



# Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke

**November 2017**

**Newsletter 52**



## **Annual General Meeting, April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2017**

Our sixteenth AGM was held in the Meeting Room of the Fulbourn Centre in the presence of about 30 members and non-members, and the whole committee except for Elfrida Heath, who was not well. We were very grateful to David Cottee of the Fulbourn Forum, for the use of the film club's trolley and data projector, for publicity for this meeting and help with the chairs.

### **Chairman's Statement**

Edmund summarised the achievements of the Friends during 2016: continued management of the south west verge of the Roman Road at Copley Hill; continued management work on the Golf course agger; on Mutlow Hill and an attempt to restore good grassland at Mount Farm which failed, overwhelmed by rank weeds. Julian Bye has very kindly offered to bring this section back to rough grassland by flailing in the winter. The Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke have also received help from all the local land owners and land managers, in particular, Peter Bennet of Babraham Farms and Michael Goodie, the tenant farmer; Richard Todd of Copley Farms, and Michael Tucker, owner of Worsted Lodge.

A plan to clear 80% of the bushes and trees on the north end of Fleam Dyke, due to start in January 2017 had to be postponed until autumn 2017. The clearance of the Fulbourn end of the dyke has been sufficiently successful to allow for sheep grazing.

### **Iain Webb, report on Work Parties**

Iain regrets that he has less time to spend on the linear sites, as his work takes him more often to Trumpington Meadows. Even so, the Mid-week Volunteers made 5 visits to the Roman Road, mowing and raking off selected areas, and leaving some for a refuge for invertebrates, as shown here.

The low winter sun reveals the classic bank and ditch structure of Roman Roads. The track, formerly used by wagons, horse riders, cattle and foot-weary pedestrians, is now used by walkers, happy dogs, cyclists and runners. These two young women have run from the Babraham Institute.



The Mid-week Volunteers also spent 5 days working on the Fleam Dyke, maintaining cleared areas and in particular the footpath from the disused railway to the Fulbourn steps. Both sites make a huge contribution to the continuation of wildlife in the area. Cambridgeshire & Essex Butterfly Conservation paid for extra work to maintain habitat for the Chalkhill Blues on the south-eastern end of Fleam Dyke.

### **Roger Lemon. Summary of Butterfly Transect Record, 2015**

Because a whole summer has gone by and there are a lot of other things to include, may I leave you to look at this interesting report on our website, [www.frrfd.org.net](http://www.frrfd.org.net) together with some of Roger's beautiful, high quality photographs.

### **Treasurer's Report and Approval of Accounts. Mike Albutt**

The Chairman thanked Mike for producing photocopies of the Agenda together with the Annual Report. On the 31<sup>st</sup> December, the Friends had £5,470.60 in the bank. By April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2017, as is the custom, we had already spent £4,340 on grassland work, plus £600 on hedge cutting on behalf of Natural England, for which we have been reimbursed.

**Election of Officers.** The committee agreed to stand again and was elected.

Hire of the Meeting Room cost £75, which included laying out the furniture and clearing it away again. We are grateful for the use of these **excellent facilities**.

**Guest speaker, Dr Edgar Turner,  
Curator of Insects in the Zoology Museum**

**'Conserving the little things that run the world'**



The tiger beetle, famously fast and voracious  
Copyright Ed Turner

The talk focussed on why insects are interesting and important, what roles they play in an ecosystem, evidence that species are declining, why this matters, and what we can do about it. Insects are the most diverse group of animals on the planet, with over 900,000 named species. Although individually small, they also dominate in terms of biomass and are extremely important for a wide range of ecosystem processes, including pollination, pest control and decomposition. Their role is perhaps most important in agricultural systems; for example, around 35% of the world's crops are pollinated by insects. Unfortunately there is ample evidence that insect species are in decline globally. This includes dramatic examples of extinctions, such as the disappearance of the Rocky Mountain Locust (once the world's most numerous insect), and long term declines quantified by careful interpretation of museum records and, more recently, long term monitoring projects, such as those run by Butterfly Conservation. There are many different reasons why insects are disappearing, including habitat change and fragmentation, introduced species and diseases, the use of pesticides and other pollutants, and the long-term effects of climate change. These losses matter, not only because of the functional importance of insects, but also because of the knowledge value that is being lost and moral and ethical considerations. There are now a wide range of conservation activities that are helping to restore insect populations. These include habitat restoration on both small and larger scales, as well as targeted conservation action and research on rare species. Because insects are small, there is also ample opportunity for members of the public to help with insect conservation in their own gardens. This can include planting nectar-rich plants and gardening in a more nature-friendly way.

I am very grateful to Dr Turner for writing this summary for us. Unfortunately, his audience was not very large, which was a great pity because it was such an important subject, communicated with vivid detail and quiet humour. I feel we should note for the record the first appearance at any of our AGMs of several Peruvian Black Beauty Stick Insects. They were produced from a small container and invited to parade up his arm as he said, 'When annoyed they can spit poison, but these are used to being handled.'

## A Roman Road Walk with a difference

Roger had planned to lead a walk on 11th September, this time taking Balsham as the starting point, but the date clashed with the Great Balsham Boundary Walk to raise money for the map project and for Balsham church. The walk was very well organised, the weather was good and it was attended by nearly 90 people and many dogs. There was a choice of three routes, distances varying from 3.5 to 13.7 miles. The longer walk included both the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke and footpaths partly over private land, giving walkers the opportunity to see parts of the countryside not normally accessible to the general public. The day raised £600 for a book, which was launched on 23<sup>rd</sup> November. '**Balsham 1617 – 2017, a village story in maps**' has been greeted with much acclaim and is available as a paper version (£15) or eBook via the website <<http://www.balshammap.net>>

## Tesco 'Bags of Help'

In November 2016, we received £500 for taking part in the trial of this scheme, ('Nice work if you can get it ...') and £5,000 to be spent on three projects: clearing the footpath from Mutlow Hill to the Pumping Station; replacing faded information boards and updating and reprinting the Roman Road leaflet.

Shortly afterwards, Historic England launched the major plan to clear most of the scrub and some trees from the northern end of the Fleam Dyke from Mutlow Hill to Fulbourn.

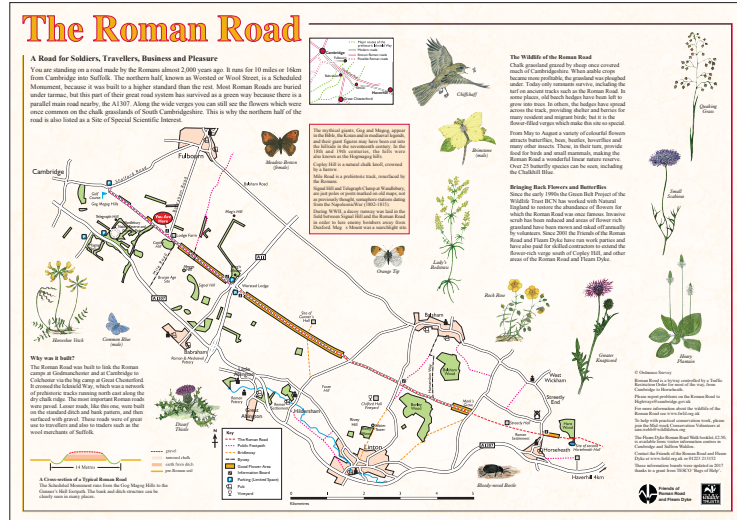


I therefore asked permission to use the money on the **Roman Road**. The winter of 2016 had been extremely wet and the track from Worsted Lodge to the rise above Gunner's Hall had become waterlogged causing walkers and cyclists to trample the verge rather badly. The Friends asked Natural England to suspend the scheduled machine mowing. The money allocated had to be used elsewhere and the five year scheme came to an end in the autumn. This meant that by the spring of 2017, a year's worth of grass and flowers would have to be left unmown, crowding out the new growth. Using the Bags of Help money the Friends paid for Fordham Estates to mow and remove the arisings as before, and also to remove large brambles along the way. The result was that this summer the wide north-east verge was full of flowers. There are many smaller flowers among the eye-catching knapweeds: Lady's Bedstraw, Yarrow, Burnet Saxifrage, Restharrow, Dwarf Thistle, some Bird's-foot Trefoil, Red Clover, Quaking Grass. The yellow flowers are St John's Wort.



Now that the Conservation and Enhancement Scheme has been renewed, we have asked Natural England that this section of the Roman Road should again be mowed in the early spring to maintain a pattern in which the summer growth is left to shelter invertebrates and small mammals, and to protect plants from trampling in wet months.

When it came to replacing discoloured **information boards**, I realised that quite a few changes were needed to the text and prices had increased since 2007, so we shall only be able to replace the information boards at Lodge Farm, Mount Farm and Worsted Lodge. I am very grateful to Glenn Mulleady, Conservation Manager at CambridgePPF, for agreeing to take delivery of the boards and to the Ecology officer, Edward Wombwell for his offer of help with installing them sometime soon.



A new edition of the **Roman Road leaflet** is under way, delayed by the changes and chances of this mortal life, but I hope to get it printed in the New Year, and sent out to our members. The initial bonus of £500 covered the replacement of the two vandalised **dog bins**. We are most grateful to Richard Fowling for installing the new ones. It is also time for a final thank you to Jon Gibbs, formerly the Head Ranger for CambridgePPF, who emptied our dog bins regularly for many years and continued to do so after he transferred to the Magog Trust. However, the regular dog bin service has now taken over.

## Work paid for by Subscriptions and Donations

In April 2017 the wide verge south of Copley Hill was mowed, with removal of cuttings: two days work. Mutlow Hill was cut and raked off, with removal of shrubby regrowth. The arisings were burned: three and a half days work. The short section of grassland which has survived on a bank opposite the Golf Course was brush cut and the shrubby regrowth removed: three and a half days. In addition, Bernard Hunt dug out the spring crop of Hemlock plants. The total cost was £2,000.

Unfortunately, that recurring adverb, the contractor for the Byways Cut flailed the track including half the bank in July, destroying all the Knapweeds in full flower with the corresponding loss of butterflies, bees and other invertebrates. Not wanting to leave swathes of mouldering hay to mulch the flowers, we paid Bernard £350 to remove it and brush cut the rest of the site.

The trouble is that the golf course hedge has grown wider, with brambles and briars spilling over onto the path. The hedge is also very tall, at 10ft and upwards. Monica O'Donnell, Natural England, spoke to the Manager of the Golf Course about the problem, but he assured her that the hedge had indeed been reduced in height, although the improvement is not obvious. This section of the Roman Road illustrates the difficulty of attempting regular practical conservation and enhancement of the flora and fauna on over six kilometres of a chalk grassland SSSI, without adequate public funding or more substantial charitable funding.





## Fleam Dyke Clearance

During the winter of 2014, the north end of the Fleam Dyke was cleared of scrub and the area seeded with Upright Brome, with subsequent mowing. In the spring of 2017, sheep were brought in to graze the approach to the dyke and the bank as far as the gate onto Mr Townley's land. The second phase: clearance of 80% of the banks of the dyke, leaving selected patches of scrub and the existing hedges, began in October 2017. The work began on the north east side of Mutlow Hill and is continuing steadily towards the Fulbourn end.

One result, above, is this surprising view of the dyke. I have walked from Mutlow Hill to Fulbourn many times, but it never occurred to me that this end of the whole extraordinary defence structure was higher than the Neolithic barrow.

Beyond Mutlow Hill, the upper bank of this section has mostly remained clear of scrub invasion since the days of sheep grazing before World War II.

Here, you can find Rock-rose, Horseshoe Vetch, Wild Thyme, Eyebright, Fairy Flax, Quaking Grass, Dwarf thistle, Dropwort, Harebell, Clustered Bellflower, Lady's Bedstraw, Autumn Gentian and, if you are very expert, the splendidly named and almost invisible Bastard Toadflax. This section has already been hand seeded with Upright Brome into which the flowers will be able to seed. The ditch of *fosse* has been cleared to facilitate management of the slope.

Beyond the disused railway, the footpath, with its remnant of original flora, is being carefully preserved, along with a few other areas where there is still genuine chalk grassland.



Edmund Tanner and I visited part of the site on a miserable grey November day and I thought it looked like the land of Mordor. However, the person in charge is not the Dark Lord, but Michael Downes of Garden Works Tree Surgery Ltd. He loves wildlife and is keen to make a success of this plan. If you would like to read the detailed specification for the work, the full details are available on pdf *Fleam Dyke north, clearance 2017*. (NB. The order of the work schedule was reversed, starting at Mutlow Hill not at the gate onto Mr Townley's land.)

The hard reality is that the chalk grassland at the north end of the Fleam Dyke disappeared under scrub fifty years ago. In 1972 I picnicked with a friend and her small daughter on a pleasant open area of grass on Mutlow Hill. At least half the hill was covered in bushes and small trees. The big beech tree must have been visible but I have no memory of the Neolithic burial mound, which would have been covered in greenery of various kinds.



In April 2001, this path was a single file through the bushes from Fulbourn to the disused railway. The Friends paid for the clearance of the path with our first Awards for All grant of £5,000 in 2002. The work was done in the winters of 2003 and 2004. The photograph on the left was taken in 2005 and the one on the right in 2015. Several work parties each year are required to keep it open. The surrounding bushes grow taller and thicker every year.

Regular maintenance work on the bank beside the Pumping Station must have continued longer than elsewhere as the scrub cover was lighter there when I first walked along the Dyke in 2001. Does anyone know how the flowery slope shown on page 5 was kept clear? For fifty years there have been continued efforts to clear scrub and restore the flowers involving work parties from the Manpower Services Commission; the Cambridge Conservation Volunteers; individual activists such as John Davison, Sean Wylie, Alex Sadler and particularly David Clark. When Sharon Hearle was appointed Green Belt Officer, the Wildlife Trust became more closely involved. Regular visits from the Mid-Week Volunteers achieved substantial improvements along the whole dyke. Work parties led by Sharon and then by Iain Webb have continued the work; but the reality is that in this part of the dyke nature has won. You can cut back Hawthorn, Blackthorn, Purging Buckthorn, Old Man's Beard and brambles every year, but the root stocks grow steadily bigger and unless very systematically treated, they grow again ever more heartily.

For several years Heritage England and Natural England have been working on a new approach, following the fairly successful clearance work on the Devil's Dyke. The area officer, David Kenny, has secured the interest and co-operation of Adrian Bayford of Wilbraham Farms and the tenant farmer, James Kiddy. Heritage England provided a grant of £180,000 for the project. Michael Downes' tender of £126,090 + VAT was accepted. The footpath remains open to walkers,

The brash will be burned on the area to the south west of the steps up to the dyke, or on a burning trailer in the ditch. All larger stems haven been treated with glyphosate. In March or April there will be an attempt to retreat the regrowth of clematis, brambles and thistles.



The plan was that the cleared area would be hydro-seeded immediately with Upright Brome, *Bromopsis erecta*, and possibly Sheep's Fescue, *Festuca ovina*. Unfortunately, the two-year schedule could not be adhered to, and it will not be possible to hydro-seed the whole area immediately as intended. The best area of chalk grassland, see page 5, has already been hand-seeded by Iain Webb. The rest will be done in the autumn of 2018. The whole area will then be flailed or brush cut for two to three years after which it will be grazed by sheep.

The purpose of this radical clearance is to protect the surface of this historic monument and to reveal its remarkable outline above the fields of the area. It is hoped that the remnant of calcareous flora which has survived on the top of the bank will spread down the banks as it has after similar work on parts of the Devil's Dyke. Regular sheep grazing will restore the chalk grassland turf with the all the wildlife, especially invertebrates which such turf supports. It is to be hoped that the Green Hairstreak will survive in the trees and bushes of the north-eastern hedges, and the Chalkhill Blue should be able to spread along an increased area of downland.



Above. Chalkhill Blue, male. The photo was taken by John Dawson, who played a major part in establishing the continued existence of Chalkhill Blues on the Devil's Dyke, and was the Conservation Officer for Butterfly Conservation, Cambs & Essex until he left Cambridgeshire. He was also the Moth Recorder for VC29. The horseshoe-shaped seeds of the yellow vetch, above, explain its name. It is the sole foodplant of the Chalkhill Blue. The return of this species to the Fleam Dyke is the result of fifteen years of skilled grassland management.

In the centre is the male Green Hairstreak, the only green butterfly in Europe. Its upper wings are brown, as are the wings of the female. It basks with closed wings, almost invisible on a spring leaf. The 'Hairstreak' of little white dots is quite variable. The caterpillar feeds on a variety of plants: Common Rock-rose, (above), Dogwood, brambles and others. The butterfly has been recorded all along the northern end of the Fleam Dyke. It is to be hoped that it will survive in the hedges and the stands of bushes and trees which have remain on the dyke.

Photographs; Green Hairstreak, Jack Harrison. Common Rock-rose, Christine Newell.

**Our website** was designed and is maintained by Christine Newell, who photographed all the flowers on the Fleam Dyke or the Roman Road. The butterfly photographs are by Val Perrin, Jack Harrison and Roger Lemon. The layout is clear. The wildlife illustrations are beautiful, and you can find whatever you want very easily. However, when I looked at the website recently, I found myself looking at an ad. for a security light, and then at an ad. for some particularly ugly trousers. On the next page there were ads. for funeral parlours and smart phones. Horrors! What would I find next? Bomb making equipment?

Evidently our webhost, Wordpress, decided to make some money from their free websites. They have a range of plans. Christine has signed up to the lowest fee plan which for £3 a month frees us from unwanted advertisements. This charge includes a change of domain name to **frffd.org.uk**, so the annual £11 will no longer be due and the final cost will be £25 a year.



**Subscriptions.** Thank you very much for paying the full subscription of £15. If you are paying £10 a year, we are still very grateful, but could you possibly increase it to £15? If you have decided to withdraw from the society, **Please let me know.** Whatever the case, we are very grateful for all subscriptions whether you have supported us since 5<sup>th</sup> April 2001, or only for a year or two. I intend to send reminders to those who need one. It is a horridly fiddly job checking about 200 entries on an Excel sheet, so forgive me if I make a mistake. **Finally, a very big thank you to those of our members who give more, and sometimes a lot more than £15. You really help us to balance the books.**



This newly emerged Brimstone butterfly was nectaring on Purple Toadflax, a new arrival among the flowers below Copley Hill. Years ago I welcomed this non-native plant to my garden for its spikes of pretty purple flowers and its ability to flower again if dead-headed. For me, it now has another interest: it is used by the caterpillar of the Toadflax Brocade moth. The caterpillar looks very like the handsome white, green and yellow caterpillar of the Mullein moth. The sulphur yellow Brimstone feeds on Purging Buckthorn in the spring, pupates among the bushes and emerges in July or August. It feeds up until late in September and then hibernates among the bushes until the first warm days of spring, living on right into the summer: a life span of ten or eleven months.

## **Our Seventeenth AGM will be on Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2018**

It will be held in the Meeting Room of the Fulbourn Centre, 31 Home End, CB21 5BS. There will be an illustrated report on the year's work, followed by a brief interval after which our guest speaker will be **Bill Sutherland, the Miriam Rothschild Professor of Conservation Biology** at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of St Catharine's College. He is currently the President of the British Ecological Society.

Prof Sutherland's research is directed at predicting the consequences of environmental change. He is known for his research on integrating science and policy, particularly in the field of evidence-based conservation. Over the last three decades, his research has spanned several disciplines. Two of his key contributions have been the horizon scanning exercises to identify future priority issues and the 100 important questions in various disciplines: ecology, poverty prevention, global agriculture and food amongst others. He has also worked extensively on bird population ecology and the biodiversity impacts of agriculture.

In his talk **Conservation in a post truth world?** Bill Sutherland will discuss how we can use evidence including the website <<http://www.conservationevidence.com>> to underpin practice.

**Please tell your friends about this talk. Members free. Non members £3. Open to all**

Best wishes for the coming year,  
Julia

November 2017

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This family of weasels and the sky lark on page 1 are by Graham Easy,