



Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke

April 2020 Newsletter 56, part 1

It is time for another proper Newsletter to tell you about the work we have done this winter.

Work on the Roman Road

In January, Garden Works finally managed to cut the overgrown Golf course hedge back to the boundary, treating the tree stumps and brambles and removing the cut material. We are most grateful to Dan Weaver, the Conservation Officer for South Cambs. District Council for the £2,500 grant. Unfortunately, this was not enough to reduce the height of the hedge for the whole length of the section. However, the main work was done, and the track is now properly centred, not sliding up the grassy bank on which we have been as such pains to preserve a remnant of calcareous flora. Unfortunately, the very wet winter months have been followed by the Covid 19 crisis, and the edge of the bank is being heavily trampled.



Then in February, the Linear Sites group (Natural England and the Cambridge CC) proposed more extensive hedge cutting here. The Golf Course hedge was to be set back to the boundary for several hundred yards, with flailing and removal of arisings. The grass verge there and also from Worsted Lodge to the Hildersham Road were to be mowed with removal of grass cuttings. The work was given to SPL Landscapes, the Suffolk branch of a bigger firm. Their website does not display experience in skilled conservation management, but they have done a good job.



The new clearance shows the Roman Road at its full width, sloping away at the sides, but if the cut ends have not been treated everything will regrow as before.

Copley Hill

In 2011 the Friends had a very successful fund raising event, thanks to Dr Kevin Leahy, who gave a brilliant talk about the recently discovered Staffordshire Treasure. (See Newsletter 35 on our website). We made £1,300, which enabled us to demonstrate the possibility of clearing scrub in a more efficient and cheaper way. This seemed and seems to me so blindingly obvious that it is hard to understand why a demonstration is needed. If there is a place where you have unwanted scrub, cut and treat with chemicals. Next year, come back and treat any re-growth. Do the same the following year if necessary or dig the occasional offender out.

At Copley Hill this simple technique coupled with mowing and removal of arisings has led to a steady reduction in the amount of money needed to manage this area. What cost £1,300 in October 2011 cost only £700 five years later. The surplus money was used to extend the area under control, and so from an initial 2 – 300 yards, the area maintained by the Friends runs from Mile Road, Copley Hill down to the footpath to Fulbourn. After three years the reduction of fertility was visible and also measurable in the reduction of the amount of scrub and grass cuttings which remained to be burned.

There is a further benefit. After seven years it seemed clear that we could leave the original central area of flowery grassland uncut. In 2019 we did leave it uncut and used the money to pay for other work. Now in April 2020, we have to leave it uncut and can do so without concern. The larger area can be dealt with in the early autumn, we hope.



This photo was taken in May 2019 from the verge near the footpath to Fulbourn. The field margin was bright with poppies. If you look right, on the verge opposite the multiple trunks of the big Sycamore, you will see several yards of yellow Horseshoe Vetch, which should be in flower now. Also please look for the flowers of the Purple Milk Vetch and let me know if you find them. I don't think this patch of the rare *Astragalus danicus* flowered last year.

Weed Wiping

I remember hearing that the Wildlife Trust had used this technique on Wilbraham Common in the 1990s. I also saw the impressive results of weed wiping on Arthur's Meadow SSSI when I went to visit it en route to Wood Walton Fen in 1909. A passing walker said, "You should have seen this three years ago. It was waist high in thistles." As far as I could tell, the flower-

filled turf showed no evidence of the problem. By chance it was also the day on which millions of Painted Ladies were travelling northwards across Britain, even reaching the Hebrides. They could have provided an alternative solution.

At Copley Hill, near Mile Road, there was an area where scrub clearance had been followed by a steady spread of Dewberry, *Rubus caesius*. The standard practice is to brush cut the area in the autumn or winter, but Dewberry belongs to the strawberry family, and as any gardener knows, each plant sends out 3 or 4 suckers in July and August. By September they have developed roots, and by the autumn you have 5 Dewberry plants. Each one sends out new suckers, and so in a few years you have a thick mat of shiny green leaves.

In April 2019, Bernard Hunt and I decided that instead of looking sadly at the problem each year, we would try a version of weed wiping. Bernard's assistant trailed a paint brush filled with Roundup across the Dewberry nearer the verge, while Bernard sprayed the thick mass of Dewberry beside the hedge. A month later the Dewberry on the verge was still visible, but it was much reduced in quantity, and the chalk grassland plants appeared quite undamaged. As proof a Treble Bar moth flew up out of a patch of its food plant, St John's Wort.

Mount Farm Clearance – Hunt's Wildlife v Wonderful Weeds



Our attempt to clear this area and reseed with flowers in 2016 was defeated by lack of money and perhaps a lack of optimism. However, unwilling to abandon so much previous work, we resumed battle. Above, just visible, Bernard, Aaron and an allen scythe. To the right, they appear to be winning, although this is a tricky procedure as the machine is on a slope riddled with rabbit holes.



The mass of cuttings were left to dry out, and finally burned several weeks later in two sessions. The cut stems were treated, followed by cutting and raking off.



The cleared space filled up with all the usual space invaders plus an eruption of *Artemesia vulgaris*, Mugwort, so called because it was used to clean and scent pottery beer mugs in the days before glass was in common use. If it were rare, its feathery leaves, dark green above and silvery grey below, would give it popular appeal. It even has its very own micromoth with a very pretty caterpillar which feeds on the clusters of small flowers. However, it is hugely prolific and its very tough roots make it a farmers' nightmare. The photo above left, taken in September 2019, shows the size of the problem. The solution was to spray the seed heads from underneath and after an interval to mow and rake off yet again. Above right, the same area looking very neat and tidy on 19th April, 2020.

It was too soon to see how successful the spraying has been. The dominant grass is, of course, False Oat Grass. There has always been a good quantity of Bladder Campion, which has large deep roots, and of course, Garlic Mustard, the food plant of the Orange Tip and the Green Veined White. Common Knapweed has been spreading and there is also a scattering of Greater Knapweed, St John's Wort, Field Basil and Ribwort Plantain. Hedge Bedstraw is a great survivor, but there are increasing colonies of Lady's Bedstraw. In short, we can hope to have a length of verge at Mount Farm with a good number of flowers for butterflies, bees and other invertebrates.

Other work on the Roman Road

Anyone walking down the Road from the Cambridge end will know the place where a farm track across a sloping field has created a badly rutted area which quickly fills with water after rain. This wet winter was particularly bad, and complaints mounted. Finally the farmer, Richard Todd of Copley Farms, filled the ruts with chalk rubble plus clay, and has banned farm trucks from using the crossing. Photograph – Edmund Tanner



Obviously, a great deal of other work is done every year by the Iain Webb and the Midweek Volunteers. The good news is that in the autumn Iain and the team will no longer be needed on Trumpington Meadows and will be able to make many more visits to the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke. More details in the next email in which there will be details of the extensive clearance of scrub round the junipers on Fleam Dyke, and a written substitute for the AGM.

Finally, many thanks to all the members who have paid their subscription (£15 - £20 in April).

With best wishes, Julia Napier

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