

I am writing to remind members and inform non-members of our **Sixteenth Annual General Meeting, Tuesday 25th April, 7.15pm for 7.30pm** in the Meeting Room of the Fulbourn Centre, 31 Home End, CB21 5BS (off Stonebridge Lane and Recreation Ground).

There will be illustrated summaries of our work, followed by an Interval for Tea or Coffee. Other drinks are available 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.

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

The Tiger beetle



News about Fleam Dyke

Some of you may remember that the **Fleam Dyke**, north of the disused railway, has been getting very overgrown during the summer despite the usual winter clearance carried out by the Green Belt Officer, Iain Webb and the Mid-week Volunteers. In April 2016, I received a phone call from the national organisation called Ground Work to say that they were administering a project started by TESCO to fund projects which would promote exercise in one way or another, and urging us to submit an application, with the strong probability that we would get several thousand pounds. However, as with all promises from Fairy Godmothers, there is a catch. The work has to be done in twelve months, with photos and paid invoices to prove it. We therefore applied for £5,000 for replacements for some of the Roman Road information boards, which are showing their age; a new edition of the Roman Road leaflet; and clearance work on the worst bits of the Fleam Dyke footpath.

However, at an autumn meeting of the Linear Sites Committee (Fleam Dyke and Roman Road), it was announced that a plan for full clearance of the north end of the Fleam Dyke was going to go ahead, starting in January 2017. The project would cost £100,000 of which £80,000 would probably be paid by Natural England, the rest by Historic England. Clearance would be followed with seeding of suitable grasses and chalk grassland flowers, the intention being to restore the dyke to sheep grazing. Rather than go into detail on this, I will follow this email with a pdf of Newsletter 50 in which the scheme is described, with some comments.

Obviously, there was no point in my booking Bernard Hunt of Hunt's Wildlife to toil away clearing invasive scrub and chunks of burdock by hand if a larger contractor was going to come along with the latest 'tree-poppers' and heavy duty equipment. I therefore asked the Tesco project officer if we could use the £2,000 to mow and bale the north east verge of the Roman Road from Worsted Lodge to the Hildersham Road.

There is a pattern in which publicly funded organisations allocate large sums of money to be spent over several years, with no provision for the lean years that follow. Thus in 2006, a very large sum of money was spent on clearing a kilometre of scrub from the Roman Road. The resulting wilderness was then flailed three times a year for several years, mulching what was left of the chalk grassland flora which likes sunshine and short grass. Following that there was a gap of two years, during which the only grass cutting was the Byways Cut, which the Highway Authorities are legally obliged to ensure. In 2011 the government grant to Natural England provided money for a Conservation and Enhancement Scheme, which at last provided for mowing with the removal of arisings. Unfortunately, (the Fairy Godmother was at it again) the scheme was administered with an inadequate knowledge of the needs of all the inhabitants of such a site: birds, small animals, lizards and invertebrates. The whole length was mowed from edge to edge twice a year.

Last winter was particularly wet and as the central track became increasingly soggy, walkers and runners used the dryer grass of the verges with visible damage to the recovering flora. It was therefore agreed that the spring cut would be suspended. Unfortunately, the rigidity of these contracts means that the money saved could not be used the following year.

At this point the cumulative protests by the Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke led to the decision to allow us to administer the grant. However, it turns out that there is no money for mowing this spring. The grant has come to an end. The Roman Road from Worsted Lodge to the Hildersham Road was not cut last spring or last autumn and unless a crock of gold could be found, the verges would not be cut until spring 2018.

However, thanks to the Tesco Bags of Help scheme, the Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke had access to a crock of gold. I asked the organisers for permission to use £2,000 differently, and two weeks ago the north east verge of the Roman Road from Worsted Lodge to the Hildersham Road was mowed and the arisings removed. Because this work was done in early March, the numerous cowslips should not have been affected. By cutting only one side of the track, and not cutting right up to the hedge, we hope to have left a useful reservoir of long grass and seed heads for some of 'the little things that run the world'. This leaves various questions unanswered but at least the wider verge is ready for another summer.

That is not the end of the story. During the autumn of 2016, Monica O'Donnell, Natural England, put in a bid for some new money, and was successful. There will be £1,825 for the management of the Roman Road from Worsted Lodge southwards, to be used in the autumn. This plan was drawn up without consultation with the Friends who are supposed to be in charge, and raises questions about the best time to mow. The advantage of mowing in March/April is that the mower takes out the new grass as well as the old, leaving the smaller species room to breathe. It also means that seed heads are left over winter for the birds or the invertebrates which inhabit the verge, and which are also food for birds. The long grass gives small mammals plenty of cover to hide them from hovering kestrels and other predators. We hope that the Natural England office in Bristol will accept this change without withdrawing the money

Hedge Cutting. The new management plan for this section of the Roman Road requires hedges to be cut with removal of arisings in a three year rotation. The new budget provided £748 for work this winter. This was enough to pay for Hunt's Wildlife to cut back the tall Hawthorn hedge at Mount Farm, which had grown too close to the track. Bernard Hunt also dug out a couple of dozen Hemlock plants, again!

Walkers will notice that the hedge to the south west of the Roman Road from Copley Hill to Mount Farm has been topped and sided up. This was arranged by Peter Bennett, the Land Manager for Babraham Farms. At the moment, hedge management is part of the conservation schemes subsidised by the EEC. What happens next is unclear, but given the help we have received from farmers and land managers along the Roman Road one need not be pessimistic.

Work yet to be done this spring

In April, Hunt's Wildlife will brush cut, treat and rake off the wide south west verge below **Copley Hill**. As the verge becomes less fertile, the work gets easier. What cost £1,300 in 2011, cost £700 in 2016. This means that we should be able to afford similar work on the **agger** or **bank opposite the golf course**, now that the worst scrub has been treated or dug out. If our funds stretch far enough, I hope to be able to arrange for an annual hair cut for at least the south west half of **Mutlow Hill**, where the chalk grassland flowers are spreading steadily. The north east half may be chewed up by machinery when work starts on the Fleam Dyke.

“What do you mean, when? I thought it had already begun in January.”

Just after I had transferred £2,000 from the Fleam Dyke to the Roman Road, it turned out that the Big Clearance would not start until 2018. So if you have been walking along the Fleam Dyke thinking “What about this massive clearance scheme, then?”, the answer is that it will happen next year. However, if you have just been walking happily along, thinking “This is all nice and clear. Someone did a good job here” that is because **Iain Webb and the Mid-week Volunteers** have done their usual winter path clearance and done it extra well in order to avoid last year's problems.

This brings me to Subscriptions.

TESCO Bags of Help have provided the money to do new things, but if we are to mow, treat and rake off our usual sites, we need all 2016 subscriptions to be paid. **Could you kindly check whether you sent us a cheque for 2016, and whether your standing order is up to date.** Please send cheques for £15 to Christine Newell, 82 The Lane, Hauxton, Cambridgeshire, CB22 5HP

Julia Napier, March 26th 2017

