

THE BEACON

NEWSLETTER FOR THE STAFF, VOLUNTEERS &
BOARD MEMBERS OF THE MALVERN HILLS
CONSERVATORS.



Issue: 35 May 2010



Send your news and views please to the Beacon Editorial Team at the Malvern Hills Conservators office, Manor House, Grange Road, Malvern, WR14 3EY:
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Current topics the Conservators are discussing.

By Val Moore

New Conservator

Following the resignation of Richard Thomas last year we now have a new Conservator, Dave Baldwin, appointed by Mathon Parish Council. Dave who lives in Cradley, has always had a keen interest in the Hills and is looking forward to his new role.



Questions from the public

The questions asked by members of the public regarding the plans for St Ann's Well Cafe highlighted that the formal public questions item on Board Meeting Agendas is not always the best forum for the public to bring their concerns to members' attention. In the circumstances the Administration & Resources Committee discussed this and has recommended publicising other ways the public can discuss issues or concerns. This will appear on the 'Contact Us' section of the website and will suggest the public either contacts the office, their local Conservator, or opt to discuss their concerns with a panel made up of three Conservators who, if they are unable to resolve the matter, will be able to advise the best way forward.

Park Wood

At the Land Management Committee Rob gave members an update on the work carried out over the last two years to restore the hazel coppice. This had included planting 1500 hazel trees as well as oak and cherry to match the existing tree species. Following damage in the Wood caused by cars and horses, barriers have been placed at the two main access points. At the suggestion of members of the public, it has been agreed use the Gift Fund to finance the repair and clearing around the Lime Kilns in Park Wood and to erect an interpretation board.

Community Woodland

Malvern Community Forest Group is continuing to work with the Conservators in managing this area situated off Townsend Way by organising volunteer days to do litter picks, manage the ancient woodland section of the Community Woodland and to coordinate the Memorial Orchard fruit tree planting. As well as erecting two wooden signs on the boundaries of the Woodland, the Administration & Resources Committee has agreed to finance from the Gift Fund path creation and bridges to further open up the area.

Gift Fund

The Gift Fund is made up of donations made by the public. Some of the donations are given for specific items, others are general donations towards the general maintenance of the Hills and Commons. We have recently produced a Donations and Legacies leaflet, together with a section on the website, to publicise our charitable status and the improvements that can be made to the Hills and Commons by this source of income.

Mill Pond

Work will soon be starting to install coir filter beds pre-established with reeds at the Mill Pond to protect the banks from erosion from both wildfowl and fishermen.

Future Meeting Dates:

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| Annual General Meeting of Council Tax Payers followed by the ordinary Meeting of the Board | - | 8 th July | 7 pm at Priory Lodge Hall, Avenue Road, Malvern |
| Land Management | - | 3 rd June | 4 pm at Conservators' office |
| Administration & Resources | - | 10 th June | 7 pm at Conservators' office |

Full reports of the meetings can be viewed on the web site at

www.malvernhills.org.uk

Spring.

By Ian J S Rowat

Our surveys and car parking revenue tell us that over a million people come to Malvern to enjoy walking on the Hills. Those that are lucky to live either on the hills themselves or in surrounding towns and villages are emotionally attached. Letters and articles in the papers and magazines, together with television coverage show that the shapely curves of the outline of the Hills sells as well as any of those of page 3 girls. For those of us with the job of looking after the Hills we are constantly asking what people want from their visit. Is it simply to wander along the paths with their closest companion, whether that is family, or a dog, or is the connection more spiritual? Is it about knowing the Hills are there and in a fast changing world they are the one constant? May be these thoughts are too whimsical for the active participant who see the ups and downs a challenge. The opportunity to carry out a physical sport such as orienteering, mountain biking or experience the exhilaration of hang gliding. Many people see the Hills as a watering hole somewhere to capture the pure water that bubbles out of spouts, or the attractions of cosy cafes and country pubs.

In carrying out the practical work we have to take into account the users; we try to leave a light touch. Our Acts give us the duty to keep the Hills natural and protect tree, turf and bush; we translate this to modern terms such as conserving the land. The principles of conservation only emerged in the 1950s although the conservation bodies themselves like ours were around 50 years before that. Another statutory duty imparted in the Act is to keep the land as open space for all to enjoy. It is the balance of these aims that exercises Conservators today. It will always be debated and influenced by current thinking or new challenges. Initiatives such as health agendas are encouraging the medical profession to see the countryside as a place of healing and an antidote to obesity. Other issues such as climate change may have a radical impact on our management and visitors use of the Hills.

Daily we are contacted with requests either for more signs, to do something about litter, or to hold an event. To a certain extent our remit is one to resist change but also to evaluate the needs of the community. This is a difficult task as who speaks for the community and in an organisation such as ours, it does need to be the elected representatives working together with the staff to ensure that we safeguard the Hills and Commons yet deliver what the majority want, as well as remaining true to our statutory duties

Grazing Livestock on the Hills and Commons

By Rob Havard, Conservation Officer

Common rights holders grazing on the Hills and Commons has been going on for 1000's of years. Sometimes it is easy to forget that it is only 15 years since it nearly died out in this area. By 1994 most commoners had ceased to turn livestock out on the Malvern Hills. A combination of agricultural economics and an increase in visitor pressure had precipitated the last days of a British tradition that went back to before the Norman Conquest.

The rights of Common are based in Common Law and pre-date our Parliament. They are a property right and are usually linked to the property itself, although in exception they can be registered to a family or individual. Although there are other rights on the Commons, the most frequently used is "Pasturage", the right to graze a set number of animals, also known as a "stint".



It is fair to say that the total number of animals on the Commons in the past would dwarf the numbers we see today. There are rights registered for over 9000 sheep on the Hills and Commons while today we have about 500 sheep and 150 cattle grazing on MHC land. Despite the huge numbers that would have been on the Hills the numbers started to decline significantly following the 2nd World War. People who have lived in the area for a long time often remark on how significantly the Hills have changed in the last 50 years and the aerial photography we have on record shows the dramatic increase in scrub and secondary woodland over this period.

Figure 1. British Camp 1948



Figure 2. Happy Valley 1923



Figure 3. Happy Valley 2004

In the early 1990's ecologists and wildlife experts started to see a significant reduction in ground nesting birds like the Meadow Pipit and Skylark and the near local extinction of the High Brown Fritillary butterfly that lived on the violet flowers between the grasses and the bracken. The acidic wildflower grassland was also being lost at an increasing rate, with 95% of all examples lost across Britain over a 50 year period, along with about half of all wildflower grassland on the Hills themselves. During this time the Conservators got together with English Nature (the precursor of Natural England) to see what could be done.

In 2001, with the help of the National Lottery, grazing was reintroduced on British Camp and in 2003 on The Northern and Central Hills. It was the Hills Conservators themselves who carried out the farming operation to manage this livestock and a few people had their doubts as to how we would get on. There were certainly strong voices saying that it would never be attractive or viable for “real” farmers or commoners to take it on. In 2003 Trevor Baylis (a “real” farmer and common rights holder) turned sheep and cattle onto the Central Hills and has been grazing this area ever since. While we successfully managed the livestock on the Northern

Hills it had always been the aim to prove that it could be done to encourage local commoners to turn out stock once again. In 2006 we were successful with an application for a conservation grant scheme, which would help support the grazing on the Hills for the next 10 years. We used the opportunity to encourage more local farmers to turn out their livestock instead of the Conservators and we now have Matt Rouse grazing sheep and cattle on the Northern Hills and are due to find a grazier for the Southern Hills in the coming months.

Figure 4. Matt Rouse took on the grazing on the Northern Hills from MHC in late 2008.



The move to local farmers and graziers is a natural one for the Conservators. In our own Acts of Parliament we are given 4 main duties, one of which is to protect the rights of commoners. Obviously the best way to do this is to ensure that commoners' rights are still used and are still relevant in today's society.

The combination of opening up views and paths for public enjoyment, preserving the important habitats that support the wildlife special to the Malvern Hills while safeguarding the traditions of the local area that we were set up to protect seems to us like a "no brainer", as the Americans say.

However, it is not all plain sailing. We have to balance the wishes of the public with the rights of the commoners and requirements of the wildlife on the Hills and Commons. With that in mind we post the whereabouts of the livestock on our website home page and also in the local paper every week. We also offer free dog training to anyone who wants to train their dogs to ignore livestock, we feel it is the responsibility of the dog owners to train their pets accordingly if they wish to take them into the countryside. We work with the local orienteering and hang gliding clubs to try to balance the positions of our grazing compartments with the recreational uses on the Hills and make sure that grazing areas are well signposted with further information available on the gate information boards. Failing all of that, there is always a real person at the end of a phone line to explain what is happening.

From time to time we also get calls from people to "leave the Hills to nature" or "to let nature take its course". While I have some sympathies with the intentions behind these pleas they become more difficult when we actually try to implement them. For a start, what is "natural"? Does natural include humans? If so do we have to wear loin cloths and carry spears? Lets assume it means leaving the hills well alone. The trouble is that we have already meddled with them and negatively influenced the ecosystem. Where are the 10,000 strong herds of European Bison and Wild Ox? Where are the Irish Elk, mountain goats and wild sheep? Unfortunately the answer is that we have killed them all off in this country with the Irish Elk and the Wild Ox now completely extinct the world over.

So what do we do now?

We have all these grassland wildflowers, butterflies and birds that have evolved to live in the habitats provided by large herbivores grazing across a landscape (think Serengeti plain or Castlemorton Common). In order to make our system "natural" and at the same time accommodate all the wildlife, somehow we need to re-create the natural process of these wild herbivores grazing that takes place in most temperate eco-systems.



Figure 5: Now if we could just think of a project or process that could do this then we really would be well on our way to a "natural" system.....

Wild About the Hills

By Nicky Quinn

The Eurasian Otter (*Lutra lutra*)

The Otter is a mainly nocturnal, semi-aquatic mammal of the mustelidae family which also includes weasels, polecats and badgers. Otters have a long, sinuous muscular body 30 – 69 inches (males are usually bigger than females) long including the tail and are covered by rich brown glossy fur. They have a long powerful tail, short limbs and webbed feet with long claws. Their broad, flattened head comprises small ears, eyes and nose at the top of the head to allow those senses to work even while almost totally submerged. Fish comprises 90% of the otter's diet but may also include shellfish, amphibians, aquatic birds, invertebrates and small mammals. When hunting otters can submerge for up to 70 seconds.

The male otter (dog) is mainly solitary and can have a territory of between 7 – 25 miles across, while the female (bitch) has a much smaller territory. The dog otter may stray into female territory to mate but has little to do with any offspring (whelps).

Breeding can occur at any time of the year and there is no delayed gestation period, which can result in young dying in harsh winters. Pregnancy lasts from 60 – 80 days and there will be between 1 – 5 fully furred, blind young. Their mother rears them until they are ready to leave from any time between 7 – 12 months of age.

Territories are well marked areas. Characteristically the otter will mark prominent positions such as pathway intersections, raised rocks, tree trunks, beneath bridges, etc. with cylindrical droppings called spraints. These are oily and musky smelling and act as boundary markers to let other otters know the sex and sexual condition of the otter claiming ownership and to deter trespassing animals. Otters may also spraint the central parts of their territory including outside den entrances, near to couches (platforms of twigs and plants), regular haul sites (where they leave or enter the water) and rolling sites (where they dry themselves).

There are 12 species of otter throughout the world but we have the sea otter (*Enhydra lutris*) and the Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) in Britain. These species had both declined to a few hundred individuals by the 1970s due to water pollution, pesticide pollution, habitat loss and hunting with hounds. Full protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the ban on hunting in 1977 has meant that otters have made a strong recovery in Britain. There are regular signs and sightings of them in and around the Malvern area.



Conservation Day Activities

By Nicky Quinn & Rich Vale

February 6th - Rushy Valley

Another fantastic turn out of volunteers and some excellent work going on at this deep valley below the Worcestershire Beacon. We stuck to the lower slopes in order to clear the rowan and birch saplings from the bilberry patches and dragged the branches to the fire (no mean feat in itself). Well some people would call it a fire, although there was not a great deal of heat or smoke usually characteristic of that feature. We don't really feel we have had proper bonfire until the fire brigade have been out to see what we are doing. *NQ*

Feb 12th Old Hills.

Tree planting, makes a change from slashing and burning. We were over at Old Hills to plant some native Oak Trees that had been donated to us by the Grandfather of a lad that had been killed in a car accident. The lad had grown them from acorns. We spent most of the day constructing park type tree guards around the Oaks. This seemed a bit like overkill, but we have had problems in the past with trees being destroyed by the mowers, and the Oaks being quite small (well, very small actually) we wanted to give them a fighting chance. We also cleared quite a large amount of bramble from around the planting sites. We almost had a revolt on our hands as Nicky forgot the biscuits! Luckily the post office was open at Callow end so we were able to get a supply before it turned nasty. *RV*



George planting a mighty oak!

March 6th - Parkwood

One for “Record Breakers” that would have got Roy Castle leaping about excitedly, as a new record was set on this otherwise unassuming day. No less than 44 volunteers came along to help plant trees with Dave Jackson (it would have been easier using a spade) the coppice worker reinstating some of the coppiced hazel stools in Parkwood. Even taking into account that most of Dave’s family were there helping we still had a tremendous turn out of 36 of our own troupe. We



planted about 250 trees, mainly hazel to restock the coppice species for future generations. Parkwood has a long history of coppicing so it is great to see an ancient management technique back in use in this beautiful woodland. *NQ*

March 12th Gullet Quarry Butterfly Site.

A mixed bag of weather greeted us at Gullet Quarry, but for the most part it was another sunny day. We were clearing small trees and bramble to encourage the wild flowers and in turn the butterflies. It was good to hear the crronk, crronk of the Ravens that are nesting again in the quarry. *RV*

March 26th Purlieu – Dingy Skipper & Meadow Saffron Field.

‘Clearing patches of scrub to encourage Naked Maidens’, I wonder how many more male volunteers we would have got if this was on the conservation day list. Naked Maidens is one of the many vernacular names used for Meadow Saffron. It is also known as the Autumn Crocus as it flowers in the autumn, long after the leaves have died off. A good effort by everyone, clearing lots of scrub and bramble. Top marks to Brian and Pete for keeping the fire going. Thinking about it you have probably got more chance of seeing naked maidens down the Purlieu than you have the elusive Dingy Skipper! *RV*

April 3rd St Ann’s Well Bilberry site.

This is our second visit to this site, clearing Rowan saplings from among the bilberry. We had a lot of cut material to clear from our last visit so the first job of the day was to start a fire. This job was given to ‘twisted fire starter’ Sarah Davies. There was another little fire started later by Nicky but it was barely smoking so it’s not really worth mentioning. In addition to the fire we cut down a lot more of the Rowan so we will need to return in the autumn to clear the remaining cut materials. A really good effort by everyone. *RV*



Left: Sarah’s fire, yeh!

Right: Nicky’s fire, oh dear !



April 9th - Berington Quarry

On a south facing, dry slope and sheltered from the wind this is a good site for adders, the very rare grayling butterfly that is found on a few rocky places on the hills, not to mention glow worms. A new site for the group to work on, it was lovely to soak up a few warm April rays ourselves whilst we cleared away some of the ash trees growing around the quarry floor. This should help to continue to make this a dry sunny slope favoured by the above species for years to come. There have been reports of another rare creature asleep in this sunny spot, known locally as the “Strangely-hatted bearded Tony” but I believe that this is more likely the stuff of local myth. *NQ*

April 23rd Hangman’s Hill Ephemeral Ridge.

Another lovely day on Hangmans Hill. It was encouraging to see the bank covered in wild-flowers. It was mainly Spring Cinquefoil but we did find Storksbill (well, one flower) and Hairy Bittercress, plus lots of Sweet Violets and Ground Ivy. We concentrated our efforts on the bank below the path, wummaging around in the undergrowth, clearing low growing bramble. Oh, and Pete, your little beastie was a Pill Millipede. *RV*

Caption Competition

Can you think of a witty caption for the photo below? If so let us know.

Due to the poor response we usually get to these competitions we are offering a fantastic prize. VIP treatment at the next conservation day. Basically this means you get first dip into the biscuit tin.



New tactics to solve an old problem ?

Cartoon by Antony Griffiths.

