



Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke

February 2014
Newsletter 43

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

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

There will be a short business meeting followed by a talk.

Our Patron, Peter Grubb, Emeritus Professor of Investigative Plant Ecology, at the University of Cambridge will take as his subject the conservation and restoration of chalk grassland.



'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

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Rock rose, Rock-rose, or Common Rock-rose?

The typical chalk grassland flower illustrated above is by one of the un-named artists whose beautiful drawings illuminate the 'Flowers of the Field' by the Reverend C. A. Johns, a great Victorian botanizing clergyman.

For many years I had been happily calling it a Rock Rose until it was pointed out to me that there is no such thing. What we have on the Fleam Dyke and the Roman Road is **Common Rock-rose**, *Helianthemum nummularium*, (meaning sun flower, shaped like a coin, *nummus* in Latin). But, I said, how can I persuade people to join the Friends and give us money if these things are common? In any case, what other uncommon ones are there? So it was agreed that Rock-rose was permissible.

What other Rock-roses are there?

There is the rare **White Rock-rose**, *Helianthemum appeninum*, a shrubby plant confined to the carboniferous limestone in north Somerset and Devonian limestone in south Devon, and the

equally rare Hoary Rock-rose, *H. caninum*, which is confined to the carboniferous limestone of the Gower peninsular, the head of Morecambe Bay, and the Burren district in western Ireland. There is also the **Spotted Rock-rose**, *Tuberaria guttata*, a low-growing annual, with three veined elliptical leaves, and spotted petals, which drop at mid-day. It prefers island habitats, with light soil over igneous rock. It grows on the Channel Islands and Jura but the highest concentration is on Anglesey, where it is the County flower. It has the interesting ability to produce viable seeds without flowering, a quality known as *Cleistogamous*, or 'closed marriage'.

An idea for QI perhaps.

Confession Time

Having been well teased about confusing Marsh Harriers and Hen Harriers in a previous newsletter, I was horrified to learn that I had mislabelled one of the birds illustrated in our 'Birds of Prey' booklet. My excuse is that I was checking the name on a photocopy which only showed the top half of the name. Cataracts did not help. Graham Easy was very forgiving. 'These things happen.' I wonder how many of you noticed the mistake. If you did not, here is a pictorial clue.



I did receive a complaint in charming verse from Anne Waldock who feels very strongly that the song birds we all love are under too much pressure already. Some of you will agree. I find birds of prey thrilling to watch, but I also find it hard not to connect the sudden disappearance of the Gold Finches which came to my Evening Primrose seed-heads all winter for many years with the pair of Sparrow Hawks which nest at the top of Cavendish Avenue. My niger seed feeder now hangs unused. Great Tits come singly or in a group, but Blue Tits have suddenly become uncommon in my garden, and the little posse of Long-tailed Tits seems to have gone, but I have a family of Green Finches. Several years ago I saw a Sparrow Hawk tearing a sparrow nest out of my neighbour's eaves, but now I have a colony of Dunnocks. These days I see a Peregrine Falcon speeding by or doing dazzlingly tight turns, but after 22 years in this house, I no longer have a Thrush claiming territory from dawn to dusk. Post hoc, or propter hoc?

Bob Jarman backed up his text with references to research work, where available, but I am aware that there are sharply conflicting views on the subject. So perhaps I can only say that the publication of the 'Birds of Prey' booklet does not represent the views or policy of the Friends of the RRFD. Moreover, it most definitely does not imply criticism of the local farmers and farm managers who have often been extremely helpful to us. For example, in the spring of 2011, Peter Bennet, Babraham Farms, arranged for the contract farmer, Michael, to flail several hundred yards of the Roman Road verge just south of Copley Hill as we have not had the money to manage this section. This autumn Michael did the work again, with particularly good results, because November was a relatively dry month.

Julian Bye, the Gamekeeper for the six-farm shoot in the area around the Roman Road, has been extremely helpful as well. In the winter of 2012 he double flailed the same problematic section, and has offered to do other work for no charge in his own time. Any criticism of gamekeepers in 'Birds of Prey' does not apply to Julian. Quite the contrary. Furthermore, farmers and gamekeepers see wildlife in all seasons, every day and also have years of knowledge and experience. One farmer said, "People walk along my footpath and I hear them say, 'There is nothing to see here,' while only yards away there is a Sky Lark sitting on her eggs. You get a very good view from a tractor." My pleasure in seeing Buzzards was rather sharply reduced by Julian's account of finding a Buzzard dismembering a Kestrel on the Roman Road. He pointed out that he used to see several Kestrels during his work on the Roman Road. Now there tends to be only one. Similarly, badgers need to be protected, but what

about the damage to crops, or to ancient monuments such as the Fleam Dyke? What about the Red-tailed Bumble Bees whose nest on the Roman Road was raided in August? Julian said he had seen six bumble bee nests raked out by a Badger last summer. Protecting wildlife is not simple.

In an attempt to be objective here some facts about shooting and gamekeeping taken from Wikipedia. The writer or writers give references to their sources.

Today, some five thousand full-time gamekeepers are employed in the UK, compared to as many as 10,000 at the beginning of the 20th century. In addition, there are many people who spend their leisure time and money rearing game and maintaining habitats on their own small shoots.



Gamekeeping is an essential part of countryside conservation. Two thirds of the UK rural land mass is managed for shooting. The shooting industry is worth £1.6 billion. £250 million is spent on conservation as a result of shooting.

The League Against Cruel Sports estimates some 12,300 wild mammals and birds are killed on UK shooting estates every day and sees gamekeepers as playing a key role in the destruction of wildlife.

On the other hand, the shooting industry says that gamekeepers are vital wildlife conservation workers in the countryside. The National Gamekeeper's Organisation claims that nine times as much of the British countryside is looked after by gamekeepers as is in nature reserves and National Parks.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has criticised the poisoning of birds of prey on some shooting estates. This is probably the most controversial of all topics surrounding the gamekeeper. However, this is now much rarer due to better knowledge of the ecology of birds of prey, and poisoning cases are generally condemned by the shooting community.

The claims by the League Against Cruel Sports seem to me so extreme as to be incredible, and reminds me of the Equine Society's calculations of the number of horses dying every year from eating Ragwort, which was based on some remarkable statistical fiddling.

Does anyone have the British figures for poisoning of birds of prey in 2013? Offences in Scotland have fallen dramatically in three years, from 30 a year to three.

Finally, while looking for information on the wonderful web, I came across a little pictorial fun and a very interesting essay on the morality of shooting game versus the killing of other animals published by the Oxford Institute of Ethics. It seems to me a beautiful example of unbiased ethical analysis. blog.practicaethics.ox.ac.uk/2011/10/pheasant-shooting-bad-for-pheasants-worse-for-humans/



We can't get no Satisfaction

What follows is my understanding of what has been happening. Julia

From 2006 onwards, sections of the Roman Road have been brutally cleared following plans either by Natural England or the County Council Rights of Way Department or both together. The reason given by Natural England is that the Roman Road is listed as an SSSI for its chalk grassland. Chalk grassland is now a rare habitat in Cambridgeshire and must be conserved and restored where possible. However, most of the Roman Road ceased to be quality chalk grassland many years ago. If the section from Worsted Lodge to the Hildersham-Balsam Road was surveyed for reclassification as an SSSI, it would probably be taken off the list. It is indeed possible to restore this habitat but not by wholesale scrub clearance, dumping the chipped brash on site and burning the rest in huge fires. The story is a great deal more complicated than that. I hope everyone with any interest in the subject will come and get a better understanding of the situation at our AGM on 12th March.

The reason given by the Rights of Way Department for this sort of edge to edge clearance is that the law says that the public has the right to enjoy the full 40ft width of the Roman Road. Each new clearance is greeted with public protests, which are usually disregarded. Recently, it has been argued that the deep ruts in many stretches of the Roman Road between Worsted Lodge and the junction with the Icknield Way just north of Borley Wood are caused by the narrowness of the central track. If all the scrub were removed, we are told, the walkers and cyclists and horse riders, off-road vehicles and motor bikers will use the whole width of the Roman Road and eliminate the problem. Anyone who has watched cyclists racing down the narrow groove in the centre of the mown track south of Worsted Lodge will doubt this proposition. Walkers also do not stray far into the grass verges. Even horses do not choose to use the verges. Deep ruts are usually caused by farm vehicles and 4 x 4 off roaders.

A feature of all this work has been the absence of a carefully considered plan for the clearance. There has not yet been any scientific survey of the results of such clearance, or even a serious informed discussion of the results.

Even more striking is the total refusal of Natural England and the CCC Rights of Way Department to obey their legal Duty to biodiversity. The NERC law of 2006 specifically states:

All public authorities in England and Wales now have a Duty to have regard to the conservation of biodiversity in exercising their functions.

Money

At the Linear Sites meeting for the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke on 5th December, I again asked precisely how much it had cost taxpayers to clear the Chilford Hall section of the Roman Road. Kate Day produced a sheet of paper and, at great speed, read out a series of figures totalling £5,000. She then announced that she had another meeting and had to leave, saying the information was all on the CCC website. I asked for the web address of the relevant part of the Financial Statement, but was not answered. After Christmas I asked again by email, and was again refused. Natural England also seem unable to produce figures for the widely condemned clearance on the Roman Road SSSI in 2006.

I am sorry to write so critically, but civil servants have a duty to the public, and the public has the right to answers.

2014 More of the same; NOT planned or paid for by the Friends

At the meeting of the same Linear Sites committee on 5th September, it had been agreed that any more clearance work would be agreed by the committee. Donna Radley, English Nature, set the committee up in 2002 in order to ensure just this sort of collaboration. At the above meeting on 5th December, there was no mention of further work of any kind. I was therefore shocked to receive an email from Kate Day on 23rd January 2014 asking if the Friends would approve of more clearance work on the Roman Road from Deadman Hill to the Hildersham Road. Professor Grubb and I both replied negatively. On Saturday 25th Peter Grubb, who is extremely busy, made time to go and assess whether clearance work was justified. He rejected the plan entirely. However, on the evening of the 24th January reports Pat Lambert emailed me complaining furiously about the clearance work she had seen on 23rd and 24th. Two contractors were working on the Roman Road nearer to Worsted Lodge, cutting back scrub, removing the brash with a heavy vehicle, which had churned up the sodden track and the verge. This was at a point where some calcareous flora has been recovering moderately well. I am told it will be lifted and rolled. Worse, the contractors said the work was planned and paid for by the Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke. About half our members use email. For those who cannot receive email, let me assure you that this work was NOT planned or paid for by us.

On Monday 27th, two contractors began clearing the scrub from the Hildersham Road working upwards from the TRO gate and the road. On Tuesday 28th they told Pat Lambert, who walks there regularly, that they would be leaving at the end of the day. Clearly there had been a change of plan. On 14th February, members of the Linear Sites committee received an email from Kate Day as follows:

No order has been placed for any work on this section and I would still welcome constructive suggestions as to how we might get this scrub back in hand to prevent damage to the monument and to the surface of the path.

All payments made by the County Council to Contractors are available on line, although the clearance you are referring to was sometime ago and these payments may now have been removed.

There has been recent confusion as to whether clearance work at this end of the Roman Road has been carried out for several hundred yards, or not. If no order has been placed, who authorised the work? The scrub border to the RR near Hildersham has been there for two decades at least. In the Management Plan of 1990 and 2004 it was listed as a valuable habitat for migrating birds. Scrub damage to the monument was not mentioned as a reason until recently. When consulted, the archaeologist involved stipulated that any clearance should be done carefully in order not to damage the monument. It was requested that burning should be done on a metal sheet raised above the soil on bricks. This was not done.



The Roman Road at the junction with the Hildersham-Balsham Road. The post is part of the traffic restriction barrier. This remaining wooded section is usually full of small birds calling to each other. In particular, it provides shelter for endangered birds such as Bull finches and Yellow Hammers. Two more wild Prunus trees have been cut and burned.

Photo 3rd Feb 2014. JN



The Roman Road 2-300 yards further on. The lollipop at the end of the view is the No Entry sign at the metal TRO gate.

A lot of wood had been burned on these metal sheets. This will not matter. The seeds of any calcareous flora will have gone long ago. The existing verge of about a metre's width had very few flowers of any kind.

Photo 3rd Feb 2014. JN

And more

On Saturday 15th February, I received a phone call from a gentleman who lives in Stonebridge Lane, asking what was going on at the Fulbourn end of the Fleam Dyke. The big hedge had been cut back, the bushes were now in the ditch, and access to the Fleam Dyke extremely muddy and unpleasant. I said I thought it was part of an environmentally positive plan by the landowner to have sheep grazing in the fields and on the end of the Dyke, which he owns. My caller said the sheep would get foot rot, and rang off rather abruptly. Two days later, on 17th February, I received a phone call which explained why he might have felt so angry. If you know the gentleman, please pass on my apologies.

This second phone call was from Andrew Impey, Global Habitats Co-ordinator for the RSPB at Sandy. That is to say, his area of interest is habitats, of which there are many. He said he knew almost nothing about the management of chalk grassland habitat. He could only say that he had been astonished to find that such a large area of the Dyke had been cleared from the eastern hedge to the edge of the western ditch for several hundred yards. As it happened, the Friends committee was meeting that evening, and David Kenny, English Heritage, had asked to come and talk to us. We were equally astonished. We had not been consulted, although we had advised against an outline of the plan three years ago. The Rights of Way Department have not been consulted either, although Fleam Dyke is an undisputed footpath. The plan had been agreed between Natural England, the landowner and English Heritage, and implemented.

I regret having to write so critically about the Natural England and Rights of Way staff but I feel the public are entitled to information. Meetings are minuted, but I doubt whether anyone outside the CCC would know where to find them. The minutes of the meeting on 5th December are incomplete. The objections I raised in September were not dealt with, perhaps because the meeting ended early and rather abruptly. For years now Professor Grubb, Dr Tanner and I have attended these meetings and raised regular objections to the work, which were dismissed with the arguments I have listed above. For several years at our AGM, our Chairman, Dr Edmund Tanner, has said very clearly that we are not in favour of much of this work, but our comments are not considered.

Comments from you have temporarily stopped the latest clearance on the Roman Road. Please continue to tell Natural England and the County Council what you think.

Anstey Hall Party, Wednesday 4th December

Because there were some donations as well as ticket sales at two prices, we cannot calculate the exact number of guests, but thanks to Elfrida, the total was between 75 and 80 people. After costs we made £1, 210, which was a wonderful result, replacing the £700 we had to pay to control the Hemlock fully covering the cost of this newsletter.

Professor Grubb gave a short talk on the importance of chalk grassland, and Julia summarised about the conservation work we have been able to pay for recently, thanks to your subscriptions and donations, and the work planned for 2014.

John de Bruyne led two tours of the picture collections in the family rooms, and the evening concluded with a selection of a capella classics old and new sung by the Little Choir of the Philharmonic Society. Those who were not there will be interested to know that the Slow Train, immortalised by Flanders and Swann, actually called in at the Fleam Dyke, Six Mile Bottom and Gamlingay.

Sunday 16th March 2014: There will be a work party on the Roman Road. Meet at the junction of Babraham Road and the Roman Road. During the last two work parties, a great deal of mowing and raking was done on the north verge where the Rock-roses, Lady's Bedstraw and Small Scabious are doing well. If you are there in May/June, pick a few blades of grass and look for the famous 'eye-lash' hairs along the edge. It is Upright Brome, or *Bromopsis erectus*. If you run your finger down the blade you can feel that it has a very fine saw-like edge. As it grows, it develops quite long and heavy seed heads, which hang down when ripe.

Photos on page 8.

Saturday 28th June 2014.

'Summer is icomin in, Loudly Sing cuckoo...', which, I have just learned, actually means 'summer has come in.'

So what about white wine and nibbles on a summer evening, a talk about the butterflies of chalk grassland, meeting other conservation supporters and a little light music.



Details have yet to be confirmed, but ...

The party will be held in the **Freemasons Hall** on Bateman Street, opposite the old entrance to the Botanic Gardens. The Freemasons regularly lend their very nice facilities for fund-raising events. There is a large and pleasant hall, with a comfortable bar area. Generous parking is available on the south side of the buildings, with a connecting path round the lawn to the foyer.

6.0 – 8.30 pm or so

Drinks and light food. Tickets to include one glass of wine £12 50 each, £20 for a couple.

Tickets will be available after 15th April from Elfrida Heath, 69 Humberstone Road, Cambridge, CB4 1JD

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



The Roman Road in 1932, from the Cambridgeshire Collection

But where, and does anyone recognise the botanist?

Note: you could drive your car along the old road then, if you were lucky enough to have one, and no one had special 'wildlife' clothes.

With Best Wishes to all our members and friends of Friends,
Julia Napier, 30a, Hinton Avenue, CB1 7AS frrfdjin@freebie.net 01223 213152