



# Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke

**November 2016**

**Newsletter 50**

Observant readers will notice that it is now more like February 2017, not November 2016, and some may even have noticed that there has not been a newsletter since February 2016. Oft in the still night I wonder about this. Has anyone noticed? Does anyone mind? And, more important, will anyone pay their subscription (£15 in April, please)?

The best explanation I can offer comes from Saxon epic of the Battle of Maldon about our hearts being higher and our courage greater as our strength lessens, so there has been quite a lot of action, but energy has not stretched to producing a newsletter.

## **A Radical Solution for the Fulbourn end of the Fleam Dyke**

Since we were set up in 2001, the Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke have supported the Green Belt Project in work to maintain existing clearance and extend the small areas of original calcareous flora from Mutlow Hill to the Fulbourn end. Now, however, Heritage England have proposed extensive clearance of the scrub, with reseedling of the slopes, in order to reintroduce sheep grazing.

The plan is to remove 80% of scrub during the winter months of the next two years. The remaining 20% will include boundary hedges of about one metre wide. There will also be blocks of scrub of different heights, selected to retain interest and variety. There is also a plan to strip plants and soil from the path on the top of the Dyke down to the ditch. These strips will be 3-4 m wide. Their exact position will be decided once the scrub clearance is done. They will be adjacent to the remaining areas of chalk grassland flora.

In January and February 2017, the *fosse* or ditch will be cleared to allow machine access. Access windows will be cut upwards through the scrub and the upper band of scrub will be cut all the way along. From October 2017 to March 2018, the work will be completed, with the cutting of the lower band of scrub. Cut surfaces will be treated immediately to prevent regrowth. Cleared areas will be hydro-seeded with Upright Brome Grass and possibly Sheep's Fescue. The newly created herbaceous vegetation will be flailed once per year for two to three years, depending on growth, after which it will be grazed by sheep.

The plan is likely to cost £100,000, 80% of which will be paid by Natural England. Historic England will probably supply the rest.

## **A pinch or two of salt.**

I am grateful to our Chairman, Edmund Tanner, for summarising this plan impartially. Members of the committee and others have severe doubts and objections. The clearance will remove many of the bushes visited by the Green Hairstreak, one of our two notable butterflies. This has been repeatedly pointed out, but has been disregarded. (Moreover, there has been no survey of the invertebrates in the scrub on this kilometre of the dyke.) It has been said the ageing scrub is not much used by birds, although that was disputed by some of the experts who came on the Cambridge Conservation Forum walk led by Edmund on the 24<sup>th</sup> May 2016 and is likely to be of concern to bird lovers.

Professor Peter Grubb has pointed out that in order to prevent, or at least greatly reduce, the reinvasion by scrub it would be necessary to have hard grazing by sheep in the first few years after cutting, starting in the first year after the cut, as was done on a section of the Devil's Ditch just north of the A14 during the Devil's Ditch Restoration Project of 2002-2006. On the parts of Devil's Ditch further north (nearer Galley Hill, and north of the Burwell Road) much effort was expended on cutting the shrubs and poisoning the stumps, but the grazing regime was not as intense as on the stretch near the A14, and gradually the shrubs have grown back and in places now present an almost insurmountable task of clearance all over again. The Upright Brome Grass that was sown on the cleared ground, and took well, is now being overwhelmed.

### **Win some, lose some. A tale of two sites.**

At the Mount Farm end of the Roman Road, there has been for many years an area of scrub, brambles and clematis along the wide south west verge, which has been cleared occasionally by the Green Belt Project or the local farmer. The problem was that each clearance encouraged the clematis to advance further along the Road, and a neglected patch of Hemlock suddenly spread all over the area. We attempted a radical solution.

Over a period of three years, scrub clearance by Hunt's Wildlife supplemented with work parties from the Friends and the Conservation Volunteers cleared 200 yards of the southern verge, leaving only a small wilderness of brambles and Mugwort to camouflage the recycled oil tank which, at no expense to the taxpayer has kept travellers off that end of the Roman Road for a good many years.



At Mount Farm, the Friends of the RRFD and the Cambridge Conservation Volunteers clearing the site in 2016, again; Weeds growing happily; Bernard Hunt broadcasting seed; and with Aaron, synchronised raking in of the new seed. But the weeds won in the end!





After twenty years or more of scrub cover, nothing remotely approaching chalk grassland flora remained, apart from Bladder Campion, which has substantial carrot like roots and proved impressively resistant to glyphosate run off and general clearance. There was no point in leaving the bare soil to fill up with the energetic 'weeds' such as Mugwort and thistles of all kinds, so vigorous attempts were made to eradicate them (literally) before seeding the site with a suitable mix of native grasses and flowers, based on the plant lists used by Dr Dan Danahar in the grounds of the Dorothy Stringer School in Brighton.

Unfortunately, a delay in obtaining the seed meant that it was finally broadcast and raked in during a long dry spell. The small quantity of rain which fell in the following fortnight was not enough to trigger germination of the new seed, but quite enough to kick start the 'weeds'. To cut the story short, my attempt to turn this section into a grassy area of knapweeds and Lady's Bedstraw has not succeeded so far, despite a lot of work by Bernard Hunt, Aaron and a work party from the Friends. This almost complete failure was correctly predicted by Julian Barnes, who has regularly helped us in various ways, and who will now flail the area annually, as he originally suggested.



July 2016, photo taken while thumbing a ride with Bernard Hunt to assess the winter's work.

**By contrast, at Copley Hill,** (above) our work has been a big success. If I don't tell you, who will? The south west verge here had not been cleared since the mid-nineties. By 2011 the scrub was five to six foot high and the flowers that had been there were disappearing. However, in April 2011, the Friends had a very successful Tenth Anniversary fund raising party, with a brilliant lecture by Dr Kevin Leahy on the Staffordshire Treasure, which boosted our funds by £1,300. A more permanent solution became possible. The clearance work has been described, possibly ad nauseam, in previous issues of this newsletter. Although both sites had been overgrown for a long time, the verge at Copley Hill was higher and drier than the section at Mount Farm, with chalk grassland flowers still visible between the bushes and on the verge. The first clearance left a long stretch of apparently bare or mossy ground, but as the mosses dried out or were cleared, a surprising number of calcareous plants which had survived at low levels re-emerged into the light and warmth. There were also large areas of Common Rock-rose, previously unrecorded on this part of the Roman Road, an unexpected by-product of Staffordshire gold.

During the summer of June 2011, I collected several grammes of seed of Upright Brome from the sloping bank opposite the Golf Course, where it is abundant, and from the north east verge of the Roman Road where it is the dominant grass. The long seeds are relatively heavy and fall to the ground unless given a helping hand across the Road. This is not as simple as it sounds because the seeds ripen and fall almost immediately. I had hoped to collect some more seed in June 2016, but everywhere the Upright Brome had been blighted by Ergot. [In earlier centuries, such a wet season would mean that people would have to eat rye polluted by ergot, and might suffer the vascular damage to hands and feet known as St Anthony's Fire and the involuntary jerky movements called St Vitus' Dance]

One essential for this success has been the cutting and immediate treatment of the scrub stumps and brambles. Another is the regular help and collaboration from Peter Bennett, land manager for Babraham Farms, who arranges for Michael Goodie, the tenant farmer, to flail the upper end of the site in preparation for annual work by Hunt's Wildlife. The third and most important is **your subscriptions** which allow for the work to be repeated annually.

In April 2011, clearance and treatment of half of the scrubbed up verge cost £1,300. That June, the remaining section of scrub was flailed by a contractor who was on the wrong job! In April 2012, Bernard Hunt and one or two helpers recut and retreated the whole section, and although the flailed section took longer, he only charged £1,300. In following years, he has managed to brush cut and treat the original areas, and brush cut most of the rest of south west verge, raking off and burning the arisings. As the fertility of the site falls, the work goes more quickly, and so a budget of £1,500 could be stretched to include annual work to eradicate the new Hemlock seedlings. Last year the cost of brush cutting, raking off and removal of arisings on the Copley Hill section was £700.

Our success or failure on these two sites may explain why the Committee of the Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke have serious doubts as to the wisdom of spending £100,000 or so on total clearance and reseedling of the north end of the Fleam Dyke. It seems likely that the energetic, invasive 'weeds' which put paid to our recent attempt to restore 200 yards of grassland to the Roman Road at Mount Farm will also overwhelm large areas of the Fleam Dyke, particularly on the lower levels which are shaded and damp. The absence of a detailed follow up plan adds to our doubts.

### **Chalk grassland bank opposite the golf course**

For the last decade, our work parties have tried to maintain the remnant of chalk grassland flora on what is thought to be a bank or agger of the Roman Road about ten minutes from the junction with Wort's Causeway. During an interval when clearance by hand was replaced by machine mowing, the brambles on the north east side (right) were left untreated and gradually took over again. The hedge on the Golf Course side (left) had grown wider, so the By-Ways mower



moved up the slope. Temporary fencing has reinstated the path, and the new contractor cut the hedge back as part of the job. It is typical of the complexities of the ownership and management of our sites that I have not yet discovered the name of the company which is



now responsible for this important work. The invasive scrub on the bank was dug out or treated in October 2016. I hope to be able to maintain this small site in 2017.

### **Mutlow Hill (below)**

For several years, work parties from the Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke visited Mutlow Hill, clearing brambles and clematis, but each year the work was there to be done again, so we found the money to pay Bernard Hunt to treat the clematis on Mutlow Hill for two successive years. The area was seeded with Upright Brome (and some Kidney Vetch seeds) from Therfield Heath. Each subsequent year the hill has been mowed and raked off. Although there is a visible improvement in the flora on the top of the south west slope, including a surprising increase in Quaking Grass and Horseshoe Vetch in 2016, it must be said that three quarters of Mutlow Hill is still a sea of weeds with some clematis regrowth. This is possibly the one area in which complete clearance and hydroseeding could have a real chance of success, particularly if the areas of original flora could be preserved.



### **The Roman Road from Worsted Lodge to the Hildersham Road**

In January 2006, the best part of a kilometre of the Roman Road was stripped of bushes in the mistaken belief that clearance of scrub would produce chalk grassland. The result was flailed three times a year for three years, mulching whatever chalk grassland flowers had survived. Money then ran out and there was a pause before Natural England brought in the Conservation and Enhancement Scheme, which paid for a large vehicle to mow and remove the grass cuttings. The removal of arisings reduces fertility and regular mowing has allowed many species of flowers to flourish and spread. Unfortunately, the Road was close mown, edge to edge without variation, leaving no habitat for overwintering butterflies, insects, small mammals or lizards. Heavy rainfall last winter meant that the central path became waterlogged, so walkers, joggers and cyclists moved over to the grassy sides, trampling the turf into the mud. Close mowing in the spring would have increased the damage, so Natural England in Bristol gave permission to suspend the work. That Conservation and Enhancement Scheme has now come to an end, and money has not been allocated for mowing and baling this section. Given the abundant growth caused by a warm wet summer, it seems that the gains of the last few years funded by Natural England (and the tax payer) may be lost. However, some provision has been made for necessary hedge cutting.



The Roman Road south of Worsted Lodge, in June 2016. There are a great many flowers among the grasses, particularly further along and up the slope to the big Sycamore on the horizon. The County Council is obliged by law to keep byways and public footpaths open. Here the byways cut will keep the track open even if the verges cannot be mown.

### **The Roman Road - Hildersham Road to Balsham Road**

You may remember that the woodland path from the Hildersham Road to the Balsham Road had become overgrown, although the farm track was still open. The previous County Council Countryside Access officer decided that the full width should be cleared back to the original hedge. It was claimed that this major clearance 'only' cost only £5,000 and would restore the chalk grassland. Since the scrub represented several decades of growth, there was no chalk grassland left, only an edging Common Knapweed, St John's Wort and Cinquefoil. Burn sites from several large fires are still visible, with weeds flourishing in areas where chippings have been spread on the surface. Two impressive old Bullace or *Prunus domestica sp. institia* were cut down. One mangled half was left in the straggly hedge. A section of the scrub was composed of elm suckers backed by a very healthy stand of Elm trees. It seemed likely that the bark of the trees had been protected by surrounding scrub. When I looked recently half of them appeared to be dying. So we have gained a wide verge of unremarkable grass, with increased mowing costs, in exchange for a woodland walk which only needed a good cut back and the usual twice yearly path cut.

This clearance made it likely that travellers would seize the opportunity to camp on the cleared verge, as indeed happened during the autumn. Robert McEwan, a member, contacted the County Council about it. Subsequently, he sent me a photograph of a new single swing access gate: about £1,000, plus VAT, and fixed legal costs of £1,155.

### **Mile Road under threat**

In September, the Green Lane Fellowship put forward a proposal that Mile Road, or Babraham Public Byway 3, should be declared a Byway Open to all Traffic. Mile Road, once part of the network of Roman roads, is the green lane which connects our Roman Road to the A1307. The Green Lane Fellowship is the pressure group for 4 x 4 drivers who like driving along such lanes at speed, particularly when they are wet, churning up the turf and practising skids. The lawyers hired by this group claim equal rights with the hundreds of walkers and cyclists who want to visit our green lanes in peace. In such situations it is useful to know that in protests on behalf of the Friends of the RRFD, I can cite our large membership as people who would protest and support the landowner in his protests. In the event Richard Todd, the landowner and farmer, had to pay a lawyer to put his case to the County Council, and wiser counsels have prevailed. This track has now been closed to motorised traffic for over 25 years and therefore, as I understand the law, can no longer be claimed as a Byway Open to All Traffic, or 'BOAT'!



## **Waitrose Charity of the Month October 2016**

In the spring, I suggested to the Magog Trust and another local wildlife charity that we apply to Waitrose together for a donation from their charitable fund. However, they had, of course, had other applicants, so we shared the October appeal with Plant Heritage, formerly the National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens, and Seeds for Schools. In December, we received a cheque for £300. We should like to thank Waitrose very warmly for their continued support for our work.

### **‘Tesco Bags of Help’**

Also in the spring, I got a call about the possibility of a grant for £8,000, £10,000 or £12,000 from a charitable fund set up by Tesco. It seemed too good to be true, and indeed it was, because the requirement was to produce evidence of completed work within twelve months, which was impossible to achieve with wildlife conservation work, or it seems, with many or any other projects.

In July, they rang again to say that they were trying out a new version of Tesco Bags of Help. If we applied we were very likely to be successful, and the first three successful applicants would get £500 anyway. Since some local lads with nothing better to do had amused themselves by twisting two dog bins off their concrete posts, I was delighted find such a simple way of replacing them. I applied for £5,000 to be spent on replacing 5 information boards, now almost ten years old, replacing two dog bins, revising and reprinting the Roman Road leaflet, and, £2,000 for clearing the section of the Fleam Dyke footpath that became almost impassable during a very wet summer. It is possible that this work will not be needed after the clearance of the upper part of the footpath this winter, and we will be able to transfer the money to other areas where pedestrians will also benefit from clearance.

There followed a rather complicated process of filling in application forms on a particular website, and a strange bureaucratic preference for using two words where one would do, or explaining the obvious, as in ‘explain the need for dog bins’. However, with help from Mike Albutt, we appeared to be coming up the home strait when we struck a rock. Nothing that I, or Paragon Computer Service, could do succeeded in opening the final file which enabled the transfer of money from Tesco to our bank, the NatWest. It was only when Mike used the very latest Microsoft software that the problem was solved. The only explanation was: “We find some applicants who use Macs have difficulty in opening our files”! In all other respects the Groundwork staff were helpful and encouraging, we should like to thank them and Tesco Bags of Help for this generous grant.

### **For those who like miscellaneous facts.**

Having typed TESCO in capitals several times, and then realised that lower case would be all right, I fell to wondering who or what the letters stood for. Here is the answer with thanks, and a donation (from me), to Wikipedia.

Tesco was founded, as a one-man business, by Jack Cohen in London's East End. He came from a modest background, being the son of a Polish Jewish tailor. He began by selling groceries in the markets of the East End after World War I in 1919. The Tesco brand first appeared in 1924. Jack Cohen bought a large shipment of tea from T.E. Stockwell, he made new labels for the packets by using the first three letters of the supplier's name and the first two letters of his surname. The first Tesco store was opened in 1929 in Edgware, London.

**And Waitrose?** Founded in 1904 by Wallace Waite, Arthur Rose and David Taylor. In 1908, two years after David Taylor had left the business, the name Waitrose was adopted. But you knew that, didn't you.

**Fifteenth Annual General Meeting.** Wednesday, 6<sup>th</sup> April 2016, held in the Meeting Room of the Fulbourn Centre. It was attended by about 50 people.

In his opening statement, the Chairman, Edmund Tanner, showed that annual totals of birds seen or heard on the Roman Road and the Fleam Dyke demonstrated that the wildlife quality of these two SSSIs is as good or even better than Hayley Wood. However, we face a continual battle with the official institutions which are legally responsible for their care.

Between December 2014 and December 2015, the Friends spent £3,000 on management of three sections of our sites. The annual grant from RES (the Wind Farm) paid for Hunt's Wildlife to do extra work on the Fleam Dyke. Also at the north end of Fleam Dyke. Richard Townley has prepared the land for sheep grazing, in order to link Fleam Dyke to the Fulbourn Nature Reserve. Historic England is keen to manage these ancient sites by sheep grazing, and has plans for extensive scrub clearance, (as described above).

The Mid-Week Volunteers led by Iain Webb visited each site 5 times, getting through a great deal of annual maintenance work, with 78 hours work producing match funding.

Roger Lemon reported on the Butterfly Transect Results for 2015, the ninth year of the weekly survey of both sites. Although there are 6 other recorders, Roger does a great many transect walks himself. With thanks to Sam and Trish Agnew, Nick Ballard, Jo Darlington, Mike Gittos, Marion Jackson, Vince Lee, and Rosemary Parks.

In the absence of Mike Albutt, the Chairman was glad to report that we ended the year with £2,828.50 in the bank, £573 more than last year. The committee agreed to stand again and were re-elected.

**Tim Sparks** gave a very interesting and amusing talk on the development of woodlands at Monkswood SSSI. I am still reeling from the thought that with the ending of the Second World War, several Canadian pilots used their discharge money to buy and **clear fell** a beautiful old English wood. "There's gold in them thar trees!" JN May 2016

## **Sixteenth Annual General Meeting**

**Tuesday, 25<sup>th</sup> April 2017 7.15 for 7.30pm.** It will be held in the **Meeting Room of the Fulbourn Centre**, 31 Home End, CB21 5BS (off Stonebridge Lane and Recreation Ground).

Brief business meeting

Interval for Tea or Coffee. Drinks in the adjoining bar.

Members free. Non members £3.

**Open to all**

Our guest speaker will be **Dr Ed Turner**, who recently took over as **Curator of Insects in the Zoology Museum**. During the summer, Dr Turner won the John Spedan Lewis medal for making a significant and innovative contribution to conservation, particularly in the field of entomology. Dr Turner's subject will be

**"Insect conservation: conserving the little things that run the world".**

He will discuss some of the reasons behind insect declines, what this means in the way ecosystems function, and what we can do to reverse some of these losses.

Please tell your friends about this important talk and make sure you have it in your diary!

Best wishes for the coming year,

Julia

January 26<sup>th</sup> 2017

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