

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. How to Manage a Meadow when you don't know your Orchids from your Ox-eyes's
3. Wyewood Common
4. MMG Open Day 2008. New Grove farm and Northridge House.
5. Botanical Picnic in the Cotswolds
6. Orchard Mapping Project
7. MMG Open Day 2009

Membership

To join, contact Maggie on 01989 750740 or e-mail at monmouthmeadows@aol.co.uk

or Bill at bchoward@24e.co.uk

From the Chair.

By Stephanie Tyler

Since I wrote an update in the summer 2008 newsletter, we have had our autumn 2008 meeting and our AGM/spring meeting. In the autumn Martin Anthony and Roger James entertained about 60 MMG members, telling us about the moth and butterfly surveys they carried out during the spring and summer at several members' fields. Unfortunately it was an appalling wet summer which resulted in low numbers of these insects. After the talk

there was a lot of interest in the moth leaflets that Martin had brought with him and then we all enjoyed a delicious supper organised by Caroline Howard and Ann Robinson with contributions from most committee members as well as Elsa Wood.

Then there was the relatively quiet winter period when there

The AGM in April went smoothly with the current committee being re-elected en bloc; after the formal business we had an excellent series of presentations by MMG members on the history of and issues affecting their own grasslands. Jill Featherstone had prepared a power point presentation of photos at each



Manorside, Penylan

is a respite from the tasks to manage grassland. Grazing by sheep or our two Exmoor ponies took place on some fields until December, after which they over-wintered at Amanda Copp's fields at Lower Glyn Farm, Llanishen. The ponies are currently on the Heathland restoration area at Broadmead near Cleddon bog at Trellech awaiting their summer job grazing on our grasslands. **Don't forget to let us know if you need the ponies on your land.**

site so that speakers could talk to a background of their land and their flowers.

Firstly **Ida Dunn** talked of how she had acquired her lovely hay meadows at Four Acres, Maryland and the work she had done to restore the old buildings, renovate walls and allow the field to become two hay meadows around her house. Her greater butterfly orchids are now legendary.

Vera Easton then spoke of how she and Geoffrey came to live at Manorside, Penyvan and how they had managed their orchard area and their field. These grasslands are very rich in flowers with twayblades, cowslips and green-veined orchids once abundant in the spring. Vera catalogued a sad decline in numbers of this scarce orchid. Possibly shading by conifers, an increase in water or lack of liming may be responsible. Other plants still thrive and summer sees spotted orchids and many other species.

Ann Robinson described the rough pastures that she and Michael had bought. Since they acquired the fields they have worked hard planting woodland around the edge, clearing back brambles and taking hay from the pasture. The plant diversity has increased with the sympathetic management and in 2008 spotted orchids appeared among the ox-eye daisies and other meadow plants.

Jerry Kavanagh gave an amusing presentation on his and **Ann's** work at Badger's Holt on the Kymin. Livestock featured prominently in his talk as he enjoys using Ron Shear's sheep to graze one field and in July enjoyed having the two Exmoor ponies to stay for a few weeks to graze down other areas.

Finally Amanda Copp was to talk about her 80 acres at Lower Glyn Farm but the computer played up and disconcertingly photos kept flashing by. She decided that the audience had heard enough by then and wanted their supper so stopped. We hope that at our next meeting we can

persuade her to give her talk. We hope too that **Lyn and Rob Jones** who had prepared a talk but didn't get the chance to give it in the spring, will do so next time.

Following the talks we had as usual a first class supper, that Caroline had organised with help from Maggie Biss, Elsa Wood and other committee members. Mary Wakeling gets a special thank you for her hard work washing up and clearing up the kitchen and we thank too all those other members who helped with this task after the spring and autumn meetings.

In April the committee met for a brainstorming session ably chaired by Amanda Copp. It is May as I write this and the committee is busy organising the open day, trying to sort out machinery problems in time for the hay-making season, raising funds, progressing with ideas for projects and planning our stand at Monmouth show.

How to Manage a Meadow when you don't know your Orchids from your Ox-eyes's,

By Amanda Cobb

In 2003 we went shopping for 8 acresbut somewhere alongside Penarth Brook in a little hidden valley that runs from Llanishen towards Trellech, we fell in love and bought 80. With no land management experience beyond a ½ acre garden we moved into Lower Glyn Farm, Llanishen and only then started to wonder how we were going to care for the meadows and woodlands.

The farm has a very wide range of habitats – the valley runs West to East giving us both South and North facing meadows. The upper slopes are a mix of ancient woodland, 13 year old replanted broadleaf and a small amount of larch which we are trying to clear.

Two pieces of luck came our way that first year – we signed up for Tir Gofal (Care of the Land) environmental management scheme and were fortunate to come across Monmouthshire Meadows at the Monmouth Show and joined up. Steph Tyler and Caroline Howard came out and surveyed our meadows and enthused about the bio diversity. It wasn't just the value of the survey and the long plant list that we were given which made joining MMG worthwhile, it was the comfort of having access to knowledge so we didn't make any terrible mistakes out of ignorance.

6 years on, I have to confess I can still only recognise a handful of plants – for the first few years I felt guilty when Steph patiently told me yet again the name – and then I realised it wasn't the plant names, nor even the recognition of them that interested me – it was protecting the land to make sure they were still there for all the people whose passion they feed. I feel much the same about our trees, birds and wildlife – we try to manage the farm with a gentle touch – except for a ruthless zero tolerance for the invasive Himalayan Balsam, we try to live and let live – we don't use fertilizers or pesticides and

operate a low density grazing regime with our alpacas, Jacob sheep and visiting horses. It is incredibly rewarding to hear that the fields that were semi-improved are increasing in biodiversity year on year and we look forward to the day they join the south facing fields status as unimproved (it took me a while to grasp that unimproved as good).



Lower Glyn Farm

I am now a Monmouthshire Meadows committee member and I love being part of such an enthusiastic group. If you have an interest in helping to protect the beautiful meadows of Monmouthshire please think about joining up – the £10 annual membership fee will be put to good use in providing advice and support – and no-one will make you learn Latin names – or even common ones!

Wyeswood Common

By Julian Branscombe

Many of you will know of Gwent Wildlife Trust's campaign to try and raise the money to buy just over 100 acres of land being sold by Glyn Farm, Penallt. Since a Public Meeting was held in Pelham Hall back in October to discuss our

aspirations, we have been very busy fundraising. We are thrilled to announce our successful acquisition of the land. We have a vision to re-create Wyeswood Common, which will contrast with, yet also complement, the ancient field system on our existing nature reserve of Pentwyn Farm, right next door.

This great achievement for Gwent Wildlife Trust is thanks to the help of so many people, including many from the local community in Penallt. We have even attracted support from two high-profile conservationists, Bill Oddie and Iolo Williams. As well as donations from hundreds of individuals, we have also had substantial grants from a range of funding bodies, including the Wye Valley AONB, Countryside Council for Wales and the Tubney Charitable Trust.

We now have to work hard over the long-term to create wildlife habitat on this land. For our wildlife to survive in a changing climate there needs to be a strong network of wildlife habitat stretching from the uplands of Gwent, through the Usk Valley and across to the Wye Valley and the Forest of Dean beyond. Wyeswood Common will be an important part of this network. We hope our work will eventually prove even more important in stimulating habitat creation throughout the rest of the area.

Gwent Wildlife Trust's vision for Wyeswood Common is of a species-rich wood-pasture landscape, awash with flowers, insects, birds and bats. This wood-pasture landscape hung

on widely across the Trellech Ridge from prehistoric times, but it was finally lost to agricultural enclosure or commercial conifer planting in the last 250 years. The purchase connects the wildflower meadows of Pentwyn Farm to the nearby Wye Valley woodland, allowing species the space to move and thrive.

We have a detailed plan for the future of the site with a framework for habitat creation mapped out for decades to come. The change will be slow at first, but we will continue to farm the land, with organic conversion planned. This year and next, we need a grazier or tenant to take silage cuts, and with preferably organic stock, to help start the process of reducing the soil fertility to natural levels which will support more wildflowers. We also hope to sow a wild bird cover crop, and some areas of organic cereals. We expect to start the main tree-planting in selected parts of the site in winter 2009/10, and eventually we would like to see about a fifth of the site being woodland.

Species that we hope will benefit include many of Britain's rarest and most threatened species, such as the green-winged orchid, spreading bellflower, lesser horseshoe bat, dormouse, harvest mouse, hawfinch, spotted flycatcher, rugged oil-beetle and the wood white butterfly.

Gwent Wildlife Trust is planning an event for the local community at Wyeswood Common in the Summer. In the meantime, if you are keen to be

involved in this exciting project we are looking for voluntary site wardens that can give a little bit of time to help with a range of tasks, from practical management to looking out for wildlife. If you are interested, or have any questions, please contact Lauri MacLean at Gwent Wildlife Trust on 01600 740600.

MMG Open Day 2008

By Pam Lloyd and Ann Robinson

New Grove farm

The weekend of June 8th 2008 was, perhaps, the only really beautiful weekend of an otherwise terrible year for hay meadows. We agreed to show our fields as part of the annual MMG open day – and thanks to the weather it all worked out brilliantly.

The fields are adjacent to the New Grove Reserve which is owned and managed by Gwent Wildlife Trust. When we bought the house we agreed with the trust that we would work with them to manage our 5 acres using the same management plan. We have laid all the hedges and erected stock proof fences, which allows us to accommodate autumn grazing. We have been fortunate in being able to use the same contractor as GWT to cut the hay and to supply the sheep to graze the fields. Like other members we have a problem with bracken around the edges of the fields, but we have devised a metal plate which we attach to our motor mower and this enables us to do some very

successful bracken bashing in May and June.

We are blessed with a prolific number of orchids, hay rattle, cow slips and about 14 different species of grasses. We are also lucky that our 2 fields, which lie either side of our house, have slightly different soils so this gives us two slightly different meadows.

We are also the proud owners of the wind turbine, which many of you will have noted when driving along the Trellech to Monmouth Road.

A lot of thought has been put into designing the base of the structure to avoid a great big area of concrete, which would have spoilt the outlook of the meadow. We can also report that two years on we have found no dead birds beneath the turbine, which is always a worry to wildlife supporters.

Northridge House

We were in the eighth year of a long programme of restoration of about 12 acres of extremely neglected former pasture. By the time we acquired the land in 2001 the brambles stretched at least twelve feet out from hedges and the field edges were full of bracken. In addition, the lack of use over the previous few years meant that self-seeded trees were sprouting in many places.

We set about restoration in the summer of 2001 and a little later also planted about half of the land with native trees thanks to a grant from the Forestry Commission.

Our management plan has been simple. We keep bramble and bracken at bay by cutting. We have not used weed killers. We cut and remove the hay each year from about July. The area of hay meadow is now generally free of noxious weeds like docks, nettles and ragwort. Any ragwort that appears is promptly dug out. Unfortunately, during the past two wet years the hay has been made very late and as in 2008 the good weather of early June turned to unremitting rain, instead of hay we had to make silage. Removal of the hay is absolutely essential for the future emergence of species rich meadow. We have not grazed the land since 2001 because of the need for extensive fencing of the newly planted trees. We may introduce grazing of the aftermath in a year or two.

We were able to show the visitors to our site the beautiful effect of a real old style hay meadow. Over the years, without us interfering with nature, the plants have returned. An early useful plant was the Hay Rattle. The many different grasses provide a background to Ox-eye Daisies, various vetches and clovers and even a few orchids. Unfortunately, the orchids arrived about a week after the open day! The area around the stream provides a different set of flora including Yellow Iris, Ragged Robin and Great Hairy Willow Herb, Water Mint, Marsh Birds' foot Trefoil, Purple Loosestrife, Meadowsweet and Fool's Watercress.

Earlier in the year we had been astonished by the huge

swathes of Bluebells in the upper wooded area and by the large expanses of Cuckoo flower or Ladies Smock shining like rivers in the lower more swampy field. Removal of noxious weeds has allowed these dormant plants to emerge once more to delight those who visit Northridge House Fields.

Botanical Picnic in the Cotswolds,

By Caroline Howard

Those of you who came to our lovely Botanical walk, BBQ, and Children's quiz at Wheelers SSSI on **Cleeve Common** above Cheltenham last year will be glad to hear that we will be doing much the same this year **on July 12**.

To see the wonderful chalk hill flora, there will be a BBQ Sunday lunch at 1pm in the wood below the SSSI, followed by botanical exploration and quizzes. We will have tea, cakes and prizes before leaving.

It is a terrific family day out. Do come.

for details and lunch numbers please contact Bill or Caroline Howard 01291 689 477 or bchoward@24e.co.uk

Orchard Mapping Project,

By Erica Shepard

Do you own an orchard or single veteran fruit tree in Monmouthshire or are you a school or community group with fruit trees? If the answer is yes, then you are invited to take part in a local orchard mapping

project. This mapping project is being organised by **adventa**, Monmouthshire's Rural Development Programme. The launch of this project took place in Chepstow on 11th March. The project has received funding through the Rural Development Plan for Wales 2007 - 2013 which is funded by the Welsh Assembly Government and the European Union.

Anyone who own any fruit or nut trees in Monmouthshire are asked to contact Erica Sheppard, **adventa's** woodland revival officer so that a record can be made of the location of these important orchard habitats. She said *"Much work has been done UK wide to record and protect our orchard heritage and this mapping project in Monmouthshire will add our information to a growing interest in orchards and fruit trees."* *At one time Monmouthshire had a rich diversity of orchards and we are hoping that this project will help record an exciting picture of existing information as well as to develop our historic orchard knowledge"*

The Welsh Perry and Cider Society have already undertaken a lot of work over a number of years to record Monmouthshire's orchards and adventa are working closely with them on this mapping project.

Once the information has been gathered the project will go on to develop educational trails and events linked to our local orchard heritage and to train young people in fruit identification.

Erica Sheppard, adventa 'Wood Works' project,

Prosiect 'Gwaith Coed',
01873 736035
07921870347

Hay Cutting and Grazing 2009.

By Bill Howard

We all have our fingers crossed that this year will, at last, provide us with a dry summer to allow our schedule of haymaking to run smoothly. As usual we have a number of contractors who can be hired by members to cut, bail and remove if necessary, the hay from your fields. A list of contractors and prices can be obtained via myself, Bill Howard, at the address or phone number below. bchoward@24e.co.uk.
Tel: 01291 689447

Please also remember that we have our 2 Exmoor ponies to hire for aftermath grazing, or alternatively we can put you in contact with farmers who are willing to loan out sheep or cattle between August and February next year. Good stock proofing and a water supply must, of course be available in the field.

MMG Open Day 2009

Although we weren't quite as lucky this year with the weather compared to last year, the Open Day was again a great success and appeared to be appreciated by all our visitors.

An enormous Thank You to the site owners who allowed us to visit their meadows and a Thank You to everyone who supported the event or helped out on the day.