



Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke

November 2013 Newsletter 42

What are we for? This.



Fleam Dyke, south of A11

This photograph was taken for us in July 2013 by Henry Stanier, Ecology Groups Officer for the Wildlife Trust BCN along with other views and close up photographs of flowers, which will be added to their files. He plans to return next year and take some long shots of the Roman Road.

This photograph shows about half of this section of the Fleam Dyke. The Juniper bushes and the Bedford Gap are behind us. Most of the left hand bank here was cleared of thick scrub in 2001. An early work party of the Friends cleared an area of the right hand bank next to the Silver Birch tree. The reason that this clearance has been so successful is that the top of this bank was kept clear in the seventies and eighties by people such as David Clark, Sean Wylie, Alec Sadler, John Davidson and others. The flowers are classic chalk grassland species, which spread happily down into the pure chalk of the cleared bank: Thyme, Rock-rose, Lady's Bedstraw, Squinancywort, Horseshoe Vetch, Dwarf Thistle, Carline Thistle and Dropwort. The taller purple flowers are Greater Knapweed, which is followed by Common Knapweed, feeding butterflies and bees all summer.

“Route and Branch” – a memoir by Bill Clark

Every time I read the Friends' Newsletter, it reminds me of my own efforts of getting volunteers, raising money and wrestling with officialdom in its many guises - who seem to spend most of their time demanding much paperwork, and saying, 'You may not!' but will occasionally swamp you with money, machinery - even more paperwork - and a deadline! This July's Newsletter announcing that the newest leaflet is dedicated to Dr David Clark - no relative of mine I am sad to say - jogged more memories! I was a member of his Committee during the 1970s - but only managed to do a couple of 'heavy' jobs for him. However, I was dealing with identical problems at Wandlebury, and we had many conversations about the do's, don'ts and wherefore, and I like to think that I was of most help to him in that way. Having just published "Route and Branch" - my own memoirs - perhaps a few edited snippets out of it will give a flavour of my 'history' and the 'ability' that I was able to impart.

By the time I was thirteen I was working with the tractor most evenings and weekends. Little did I know that I was about to be at the forefront of a coming revolution, and years of controversy, It was during late spring, 1946. I was spreading a brown powder - I believe it was called Grazon, which arrived in newfangled paper sacks. It seemed a big improvement but for a still weedy lad, they contained a back breaking 50 kilos, and as I slit the tops open to spread the contents along the trough of the horse drawn fertiliser spreader - now converted to be pulled by my tractor - I got covered in the brown dust from head to toe. The fields were a sea of charlock still in bud, so thick that you wouldn't know what crop was really there. I remember I was most disappointed that not a single one seemed to be drooping by the time I finished on Sunday evening. I had no reason to go to those fields until some ten days later. What a transformation! Not only was the charlock brown and crisping up, but even the creeping thistles, our most persistent weeds, had their heads hung low. All the farm workers were ecstatic. No more back breaking charlock pulling in the potato fields. No more hand hoeing the cornfields. No more thistle filled arms and hands whilst stooking the corn at harvest time. Collectively, we all thought it was a wicked shame that it could only be used on corn crops and the potatoes before they emerged - the other crops would have to wait for some years!

However, my father cast his eye around other problems, thistles, nettles and buttercups aplenty in the grass fields. Let's try it on the worst patches, before the cattle move in. I remember being pleased that the buttercups had thinned quite drastically, but I don't remember noticing orchids and cowslips had thinned too!

As a member of the Essex Naturalists Trust in 1970, I was instrumental in stopping the Essex River Board weed-spraying streams and river banks, thus causing a Trust official to write me a letter, asking if I thought the roadside flowers important? Were they holding their own? Or were they disappearing? Should the County Council take more care with mowing and their timing of it! She was highly delighted when I not only wrote that I had been one of the first to machine-mow road verges - a contract for 800 miles in Buckinghamshire in 1948 and 1949, using Ferguson tractors with 'finger mowers' - but said that I thought the new flail mowers were both damaging perennial plants by being set too low, and smothering finer plants with a rotting mush. This was not only bad for plant life, but for butterfly and moth caterpillars too. And yes, I did think that it was imperative that more care was taken with the timing. I finished by enclosing notes of changes that I had noticed over the previous 9 years, due I thought to a combination of mowing, farming spray drift, and the new habit of winter salt spreading on the A12.

On my first day at Wandlebury in August 1973 - a Sunday - I was patrolling with note book in hand jotting down, 'things needing urgent attention', when my daughter Caroline joined me for a time. 'Look Dad, some primroses', she moved closer and peered at a dozen or so broken stalks, and one tall brown stem with seed heads, 'No they aren't,

what are they?' I was about to say, 'Caroline, don't tell me you can't recognise....', when the truth hit me - hard! Just a few weeks short of her ninth birthday, Caroline was looking at her very first cowslip. I stood stunned, trying to think back to when I had last seen them flowering in a meadow. Twelve years ago in Essex? No! Seven years ago in Buckinghamshire? No! Three years in Oxfordshire? No! It had to be the ones that I had been spreading Gazon over when a schoolboy! I took out my handkerchief and knelt down to carefully pull off the remaining seed heads, and knotted them inside. As we walked on, I explained to Caroline, how at her age, I played in meadows that were yellow with cowslips. Pointing to the just harvested wheat field beside us, I remarked, 'If the Society will allow it, one day cowslips will cover that field'. Was I feeling remorseful! However, my immediate concerns were the heavy foot fall, the miles of 'unofficial' footpaths, the many bare areas and the fact that there were only tiny bits of true, 'chalk meadow' among the rough grass areas.

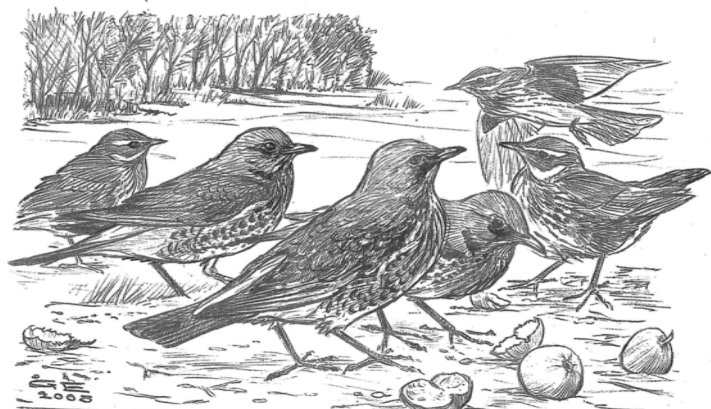
My desire to spread the small areas of chalk grassland was twofold: to bring back the indigenous flowers and help the butterflies and bees. Having spoken to elderly estate workers and servants, I was able to put a date to when much of the rough grass areas were last ploughed, allowing me to ascertain - fairly accurately - that nearby chalk grasses and flowers creep back at the rate of thirty or so centimetres per year. (I used this method to prove that the so called, 'Hill Figure' area, had been ploughed over as recently as 1946!) I thought this method would work for the Fleam Dyke - assuming few hands anyway - keep the path clear for the whole length - to encourage footfall - and only widen it by thirty centimetres per year either side, where chalk-plants were established. Interestingly at Wandlebury, I realised that if I mowed - or grazed - the rough grass more frequently, but allowed the chalk grassland to flower and seed, the spread would be as much as a metre each year.

Two of the first conservation groups I joined were CAMBIENT - now the Wild Life Trust - and the RSPB. CAMBIENT helped with setting up the new 'Nature Trail', and the local RSPB members were particularly helpful in providing work parties to construct cover and plant habitat for birds and small mammals - their blackberry and wild rose plantings, not only raised the numbers of nesting white throats and yellow hammers, but soon blocked off many of the unofficial paths, and the areas behind quickly grew over with woodland plants and grasses. This work soon established the Speckled Wood butterfly as a common species and tripled the number of Chiff Chaffs and Willow Warblers! As it happened, I was eventually allowed to grass down all the Wandlebury agricultural land, and despite many problems - you will have to read the book - have lived to see a profusion of cowslips and insect life, including the Small Copper and Brown Argus butterflies and Leaf Cutter bees, returning to Wandlebury.

Bill Clark, 2013

Field Fares and Redwings

by Graham Easy



Books for Christmas

Even if you do not know the wonderful nature reserve at Wandlebury Ring, and have never met Bill Clark, I am sure you will enjoy his book Route and Branch. It is typical of Bill that he does not call it an Autobiography, but 'an account of my life', a phrase which seems to me to reach back in time to books by Daniel Defoe or Robert Louis Stevenson; narratives where page after page offers another good story, a sudden laugh, battles with the fearful giant 'Bureaucracy' and disasters such as the great 'blow' of 1976 and worse, the hurricane of 1987.

Estimating a thousand trees down, Bill managed to drive to the home of the proprietor of Duxford Hire and Supply, buy all the good quality chain saws they had and then phone a timber merchant to get a good price for the wood before the price fell! Our man is a crack shot, and an expert bee keeper. His knowledge and understanding of wildlife is remarkable. After a lecture by Michael Majerus, I begged a petri dish of the enemy alien Harlequins to show to Bill. He was unimpressed. He called to his wife, just saying "Wendy, these are the ones we saw on that gate post three years ago, aren't they?" In spare hours Bill calculates the average mileage covered by the various boots required by his work, and their durability; or notes how many solitary bees and caterpillars are minced by the roadside flailing operations, or mashed up by the Amazon mower-baler used on the Roman Road. Just the thing for Boxing Day.

Available for £12 from Bill Clark, Gogmagog House, Wandlebury Ring, CB22 4AE, or £15 p&p incl.

Cambridgeshire Bird Atlas 2007–2011

Louise Bacon, Alison Cooper, Hugh Venables
Published by the Cambridgeshire Bird Club, July 2013
£15.00 plus £2.00 p&p



The new atlas provides a complete and comprehensive overview of the summer and winter distribution and abundance of birds in the county. There are 500 detailed maps, which show where 167 bird species can be found breeding or wintering. Facing the maps are expert species accounts interpreting the maps and placing them in historical and national context.

Almost a thousand contributors, from professional ornithologists to ordinary bird watching members of the public, provided details of the birds they saw, and these have been mapped at a closer level of detail than for the national atlas – at the 2 km square level; there are just short of one thousand such squares within the county boundary. Records were received from 90% of these squares.

Available for £17 (incl.) from the Cambridgeshire Bird Club, 4a Cavendish Avenue, Cambridge, CB1 7US, or online from Amazon.
<http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0902038273> or from
http://www.nhbs.com/bkfn0_207682.html

Wild Hope by Andrew Balmford, describes several of the commercially sustainable conservation projects which are the main hope for the natural world.

What has Nature ever Done for Us by Tony Juniper. What is good for nature turns out to be what is best for us. Whenever we manage to preserve nature intact, we are healthier – and wealthier too.

We hope to have the books mentioned above available for sale on 4th December.

Tax Payers Money Wasted on Pointless Clearance, Continued.

In my article in the July edition of these newsletters, I said that the total clearance of the northern verge of the Chilford Hall section of the Roman Road had been planned and paid for by Natural England. **That is not correct.** Natural England approved the plan. The work was planned by the Countryside Access Department of the County Council.

Despite several requests we have not been told the cost. At the September Linear Sites Committee meeting, my estimate of £25,000 was ridiculed. We were told that the work cost 'about £5,000', a sum which is apparently too small to be accounted for.

Previous statements that the work was done at the request of the landowners was not repeated at that meeting, as it could not be substantiated. The assertion that the Roman Road had to be kept clear of all vegetation 'by law' has morphed into the following statement: "The public has the right to enjoy the full 40ft. width of the Roman Road". Since I am the only person on the Linear Sites Committee who regularly encounters 'The Public' on the Roman Road, and at related conservation events, I feel I can say with confidence that many members of The Public are not enjoying this right at all. There are indeed people who enjoy not pushing past overgrown bushes when they walk or cycle there but that is not the same thing. The obvious problem with this byway was that there was no system of cutting back the scrub flanking the path.

However, this will no longer be a problem because the full width will now be flailed two to three times a year as part of the regular programme of footpath and byway cutting. It is hard to understand why the County Council would undertake an increase in their work, particularly at a time when budgets have been cut. As I understand it, some parishes have been told that they will have to cut their own footpaths, and there will no longer be special arrangements for Protected Verges. ([Nature in Cambridgeshire](#), 2012)

One aspect of this story is incontrovertible. No Management Plan for the Roman Road is now regarded as permanent, no matter how expensive and how much voluntary time and effort has been put into it. The concise Management Plan produced for CCC by Alison Kew in 1990 was expanded by Donna Radley for English Nature in 2003 – 4 and intended to be revised in 2008. This was over-ridden by work carried out in 2006 under a plan devised by Peter Stroh of the new Natural England and Naomi Brookes, Green Belt Officer. Furious protests led to the funding, by Natural England, of an expensive, time consuming and over-detailed Management Plan intended to last until 2017. This was then over-ridden by the Conservation and Enhancement Scheme 2011- 2017 agreed by officers at Natural England. The detailed provisions of this plan specify variety of grass margins and a three year rotation of some cut areas in order to protect invertebrates and small mammals. However, this too has been over-ridden by the County Council's instructions to the contractor to mow the Roman Road from Worsted Lodge to Deadman Hill 'edge to edge' in October and by early May at the latest. This year the work was done on or just before May 3rd, when the cowslips were coming into flower. Fortunately, the driver of the Amazon, David, lifted the blades over five-foot widths of cowslip, especially on Deadman Hill. If you looked closely in May, you would have seen the decapitated stems of the surrounding cowlip flowers. Cowslips do not grow in long narrow bands. They spread outwards around the main plant. (See p.8)

At this September meeting, the Chilford clearance was justified as being in the 2011 Conservation and Enhancement Scheme. It is not, or not in my copy. In the 2007 Management Plan, as in previous plans, this section was regarded as a useful habitat.

"Management Plan 2007 – 2017

Compartment 6.

- i) Cut the path twice a year. ii) Maintain the scrub**

Rare and unusual flowers noted on the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke.

A reminder. Species lists assembled by David Barden are available on our website. See Flora and Fauna. Several expert local botanists continue to monitor the key areas and plants, particularly Monica Frisch, Steve Hartley and Jonathan Shanklin. Steve has previously found two remaining patches of **Wild Thyme** on the Roman Road, north of Worsted Lodge. He has also discovered that we have **Large Leaved Thyme**, *Thymus pugeloides*, both there and on the Roman Road and in the East Pit. Every year he makes a meticulous count of the flowering spikes of the Autumn Gentian on Fleam Dyke. This year he reported "285 flowering plants south east of the disused railway but the total between the A11 & Bedford Gap has shot up to 498, four times last year's total. The grand total of 783 is by far the largest since I started counting in 2008".

This year Steve has also found Small-flowered Sweetbriar in the SE hedge on the SE approach to Dead Man Hill. "Beyond the SSSI, on the Chilford Hall section, I finally refound David Barden's record of Lesser Meadow-rue, a really fine patch 7 metres by 2 metres on the SW verge, and as far as I know the only colony on the Roman Road. Also along that verge I found several plants of the Nationally Scarce Lesser Calamint, also I think the only colony on the road and an outlier of the major population around Hildersham & the Abingtons."

Dates for your Diary

The Fulbourn Swift Project

Talk by Rob Mungovan, Ecology Officer for South Cambs DC

27th Nov. 7.15 for 7.30pm

in St John's Church Hall, Hills Avenue, CB2 8RN (opposite Homerton College)
Organised by the Cambridge Local Group of the Wildlife Trust. Non-members £3
Contact: Anita Joysey 07866 935246 anitajoysey@yahoo.co

Work Party Dates 2013 -2014

Sunday 24th November, 9.45

Meet at the junction of the Roman Road and Babraham Road. TL 511 537

Sunday 19th January, 9.45

Meet at the junction of the Roman Road and Babraham Road. TL 511 537

Sunday 9th February, 9.45 and Sunday 16th March, 9.45

Details to be confirmed.

Sunday 9th February, Sunday 16th March 2014: Both work parties on the Roman Road. Details to be confirmed. Contact Julia, frfdjin@freebie.net 01223 213152

Annual General Meeting 12th March 2014, 7.30 – 10.00pm

The Six Bells Public House, 9 High Street, Fulbourn, CB21 5DH

Professor Emeritus of Cambridge University, Peter Grubb, our Patron, will take as his subject:

**You can't clear scrub and get chalk grassland unless...:
40 years of Experience on the Devil's Ditch**

All welcome. Members free. Non-members £3

At 90ft. the highest point on the Roman Road between Worsted Lodge and the Hildersham Road is called **Deadman Hill**, not, as I had thought, Deadman's Hill. I had also thought it was the highest point on the whole ancient road and trackway, but it is not. The section between the Linton-Balsham Road and the Icknield Way is 15ft higher.

The section leading south east to Deadman Hill and the Hildersham Road, has a long mound of earth which looks like one half of a rather strange Agger. Here the lowest part of the bank has been mowed, so the slope appears less steep. It is in fact the spoil heap left by the **gas pipe-line**. My thanks to Stephen Franklin, the landowner, for both corrections.



Also a big thank you from us all to David, the driver of the Amazon mowing machine, who lifted the blades over the main areas of cowslips, but felt he had to mow most of the hill. As you can perhaps (!) see, the uncut area of cowslips and grass is only slightly longer than the areas nearby. The cut was another waste of money. Cowslips do not naturally grow in long narrow bands.



A Roman Road Basket

In March 2013, I received an email from Catherine Tregaskis, saying that she and her husband, Clive, had been walking along the Roman Road. They noticed that there had been quite a lot of scrub cutting. Would we mind if they helped themselves to a few more shoots here and there. Tell me more!



Crafts for a Sustainable Future is a small business using willow weaving and green-woodworking, local and UK-farmed materials to promote bio-diversity and good habitat management. They work from two bases in Leicester and Cambridge. This basket is the result of their foray along the Roman Road. The bowl is chocolate brown (willow, which is steamed with its bark on to make this lovely colour). The stripes are silver grey (buckthorn), bright green (spindle), brownish grey (privet), apple green and red (dog rose). and red maroon (prunus sp.)

<http://www.c4asf.co.uk/what.html>



Anstey Hall Trumpington



The Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke invite you to
a **Christmas Party** in this beautiful house

Wednesday, 4th December, 6.00 – 8.30pm
NB Change of date!

Members: £12 50; £20 for a couple.

Non-members £15; £25 for a couple Children under 16 free

Tickets from Elfrida Heath, 69 Humberstone Road, Cambridge, CB4 1JD

Please send s.a.e. tel: 01223 562360 email: elfrida.heath@ntlworld.com

Programme: A glass of sparkling wine in the 18th century hall (free).

You can buy more drinks at the bar.

John de Bruyne will lead tours of the remarkable family portraits.

The Little Choir of the Cambridge Philharmonic Society will sing for us.

**Help us to increase areas of flowery chalk grassland
for butterflies, bees, invertebrates and other wildlife**

Generous Donations

Thank you all for your continued support for our society, and especially to those who pay more than the minimum subscription, or add a donation. In addition, the Committee would like to thank the parishes of **Horseheath** and **West Wickham**, which each sent £50 to help pay for the third reprint of the Roman Road leaflet, and the following individuals who have paid for specific publications this year:

Alan Leslie and **Paul Williams**, who each gave us £25 for a third reprint of David Barden's Viola leaflet,

Mike Albutt who paid for the printing of 300 copies of Bob Jarman's monograph on some of the breeding birds of Prey in Cambridgeshire,

Graham Easy, whose beautiful drawings illustrate and illuminate our publications.

and not least, **Mark and Adam Bishop of Copy Studio**, www.copystudio.biz

**See you at Anstey Hall on 4th December, I hope, and all best wishes
for Christmas and the New Year,**

Julia

Julia Napier, Secretary

30a Hinton Avenue

Cambridge, CB1 7AS

tel: 01223 213152 email: frrfdjin@freebie.net

www.frrfd.org.uk

