler. We may be able to obtain funding to cover contractor's costs so please try to obtain an estimate for the work.

RECENT NEWS ON FUNDING

We heard in late November that the Countryside Council for Wales had accepted our application for funding. Bill Howard applied for funding to repair the tractor that we acquired from the Parish Grasslands Project, for repairs to a trailer at the Gwent Wildlife Trust reserve at Pentwyn Farm (where we will keep our tractor) and importantly, for a new mower for the tractor. Our grateful thanks go to CCW for this money.

Poisonous Plants and Grazing Animals By Stephanie Poulter

Although there are many plants that are potentially toxic to grazing animals, many do not cause much trouble, either because creatures avoid eating them due to an unpleasant off-putting smell or a bitter taste or because, once they are dead and shrivelled, the poisonous constituents of some plants disappear, making them safe to eat. This is the case with members of the buttercup family. Horses and cattle normally avoid eating them in pasture in the summer months and there is no need to worry if buttercups are present in your hay crop as the poison protoanemonin is unstable and rendered harmless by drying.

In sharp contrast, all varieties of ragwort, whose clusters of daisy-like yellow flowers on tall stems have become a too familiar sight in fields, on roadside verges and alongside forest tracks, remain just as toxic when dried and unrecognisable in your bale of hay. If an animal is fed hay containing ragwort the cumulative alkaloids present gradually destroy the liver, causing a lingering death. Ragwort is officially classified as an Injurious Weed (The Weeds Act 1959) meaning it is against the law to allow it to spread, but unfortunately no-one ever seems to be prosecuted for allowing it to flourish.

Certain plants are more dangerous to livestock at particular times of the year. In the winter months poisonous evergreen trees and shrubs adjoining pastures can be tempting when fields are bare of grass. Yew leaves have no off-putting scent or taste and even a small amount of foliage can cause sudden death from heart failure. Poisoning has also occurred after heavy snowfall when yew branches weighed down by snow

come within reach of hungry livestock.

Rhododendron and laurel leaves are also more readily taken during the winter and cases of poisoning have occurred when people mistakenly give animals hedge trimmings. Recently five sheep nearly died after eating laurel hedge clippings thrown into their field by a gardener. Incidentally, in Victorian times, shredded laurel leaves used to be placed in glass jars known as killing bottles; enough cyanide gas was given off to kill the insects that were avidly

Winter hedging and ditching operations can also lead to accidental poisoning when the parts of plants normally out of reach to livestock are thrown up on to the surface of the ground. For example, a locally common plant of wet habitats, Hemlock Water-dropwort, has large yellowish root tubers, known as "dead men's fingers" that are normally out of reach in the mud at the edge of streams. All parts of the plant are extremely poisonous, but the concentration of the toxin is highest in the roots, especially in winter and spring and remains active in the dried plant, even after cooking, where the similarity of the roots to parsnips has led to fatal human poisoning. Several cattle were found dead a few years ago at Trellech after eating the plants in a stream during a dry spell. The water level was unusually low making the roots more accessible.

Early Autumn, too, can be a dangerous time if after a dry summer there is a glut of acorns and beech mast falling from oak and beech trees bordering pasture. Serious poisoning can occur when cattle, sheep and horses eat large quantities of acorns which may cause fatal kidney damage. Some animals develop a craving for acorns and oak leaves, so vigilance is necessary when they are abundant. It is also the case that animals introduced into a new environment are more at risk from

poisonous plants that were ignored by previous inhabitants familiar with their surroundings.

Overgrazing and poor pasture management may lead to the invasion of poisonous plants such as buttercups, Ragwort and bracken. But, it is important to remember that plants like Ragwort and bracken previously ignored by grazing animals may be more readily eaten after the application of weedkiller, or if pulled up and left lying around. Ingestion of quantities of bracken over a period of weeks causes "bracken staggers" in horses, haemorrhagic bracken poisoning in cattle, "bright blindness" in sheep and bladder and digestive system tumours in cattle and sheep.

For further information on Ragwort poisoning visit the British Horse Society website (bhs.org.uk) where the publication "Advice on the dangers of Ragwort" can be downloaded free of charge. An excellent book for the general reader (still available on Amazon) is the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food: "Poisonous Plants and Fungi – an illustrated guide" by Cooper and Johnson (HMSO 1988).

Haymaking 2009
By Bill Howard

Due to bad weather hay making did not start until September but in spite of this the hay quality was good and our contractor, Ian Morgan, cut hay on approximately 7 member's fields. We also managed to put people who wanted to sell hay in touch with hay buyers.

Originally, thanks to the AONB funding, we had a share in the use of the alpine tractor with The Parish Grassland Project. This arrangement has now finished but in exchange we have received a Massey Ferguson 135 tractor, a trailer, a tedder and a wrapper for wrapping bales to make haylage as The plan is now to cooperate with

well as £845 from the PGP's machinery fund.

GWT to house the equipment at Pentwyn Barn and for Tim Green, the GWT farm manager, to operate the tractor to cut our member's hay in exchange for GWT using the hay making equipment on their fields. We have also applied for funding from the CCW small fast track fund to buy a mower and to repair a GWT trailer. We have included project funding to train tractor drivers at Colleg Gwent, Usk campus.

Caroline and I went to a meeting at Carno of all the grassland projects in Wales. The purpose of the meeting was to make a case for joint funding for grassland projects in Wales. There were presentations from Flora Locale (Ivy Berkshire) and PONT, the Welsh animal grazing project (Charles Morgan) as well as presentations from other groups including Anglesey Grazing animals partnership (Hilary Kehoe), Grassland Bumble Bees (Pipper Rayner), Living highways project, Powys (Emma Durward), Grasslands of the National Botanic Gardens, Wales (Tim Bevan) and Butterflies (Russell Hobson). Rebecca Price described the work that GWT are carrying out in this field and Caroline described our work. Discussions lead to the suggestion that we would be eligible for CCW fast track funding which we have now secured. There appeared to be a lot of interest in what we are doing and how we operate. We should try to go to more meetings like this!



Peter Chard, helping bale MMG hay

**Peter Chard.
Memories of a friend.
By Maggie Biss**

After a relatively short illness Peter Chard died in July. He was a founder member and key figure of the Parish Grasslands Project which was the catalyst for the formation of the Monmouthshire Meadows Group.

I think I can claim to have known Peter for longer than anyone else in the Wye Valley. In the early 60's he taught me Botany and Zoology A levels at the local Grammar School in Evesham and it was he alone that decided that I should go to University – for that was well out of the line of vision of my Cotwold village upbringing – and he gently bullied and cajoled me until I did.

We had many happy class field trips to centres like Dale Fort and I do remember 27 year old Peter taking me and a particularly attractive 15 year old girl classmate to do a woodland flora survey in some remote woods...he left us there, driving off at speed so it seemed, returning 2 or 3 hours later to find us sunbathing in a quiet glade, quadrants and Keble Martin abandoned. I wonder what the protocol these days would be.

I lost contact with Peter until 1970 when, as Londoners, Edgar and I decided like many others at the time, to find a small weekend place. We landed up in Hewelsfield, viewing Box Cottage and although we liked the cottage, we were rather worried about the very noisy children in the garden across the lane, accompanied by a man digging his garden as near to our cottage as he could get.

When Peter and I recognised each other, the children were quietened and it seems they had been planted to make as much noise as possible to frighten off the ghastly Sloane Ranger couple viewing the cottage. Thereby our friendship rekindled and was strengthened by

the realisation that Edgar and Peter had been at school together in Pontypool in the late 50s. His eldest daughter lived with us in London for a while when she became a music student at the Royal College of Music. When our children came along, Peter took us on his favourite Black Mountain walks, teaching our daughters to map read, use compasses and appreciate the rugged hills.

The years have gone by, and Peter and I have worked together on various projects. Action Against Quarrying (to prevent the development of large scale quarries in the Forest of Dean) being an all-time consuming one, particularly for Peter. At one point, we managed to get locals to sign 10,000 postcards calling for the Forest to be given Special Protection as promised by Frank Dobson in the election campaign. The cards were put in sacks and Peter organised for a JCB carrying the sacks to be allowed into Downing Street and he delivered these to No. 10 accompanied by lots of publicity. The Special Protection of the Forest has evolved over the years and the Council is now working towards AONB status.

When Peter and George started the Parish Grasslands Project, my antenna immediately started twitching and you now see the result. Peter spoke at our first meeting in Trellech when we tested the water for interest in a similar Group. We instantly discovered that Caroline and Bill Howard, Stephanie Tyler, Adrian and Elsa Wood and Stephanie Poulter were all experts already in place to lead MMG and that we had members like Ida and the Eastons with the most spectacular wild flower meadows just waiting to be appreciated and other members who needed help and advice. The rest is history.

Peter was always an underlying strength from the start, always

encouraging, advising and helping all of us.

We shall miss him enormously.

**Umbellifers in
Monmouthshire
by Steph Tyler**

2009 saw an exciting find in Monmouthshire as in July Pat Johns discovered a population of 25+ plants of Corky-fruited Water Dropwort *Oenanthe pimpinelloides*, a species that was only known from one other site (on a road verge where it has virtually disappeared) in Monmouthshire, indeed in Wales. The new site is on Vauxhall meadows in Monmouth.

Trevor Evans at our autumn meeting mentioned this discovery and talked also about other species of dropwort. One species that will be familiar to many members is Hemlock Water Dropwort *Oenanthe crocata* that forms large clumps along watercourses (see Steph Poulter's article on poisonous plants).



Corky-fruited Water Dropwort

Although it is poisonous to livestock if they eat the parsnip-like roots, they can nibble the foliage without apparent ill effect. Other umbellifers that grow in meadows include the common early-flowering Pignut or Earthnut *Conopodium majus*, often among Bluebells, and less common later-flowering summer flowers of Burnet Saxifrage *Pimpinella saxifraga* and the yellow-flowered Pepper Saxifrage *Silaum silaus*.

If you have any umbellifers that you cannot identify then please contact Trevor Evans or Steph Tyler who would like to hear from anyone who has anything unusual, including the last two species, in their meadows. We know that Burnet Saxifrage occurs at Red House, the farm owned by MMG member Teona Dorien-Smith and Pepper Saxifrage at another member's (Gynis Laws') grassland near St. Maughans. Incidentally both these sites will be 'open' in June for our Open Day.

Our Carbon Footprint
By Caroline Howard

Our Carbon Footprint is remarkably low. Ongoing research at the University of Wales, Bangor, and, indeed, common sense show that our unimproved meadows without chemical fertiliser, and with only an annual hay cut evolve very little carbon. Where these meadows are grazed to produce meat, the meat has been shown objectively to be rich in Omega 3, to have a longer shelf life, and, as we know, to taste better.

Further, methane production is not of a scale comparable with commercial livestock farming.

We have a win, win, win situation:

*Beautiful meadows conserving local genetic variety;

*Delicious, healthy food;

*The pleasure in knowing that we are caring for our land.

No we cannot feed the world, but we can present a nutritional system that protects the environment and may help us regain the traditional sense that meat is a luxury to be enjoyed on high days and holidays. Happy Christmas to you all.

Tribute
Catherine Sainsbury.
By Amanda Copp.

We are sad to report that one of our members, Catherine Sainsbury of Ty Mawr Farm in Glascoed, near Usk died recently. Catherine was a truly inspirational lady – full of interest and always looking forward for the whole of her 98 years. She was passionate about sustainability and ran her small holding organically long before it was fashionable. She played the piano in chapel every Sunday until earlier this year when her health finally deteriorated. She also shared my love of Alpacas and spun her own alpaca fleece which she then wove into rugs. She loved attending agricultural shows with her alpacas and was still demonstrating spinning until three years ago. Her funeral was attended by almost 200 people – a tribute to her wonderful personality. The wide range of wildflowers in her meadows is a tribute to her management and hopefully will act as a living memorial for many years to come.

Work tasks

If you have spare energy and a spare few hours why not come along to one of the following work tasks.

Venue: Whitebrook valley opposite Kinson's Farm. Park along the road above Kinson's Farm.

Dates: Sunday February 21st at 11 a.m and Sunday 7th March at 11 a.m. You can always bring a thermos and sandwiches and stay on for a picnic and the afternoon too. We will be helping new member Sarah Cheese and her family to clear brambles from a formerly species-rich pasture. Anyone welcomed, even for an hour. Please bring gloves and tools such as shears, spade, cutters and secateurs.

Venue: Ty Mawr wet meadow – parking on the verge between the crossroads at the top of the Whitebrook valley and the Pecket Stone near the Monmouth to Trellech road, or at the Pecket Stone car park from where you can walk back to the gate into the field. Please bring any of the following tools:- saws, rakes, secateurs, cutters and scythes.
Date: Sunday afternoon of 28th February.

Dates for your diary

The Open day in June will be on Sunday 13th: Meadows open to all will include those at Red House farm near The Hendre; at Little Mill farm near Newcastle; at Far Barn near St Maughans; at Middle Ton in Llanvapley and fields near Broadoak. If anyone would like to help man these sites for a few hours on the day (you don't need to be a botanist, just enthusiastic!) please contact Steph or Maggie.

Welcome to new members

A very big welcome to the following new members who joined during the late summer/autumn:

- Sarah Cheese and family**, Forest of Dean (land at Whitebrook).
- Andrew Cormack**, Abergavenny.
- Ann Eggleton**, Little Mill farm, Newcastle.
- Sheelagh Kerry and Peter Smith**, Abergavenny.
- Martin and Patricia Milling**, Far Hill, Llanishen
- Catherine Payne**, Penallt.
- Scilla Senior**, Owen's Cross, Herefordshire.
- Catherine Todd**, Llancloudy, Herefordshire.
- Elizabeth Milner** of Llandewi Skirrid, Abergavenny
- David Roberts**, Botany Bay
- Kathy and Ian Barclay**, Chepstow (land at Whitelye)
- Monica Barlow**, Catbrook
- And welcome back too to **Nick and Ann Hoyal**, who now live at Brynderi.

Calling all members

Every now and again we have to call on our members to help MMG function and flourish. This has been demonstrated with great success in our last two meetings where members have provided the entertainment and told us about their experiences nurturing their meadows. We now have a number of other challenges to which we hope you will rise.

Firstly, does anyone wish to contribute an article for our newsletter?

Anything of interest -personal experiences, passionate about a particular plant or animal species?

The newsletter is your orchid! Just send any articles to me at jillyfeather@yahoo.com.

Secondly, add a new feather to your cap! We have received funding to train 4 tractor drivers to help with the harvest of members meadows using our newly acquired tractor. The course will run for 2 days at Usk college (dates to be arranged). If anyone is interested,

Please contact Bill or Steph (e-mail addresses at start of newsletter). They say it's never too late to learn.

And finally, does anyone require the loan of our two Exmoor ponies to help graze down your meadows. If so, again please contact Steph or Bill.



GWT Pentwyn

**Christmas Greetings to everyone
Let's hope for a good summer next year!**