

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

Stephanie Tyler

This will be very brief because I have written elsewhere of some of the work we have been doing recently, for example clearing brambles and scrub around grasslands with our Trakmaster machine for the Shrill Carder Bee in the south of the county. We have also been mowing brambles at members' fields at Penallt, Trellech and Craig y

Dorth with the Trakmaster bought with a grant from the Countryside Council for Wales. If you need brambles mown please let us know although work should not now be carried out before the late summer or autumn as many birds such as Long-tailed Tits are already nesting.

We have also been busy applying for more funding from CCW for a second hand baler

The ponies did a great job munching down the rough grassland there and hopefully many flowers will benefit from the grazing and reduced competition. As I write they are now grazing on some lovely pastures on Far Hill, Trellech. We tried to cut these last July but because of the rain in late July and August were unable to remove the cut material.



Photo Terry Walters of SAMFAL

and also from the Welsh Grazing Scheme PONT for the costs of keeping our two Exmoor Ponies healthy, of ensuring fields are stock-proof and of transporting them from site to site in a horse-box. I am delighted that PONT has agreed to give us over £900 for these purposes. We were pleased to be able to help the Shirenewton and Mynyddbach Fields Association SAMFAL over the winter months by loaning them the ponies for almost 10 weeks.

The ponies will help remove the rank growth for the benefit of a host of plants including Harebells.

I have also written a brief article asking what you, our members, would like from MMG and how we can better help you. Are we failing you or have we been helpful?

We would welcome your views.

We are planning an Open Day on June 12th when at least four members' fields will be open to

you all and to the general public so please keep a note of the date in your diaries.

Spring is here so please enjoy the grassland flowers from the inconspicuous and diminutive Field Woodrush and Spring Sedge to more showy Cowslips and Green-veined Orchids.

We look forward to soon meeting all new members who joined MMG since last autumn and to seeing their fields.

Are we fulfilling your expectations?

When members first join someone visits them to look at their land, prepare a plant list and give advice but unless we hear more from you we don't know if you need more help.

There is a list of contractors on our website and a list of 'dos and don'ts of grassland management' which may help some of you. Some members benefit from the MMG machine cutting their brambles, from our tractor and bailer cutting their grass for hay, by lending our own Exmoor Ponies to graze down grass or through PONT, having access to other grazing animals or also borrowing our knapsack sprayer and Asulox for bracken control.

However, there are some of you who do not contact us for help. Does this mean that you are happy?

Would you like another visit for a survey or for any advice or help as with bracken control? Have you used the contractors list or do you know other people who should be on it?

Do you need any woodland management work?

If you have a neglected woodland or copse, some coppicing or felling might help wildlife. Such traditional management opens up the habitat to benefit woodland

flowers, butterflies and moths. A new member Richard Cornock has offered to carry out such work but would like the cut timber in lieu of payment.

If any member wants to take advantage of this offer please contact Richard on 01291 421568 or email him - rcornock@aol.com

Hay Making and Seed Collection

Bill Howard

This year we are keen to make hay for members. We have a Massey Ferguson 135 tractor, a mower, a tedder for turning the hay and the mini bailer, which we are trying to sell and replace with an old fashioned conventional bailer, which makes square bales. If you want us to cut your



Photo GWT

field for hay please let Bill Howard know by phone 01291 689 447 or by email williamhoward142@btinternet.com.

The tractor can't take steep slopes and the field should not have stones or pot-holes in it. If the grass is too coarse and full of weeds it is not worth making into hay. We have to charge for using the machines so as to recover our costs. The hay can be sold to recover costs (if the weather is

kind). We don't want to undercut local contractors.

We also have a Tracmaster power scythe, which cuts through brambles, bracken and coarse grass undergrowth. It is quite slow but is useful for small areas and tidying up corners.

At the moment three volunteers operate the tractor and the scythe. We do need more volunteers to work the machines so if you would like to have a go we will organise training.

This year we plan to harvest seed with the seed harvester which we share with Gwent Wildlife Trust. GWT will collect the seed and we hope to get some money from CCW to pay GWT for the seed collection. They will operate the machine to collect the seed but we will have

to dry, clean and package it. So if you want some seed to increase the botanical diversity of your meadow please let us know.

Wild Life Sites

A Wildlife Site is an area considered to be of particular conservation value locally and that fulfils certain criteria. For example, a field that qualifies as a Local Wildlife Site must have at

least eight well-distributed plant species from an agreed list of 'indicator' species. Woodlands, wetlands, ponds and other habitats all have their own list of species or features, a proportion of which must be represented if the site is to qualify. A site is designated as a Wildlife Site with the full knowledge and co-operation of the owner. A panel of experts from the Countryside Council for Wales, Monmouthshire County Council, Gwent Wildlife Trust and Monmouthshire Meadows Group discusses each site and approves its designation or otherwise. Designation has very few if any drawbacks. It may help protect the site from adverse development but does not commit the owner to anything; indeed grants are more likely to be available to help with management if you are an owner of a Wildlife Site than a site not so designated.

You may also hear of the designation **Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation** or SINC's. These are similar to Local Wildlife Sites in being of high conservation value locally but are planning tools for Local Authorities and unlike Local Wildlife Sites SINC's are designated without the landowners' knowledge. Many woodlands are SINC's and so too are some of our important rivers such as the River Monnow and Gavenny.

Among MMG members there are 43 who are proud owners of Local Wildlife Sites and 18 who have candidate Wildlife Sites. A candidate site is one that is believed to fulfil the criteria but that has not yet been discussed and approved by the Panel. These sites are the 'cream' of our remaining species-rich grasslands and anyone who owns such a site has a Help may be available through grants – see below special responsibility to manage it to safeguard the botanical interest.

Monmouthshire's Natural Assets Project

Gemma Bode

Monmouthshire County Council has secured funding to set up a new project to help identify and support the management of Local Wildlife Sites in Monmouthshire. This project will build on the success of Gwent Wildlife Trust's grasslands project and the joint work between the Trust and the Council to identify and encourage appropriate management of local wildlife sites. Once established a part time project officer will provide management advice to owners and land managers and there will be a **new small grants scheme** to support site management. The project will run from late Spring 2011 until the end of 2013 and will also support further survey work to help identify new local wildlife sites.

The project is part of the Rural Development Plan for Wales 2007-2013, which is funded by the Welsh Assembly Government and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. For more information please contact Gwent Wildlife Trust.

Shrill Carder Bee

Stephanie Tyler

The Monmouthshire Meadows Group (MMG) in association with the Bumble Bee Conservation Trust (BBCT) received a grant from the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) to buy a Tracmaster machine to cut grass, brambles and scrub. This was to be used mainly in southern Monmouthshire to enhance grassland habitat for the benefit of the Shrill Carder Bee *Bombus sylvarum*. As many members will know from their attendance at one of the

talks by Pippa Rayner of the BBCT in November, this bumble bee is one of two rare species found in South Wales. The other is the Brown-banded Carder Bee *Bombus humilis* found at some sites in the Wye Valley AONB. Both species need a good supply of suitable flowers along road verges, along hedgerows and in hayfields and pastures from late spring through to the autumn. The Shrill Carder Bee has strongholds in South Wales in Glamorgan and in the Cardiff to Newport area. In the Newport area it was known to extend from its core area in the Newports Wetlands Reserve across to Magor. Surveys by CCW in 2010 found bees further afield at Five Lanes and at Leechpool near Portskewett in the so-called buffer area. The target of CCW, BBCT and MMG is to improve the status of the Shrill Carder Bee and flower-rich grasslands and extend the bee's range towards Shirenewton and other grassland sites on the Trellech Plateau. As part of its commitments to CCW for the grant, the MMG undertook:

*to organise a meeting in the buffer area of the carder bee's range to generate publicity and interest in the plight of the bee



Shrill Carder Bee. Essex University

*to contact landowners in the buffer area to try to persuade them to manage their fields for bumble bees and

*to undertake work with the Tracmaster to remove coarse grass and encroaching bramble and scrub on at least 10 sites.

Our autumn meeting in Shirenewton fulfilled the first target and we have now contacted a wide range of landowners in the buffer area. A group of MMG members has also undertaken practical work at sites at Five Lanes, Highmoor Hill, Rogiet and Shirenewton to try to enhance the value of open grassland for bees and plants. At three sites at Rogiet we have worked with other partner organisations – Gwent Wildlife Trust at Rogiet Poor Land and the Minnetts Field and the Rogiet Community who are Friends of Rogiet Country Park and Wales Tidy Towns at Rogiet Country Park, a site developed on railway ballast between the railway line and M4 new bridge crossing. It may not sound very interesting but it has in fact developed a rich flora including such plants as Viper's Bugloss, a good bee flower. Unfortunately Bramble and Butterfly Bushes *Buddleia* threaten to take over and we have all been working together to knock these invasive plants back for the benefit of the grassland and its flowers. At Shirenewton we have worked on two days with the Shirenewton & Mynyddbach Fields Association (SAMFAL) members to cut grass and clear brambles on their lovely fields.

If you are a landowner in the Shril Carder Bee or Brown-banded Carder Bee ranges then if you cut your fields for hay, please try to leave a patch of uncut knapweed and other flowers so that the bees can continue to find food. If you have any influence over hedgerow edges or indeed road verges, then again try to avoid cutting

these too early so that there will be late-flowering patches.

Pesticides and honey bees

'Honeybees face a poisoned spring' was a headline in many papers after news that a new kind of pesticide (neonicotinoid pesticides such as imidacloprid) may be killing off the world's honeybees.

Scientists at the USA's bee laboratory have claimed that minute doses of these pesticides manufactured by Bayer make bees susceptible to disease and are linked with the mysterious sudden collapse disorder of hives. These new generation pesticides are widely used on crops in the United States, Britain and around the world.

The Bumble Bee Conservation Trust, Buglife and the Soil Association have all expressed some concern about the attitude that pesticides are judged innocent until proven guilty and these conservation organisations have stated that a precautionary ban would be wise.

GWT Landowners' morning

Glynis Laws

More than 50 landowners and other interested folk came to Llanishen Village Hall for Gwent Wildlife Trust's morning of talks on managing land for wildlife. Gemma Bodé and Rebecca Price were on hand to offer advice, and there was a chance to walk around the adjacent meadow with Chris Hatch, a local ecologist, as our guide.

Dave Jones talked about the problems and pleasures of developing a wildflower meadow on the smallholding near Newcastle that he and his family moved to in 2001. Dave started out with an intensively-grazed, artificially-fertilized, relatively species-poor field, with few birds. Progress towards the flower-rich haven for wildlife that Dave dreamed of was slow, even after solving the problems of finding a farmer prepared to cut the hay late, and acquiring a few Hebridean sheep for aftermath grazing.



Llanishen –Landowners' Day

Photo Glynis Laws

A turning point came in 2006 when seed gathered from Pentwyn Meadows by GWT was sown. Yellow rattle appeared and reduced the vigour of some grasses, and there has been a year-on-year increase in indicator species; five indicators were present in 2007, increasing to 10 by 2010. As well as the pleasure of the flowers, including orchids, and the sweetness of the hay, the meadow has increased the numbers of butterflies and other invertebrates, and has brought in swallows and other birds.

To complement this story of an individual meadow, Gemma described the broader picture, connecting us with the aims of The Wildlife Trusts, set out in Living Landscapes. Historically, the Trusts have focussed on establishing nature reserves for wildlife but these refuges may be insufficient to preserve biodiversity in the face of pressures from climate change and human development.

The priority now is to establish connections between wildlife sites that will not only benefit wildlife but will improve the environment for people. In this context, Gemma described the detailed work that GWT have been doing to map woodland and hedgerows in Monmouth that provide habitat for dormice. Dormice are particularly dependent on continuous hedgerows for movement since they do not come down to ground level. The map will inform GWT's priorities for planting new hedges and woodland to connect existing areas of dormouse habitat.

Bistort Day

Dr Caroline Howard

The voluntary conservation team who have been working to restore the beauty of St Mary's Churchyard have completed their first working party for 2011. It was with great enjoyment that we met on Sunday March 6 to view results of our 2010 work

and to begin our program for this year. The snowdrops were in full flower and the bramble very much reduced at the Eastern end. We built two bonfires to burn scrub and bramble cleared last year and began clearing ivy, bramble and ash saplings from the Western end where they are causing considerable damage to tomb stones. The ivy is cut as near the root as possible so that it will die and fall away from the stones. We do not pull this off as it could be extremely damaging to the surfaces, where we hope to be able to read, catalogue and map all the tombs and their inscriptions. Ash saplings were cut and we will treat the roots with herbicide, so that no further damage to the tombs occurs. We began to clear the Bramble, removing all roots where possible.

We were particularly delighted with the abundance of basal leaves of Bistort, which in early June will carpet the yard with flower. At this time (either June 4 or 11) we hope to invite all interested members of the community to climb the hill and share our customary tea and cake with us. The site will be looking at its best and we will explain what we are doing and show how we think this could become an important part of Tintern's natural and historic heritage, attracting local and visiting people to a scientifically maintained site full of local wild flowers with wonderful views over the Abbey, River and Village. We would simply like to show the community what we are doing and possibly to attract some of you to join our team (meeting for a couple of hours on the first Sunday afternoon of each month during the Summer, when fine). You may simply wish to show that you enjoyed the tea. There will be a raffle, and for children of all ages: a bran tub, ice cream and games. There will be a prize for whoever can produce the best photograph or the longest list of

plants growing in the Churchyard.

Please watch local notice boards, or the Beacon in early June, as we wish to choose a weekend afternoon when both flowers and weather are good.

Little Mill Farm Hopes and Dreams Ann Eggleton

Back in 1989 in London you could not buy organic meat; there was only one organic shop in the whole great city; there were no farmers' markets, no shops selling local food, no... no ... no ...

My husband Michael and I decided we had had enough of the three hours' daily commute and being at other people's disposal, and wanted to have a crack at producing our own food. So we sold up and bought a farm. That took nearly two years! Remember Bank Rate at 17%? Everywhere we looked had suddenly got too expensive, just before we got there. Almost by accident we were tempted over the Severn Bridge to look at a tiny farm just north of Monmouth - Little Mill Farm at Newcastle.

We bought in April 1989. In August we became the first Soil Association registered organic farm in Gwent. For several years we sold our lambs and steers in the conventional markets (Monmouth for lambs, Ross for steers) because though you couldn't buy organic meat in Monmouth any more than in London, there were no customers for it either. (More often than not our lambs were bought by Bill James of Raglan - an expert judge of quality if ever there was one.) But gradually we spread the word, and by 2000 we were selling all our meat as organic direct to individual customers, ready

butchered and packed for the freezer. This was hard work – especially the beef, which always came ready at Christmas, when we had to find and alert at least eight customers per animal, to collect 25lb each of beef all on the same day. The meat was cut up on a local farm in the butcher's spare time over two evenings – he cut, I split and bagged and packed. It was cold work!

In addition we discovered that the farm was nearly untouched by modern chemicals. We had rare wildflowers, flower-rich old hay-meadows, and dormice.

Then over about 12 months, in 2000-2001, three things happened. Michael got his Old Age Pension, Foot + Mouth struck – we were caught up in the South Herefordshire outbreak (one of the largest areas in Britain to be affected) – and Michael had a stroke due to high blood pressure. We'd had the guts knocked out of us by the struggle to hold on to our flock and herd while due to be culled (we did succeed), we didn't need to make quite so much money, and Michael's health was from then on precarious.

The next few years saw the farming enterprises reduced and reduced as Michael succumbed to vascular dementia – just as debilitating and exhausting for everyone as Alzheimer's. Maintenance on the farm and buildings was abandoned, the veg garden would have been overwhelmed by its neighbouring pastures if my mother (by then living in a converted stable on the farm) hadn't nobly spent her 80s fighting back, and by the time Michael finally moved into Gibraltar House in 2009 I didn't have the energy to walk a dog.

All very bad news! But life has a way of kicking you when you need it. After 12 months of slow recovery, I suddenly found my sense of fun again – I joined a wildlife committee and the committee of the Meadows Group, and I also heard about Transition Monmouth. Here were issues I could identify with, and which matched in every way what I found I wanted to do on the farm with my new energy and enthusiasm. Michael and I had never aimed at self-sufficiency, being older and more realistic than our former hippy-

style selves, but with Climate chaos and Peak Oil on a very near horizon there is clearly an urgent need to change life-styles from the old lavish buy-your-way-out attitudes to something much more basic, local, nearer the soil, and, frankly, far more enjoyable. That is what I am aiming at in my last 20 years (or so I tell myself!) at Little Mill Farm.

The veg garden is happily being resurrected, and I still have my sheep, all born on the farm and trusting me to take care of them. But as new projects I am:-

- *Installing a pellet-fired biomass boiler instead of the old oil-fired one – nearly zero-carbon heating
- *Having photovoltaic cells laid on the barn roof – nearly zero-carbon electricity
- *Learning about chainsaws so I can manage my own woodland
- *Buying a horse and cart to haul goods (firewood + hay) and keep the pasture in trim - nearly zero-carbon haulage
- *Buying four piglings to weed the orchard + a small paddock, and provide pork + bacon
- *In 2012, buying a Dexter cow to supply household milk and quite a lot of beef
- *In 2013, planting up half of the orchard as a Forest Garden, a permanent planting on many levels of productive shrubs and food-plants around the apple trees

There are other ideas. I might install a water-ram to pump the spring water supply constantly (and without electricity) up to the tank above the house – with the overflow I could have a fish-pond, or a spring-water swimming pool, or even a small Pelton-wheel to light the house when the sun doesn't shine on the PV cells. I want to coppice my woodland for firewood and useful products. I want to plant a



Little Mill Farm Meadows photo Ann Eggleton

flower garden with nothing but native wildflowers (that will take some planning).

This is all very exciting for me, but there won't really be much point unless I can share the knowledge I already have, and hope to gain, with as many other Transition-minded souls as possible.

Would you like to learn how to grow veg? Would you like to learn about chickens, or pigs; or look at my pellet boiler? In quieter mode, would you like to make your own bread, or jam, or chutney? I want to share all this activity with everyone who has an interest. You don't even have to get your hands dirty if you don't want to. Have a think about it – and then email me and come and have a look! It's anneggleton@waitrose.com.

I look forward to hearing from you!

For your Diary

Our OPEN DAY

Sunday, June 12th
Sites to be announced soon

BIOBLITZ DAY

at Rogiet Countryside Park
on Saturday, 4th June.

Come along to learn moths, other insects, plants, etc with experts on hand to identify plants and animals.

Take Severn Tunnel road at traffic lights in Rogiet. Go over railway bridge and take first right. You drop down into Rogiet C.P.

Dyfed Permaculture Farm Trust – Courses 2011

The following courses are being held at Dyfed Permaculture Farm Trust in South West Wales, led by experienced mower and Scythe teacher Philip Batten.

Sharpening and Peening Workshop

The key to relaxed, easy mowing that is gentle on your body is a REALLY sharp blade.

Learning to peen and sharpen well will transform your mowing experience. Bring along your blade to this hands on workshop to learn how to get it into the best mowing condition, with expert help on hand.

Subjects covered include in-field honing, setting up and using a peening station and an in-depth exploration of free-hand peening blade repair

As far as we know, the only course in Britain dedicated to the

sharpening and repair of your blade!

Saturday 9th July 10am-4pm
Cost £40

One Day Introductory Scythe Courses

All you need to know to get you started using a scythe! The course will look at set up, mowing techniques, sharpening and peening. Learn how to mow a lawn, cut a hay meadow, control brambles and scrub and much more.

Saturday 28th May, Sunday 25th June or Saturday 13th August
10am-4pm Cost £40

Two Day Intensive Scythe Course

This course, for the more experienced mower or the **adventurous beginner**, will allow us to go into more depth on all aspects of scythe use. **The first day will be spent**

looking at preparations for mowing, with a detailed look at subjects such as scythe set up and free-hand peening. The second day will focus on mowing, looking at areas such as mowing techniques, tai chi style mowing, blade selection, teaching and mowing with groups and hand hay making. **Weekend of 16th /17th July**
Cost £100

Camping space is available for all courses if you are traveling from further afield.

We hand make hay by hand from July onwards, as weather permits. Volunteers welcome to come for up to a week at a time to help and learn.

For more details email scythecymru@yahoo.co.uk or phone Michelle on 07813 464990