

HADDENHAM CONSERVATION SOCIETY

Vol. 24 No. 2

SPRING 2009

May 2009

The Committee for 2009/10 is as follows:

Barclay Arnott	740500
Ann Biggs	740810
John Burgess	749441
Freda Crofts	740235
Susan Everitt	740352
Wendy Lanman	741138
Brian Lanman	741138
Jane Marsh	740680
Paul Mason	740219
Robert Norman	740473
Chris Prescott	749038
Gill Smith	741662
Mike Smith	741662
Andrew Threadgold	740650
Barbara York	741624

Please feel free to get in touch with any committee member with questions or information you might have. If you have any specific records of flora and fauna, please send them to Paul Mason, 13 Aldreth Road, Haddenham (740219).

Membership information

Subscription rates

1 Jan to 31 Dec 2009:

Individual: £6

Family: £10

If you wish to join the Society, send your cheque, made out to Haddenham Conservation Society,

with your name, address and telephone number, to Brian Lanman, 1 The Pond, Haddenham, Ely CB6 3XG.

This will entitle you to receive our regular newsletter and will give you free entry to the winter talks.

(A saving of £2.50 per session).

Haddenham Stars!



Sarah Mukherjee, BBC environment correspondent introduces the bog oaks to viewers

It was a cold windy morning on 27th February and recording for BBC Radio Cambridgeshire was due to start at 07:30. Fifty bog oaks had been dug up in only two fields in Haddenham - a record number.

Radio and television reporters rushed to the scene and the event was reported nationwide. There was even some jostling between producers of rival channels eager to get the scoop!

Sarah Mukherjee got there with her team first and impressed us with her cheery efficiency and utter professionalism.

The prostrate tree trunks were filmed in great detail and Paul Mason and Dr Maisie Taylor were interviewed 'live'.

Filming and recording took all morning - yet only a few minutes were broadcast.



Sarah Mukherjee interviews Dr Maisie Taylor, from Flag Fen nr Peterborough and Paul Mason, our very own Chairman

News from Guppy's Pond

Contributed by Gill Smith ...

While looking for hiding places for an Easter egg hunt in the garden I almost stepped onto a basking grass snake. It was curled up on one of the steps leading down to the lake side and after a few seconds slithered off the step and into the adjoining garden and it was at least 50 cm long!

Groups of up to 8 large carp have been seen regularly lately swimming very near the water's surface in front of the house giving us some amazing views of them.

...and Wendy Lanman



How would you like to be woken up early by a loud tapping on the front door for a whole week during icy cold weather and open the door to find two huge swans crowding into the doorway in search of food? Well, the answer to that as far as I am concerned is a mixture of delight and apprehension (a hungry swan's nip is quite painful).

Seriously, though, the weather we had in February was so cold and lasted for such a long time that I had never seen the birds around Guppy's Pond so hungry. We scattered wild bird food over the snow and fed the swans special swan food in bowls of water - they never left even a grain of wheat - until the grass reappeared and the ice melted on the pond.

They have finished building their nest now and the female is sitting on eggs (I am guessing here, because I haven't actually *seen* the eggs). We shall just have to sit back, wait and hope they do better than last year when only one out of seven hatchlings survived.

A pair of great-spotted woodpeckers has visited the feeding pole all winter, the green woodpeckers are making funnels in the lawn and the reed warblers have arrived - their loud chattering fills the air.

Chairman's Annual Report 2008-2009

The last 12 months have been quite a good period for HCS. Perhaps the best project we undertook was the planting of 50 Elm trees in Fairchilds Meadows and along the ridge of North Hill, the latter in conjunction with landowners there. To be able to do this we must thank Andrew Threadgold and two of his friends

who combined the Earthwatch and HSBC grants they had been awarded to purchase the trees, posts and ties. These were planted with the help of members of Haddenham Guides, Haddenham Cadets and our own members. So far, apart from one tree, all seem to be doing well. Other good work was done by work parties in the Old Burial Ground wildlife area.

This year is to be the last that Mike Smith will have carried out his work as treasurer and my particular thanks go to him for his sterling work. Our finances have been kept in good order by him during his tenure. Thanks also go to the members of the committee, all of whom have contributed their particular skills in their usual willing ways.

During a particularly wet summer not all of our outdoor events can be said to have gone off as we would have liked. The Moth Night had to be cancelled at the last moment due to rain and the fen and other walks were also affected by dull conditions. The Small Animal Trap and Release event in September did go down well and we were delighted to see so many young people there to inspect some of our resident rodents. Thanks go to Ann Sherwood for leading it.

However, our Wildlife Room event at Blossoms and Bygones went down a treat with a constant number of people inspecting the displays including a visitation by an old Haddenham Saxon inhabitant. This was the main part of an exhibit put on by the Cambs Archaeology Department of artefacts centering on the 1980s discovery of a Saxon burial ground in the middle of the village.

The winter meetings programme was another cracking good one with some of the best audience attendances we have had. Subjects included talks on Fowlmere, A Kenyan Safari, Deer of East Anglia, Orchids and Bumble and other bees, not to mention Golden Orioles! We finish this with a new venture: Woodland and Hedgerow Folklore with film and music. (I am sorry to miss it).

Wooler and the Peewits

Contributed by Paul Mason

George "Wooler" Amory was a farmer in Hillrow. He was born in 1903 and died in the early 1980s. All his life he was a bit of a character and was a good tale-teller. Paul Melton and Kevin Delaney made sound recordings of many of the older fraternity during the 1970-1995 period and here is one which may give the flavour of the bird life possibly around in the early twentieth century. Lorna

Delaney and the late Valerie Bloye transcribed the recordings and some are published in Village Voices (More Stories from round the Fens - Book3).

This is Wooler's story of "Peewit Poaching". But you must imagine the strong fen accent.

"There weren't so much shooting of pheasants and pigeons, but plenty of rabbits. Good meat, but not much on them. Nine pence and anyone would buy a rabbit. But I'll tell you what used to be a nice bird - 'course you musn't shoot 'em now - a peewit. You now what a peewit is? Well some call 'em lapwings or plovers.

I remember a farmer I were working for once. He had 'taters [potatoes] in a field and some fallow* beside it with cows in it. The peewits were making nests there, and he were scuffling them **. When they [the peewits] got up it were like a cloud was getting up, thousands of them. So he went and got his gun and I carried it down to where he reckoned they were. I gave him his gun, he loaded it up and he crept through the wheat, you see, to where he thought they were. When he got through to

within about a yard or two he just put his head out and they went straight for him. He went "bang" and they got up like a cloud, "bang" and he cut through them a tunnel. I've never seen a man do that, sixty he picked out in one go. Tha's as true as I'm here.

We had some string and we tied 'em in bunches, ten in a bunch. He had a bunch in each hand, and he put a bunch on his haywain and gave me

two bunches to put over my shoulder. We picked up sixty, and God knows how many we couldn't find. I never seen a man shoot so many peewits in my life.

He told me to take two so I went home with two bunches [twenty birds] and mother said "What ha you got?". Of course eight or nine were of use but not very big. Mother and one or two of the girls were plucking 'em and burning the feathers, then mother drew 'em and we had three or four dinners. They were beautiful, yeah!

But when I went down the next morning he [the farmer] went "You took two lots of the bloody birds".

- I said "You told me to"

- "I meant two birds not two bunches"

They were lovely, one of the richest birds you can eat but you

can't now, they're on the preserved list. You know people are still talking 'bout them sixty birds, even people who weren't born then!"

It's a great tale which illustrates a different time so we must not condemn, but it does show how many lapwings must have bred in the fens of Haddenham at that time compared with now. If we are lucky we now have

about 10-12 breeding pairs and not all those are successful. Most farmers who know they have them breeding do now take care, and set-aside used to have the odd pair or two. This has now gone so lapwings could be on a further downward path.

Oh yes, and why was George called Wooler? Well it appears

that when he was a very young boy he would agitate to go out on the fen with his elders on the carts and he would say "wooler come with you" meaning actually "will I come" which in fen parlance meant "can I come with you?". The nickname stuck with him all his life.

* fallow is bare ground that is poughed and harrowed but left uncropped for a year as a means of killing pernicious weeds like couch grass. Nowadays of course sprays do that, so there is no need for fallow.

** Scuffling is an old farming term used in those days. It is better described in modern terms as using a cultivator to keep moving bare soil around to kill weeds in fields. As lapwings like to nest on bare earth they would take the opportunity to raise a family between "scuffling" operations.



Lapwings by Ann Biggs

Cold Slow Start to a New Season

We had it all during the last months since the New Year. Cold, snow, wet, warm, dry ... all in all back to normal as opposed to all those warm and wet winters we have got used to, all blamed on global warming. However, the birdlife in the parish has, apart from one bird, not been all that exciting.

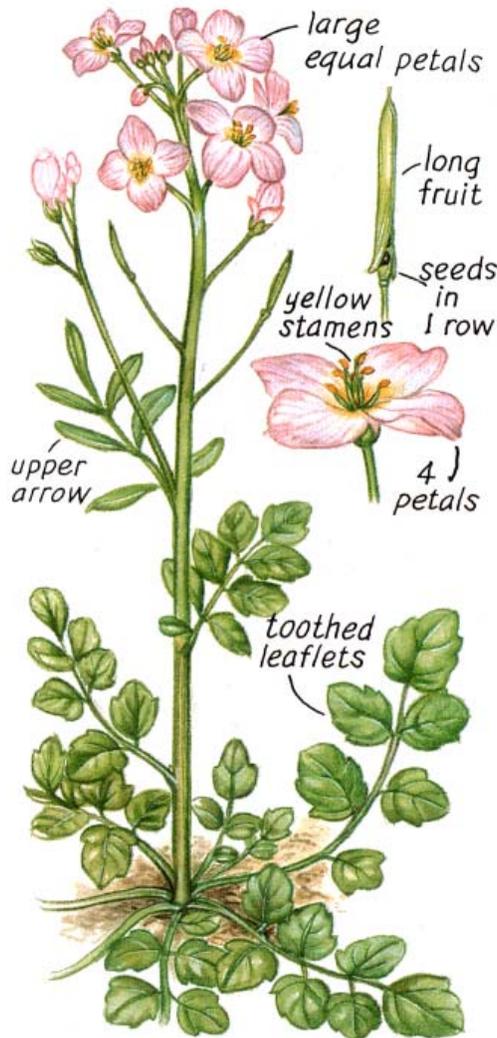
The exciting bird was, of course, the Waxwing. This had been found in Robert Norman's orchard on New Year's Eve, but managed to stay into New Year's Day and possibly for another day, but was not found on January 3rd. The Fieldfares in the orchard at the same time numbered many hundreds and were accompanied by several Redwings and Blackbirds. The Mistle Thrushes seemed to hang back a bit in spite of being larger birds which showed how the Fieldfares were "cock of the roost" so to speak, perhaps because of their sheer numbers

Out on the fens whilst Lapwing flocks totalled about a 1,000, Golden Plovers were, at least in our parish, in short supply this year. There were also less Stonechats to watch with delight. Best of all was just before the snow fell: eight Bewick's Swans (including 3 juveniles) were at Graingers Drove. Later 90 more were in Hillrow Fen and 70-80 Whooper Swans were by Hermitage Farm.

On January 23rd two Siskins briefly visited a Station Road garden and the usual Grey Wagtail was feeding at the Lode Way sewage plant. Nearby, off Hoghill Drove, a Merlin was being chased by various corvids.

It has long been thought that one particular member of the heron family ought to have been seen in the parish, but no luck until Colin Bidwell saw one in the drain leading up to Nineacre Wood. Little Egrets now

breed on the nearby Ouse Washes where there are at least 40 birds. So it was good when he spotted one at the end of January and soon another five were scattered around the fen drains from Hoghill Drove to Gravel Pit Drove.



Cuckoo-flower or Lady's Smock
(*Cardamine pratensis*)

February reports include several sightings of Goldcrests in gardens around the village, a Red Kite over the Petrus, three Bramblings in a Duck Lane garden, which may or may not have been the same birds seen in another garden in West End. These birds stayed around into early April.

March 1st and there was a Green Sandpiper and several Snipes around

the flooded grassland of The Norlands Wash and nearby a Little Owl flew out of some old knarled Willow trees. In trees by the old Top Corner Shop a Siskin sang on March 2nd and on the 3rd a Redpoll (certainly now a Haddenham rarity considering they used to breed here) visited a Bury Lane garden, but on the 14th there were three together briefly.

Other records include Bullfinches in Station Road gardens and Shelducks prospecting straw bale nest sites in Ewell Fen.

As April commenced the first spring migrants appeared in the form of ever welcome bright Yellow Wagtails. Three were by Foulmire Drove on the 7th. On the 18th House Martins were prospecting a nest site in Aldreth Road and some were doing the same along houses on The Green. By the 21st two pairs of Common Whitethroats had arrived back to along the old Haddenham-Wilburton railway line and at the approach to Hinton Hedges a Lesser Whitethroat had tuned up beautifully, accompanied by a Blackcap and a Chiffchaff.

Cowslips were in full bloom along the Grunty Fen road by the 17th and the Cuckoo-flowers in Fairchild's Meadows have never put on such a glorious show before. Some were also to be found along the banks of the Old West River and by Claytons Bridge.

Generally the migration during April was very slow and not one Wheatear was found, but things did pick up later. We will see what May brought us in the next newsletter.



FREDA FOR PRESIDENT!

The Committee voted to elect Mrs Freda Crofts as Honorary President and lifelong member of Haddenham Conservation Society in recognition for all her great work for the society since its inception in 1985. Freda is a fount of knowledge about the area in general and the Old Burial Ground in particular and has spent many hundreds of hours there and, as you may read elsewhere, she still regularly attends the work parties. She was a leading organiser of the Old Burial Ground project which was one of the first tasks undertaken by the newly formed society and led the project for 20 years.

*Well done Freda
and many thanks
for all your work!*

OLD BURIAL GROUND

The first work party of the year was held on Sunday 19th April with 11 members helping and we were lucky to have a dry and partly sunny day. The paths were cut, shrubs pruned, the front of the butterfly garden weeded and general tidying done.

For the first time some snake's head fritillary flowers were found in two different locations. As far as anyone knows these have never been planted in the Old Burial ground, but were delightful to see and we hope they will reappear next year.

So thanks to Barclay, Freda, Ian, Sheila, Sally, Gareth Angela, Bill, Gill and Mike for their hard work which left the area looking beautiful ready for Blossoms and Bygones.

Renew your subs!

Subscriptions were due on
1st January.
Please pay promptly :
it helps a lot!
Thank you.

Bog Oaks in the Fen

Contributed by Paul Mason



Bog Oaks in Haddenham

For over 100,000 years the Ice Age covered Britain with deep glaciers. 10,000 years ago the glaciers gradually withdrew northwards thawing and depositing gravel and silt creating a huge expanse of bare soil. The seeds of birch, willow and alder trees were blown across a land bridge, now the English Channel, where they colonised new bare wetlands. Over the next 5,000 years these water-tolerant trees gave way to much English Oak which then grew in dense tall straight trees with few if any side shoots.

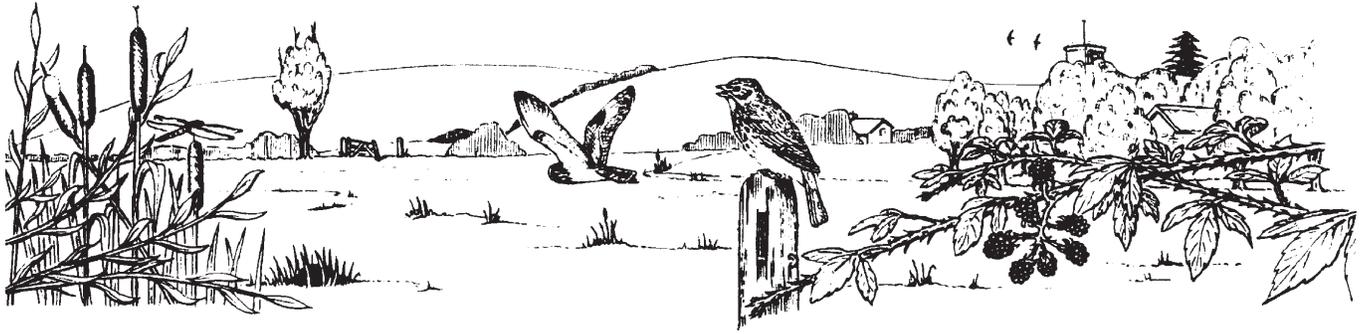
Later isostatic forces [Geological equilibrium which exists between parts of the earth's crust which rise if ice crusts are removed and sink if other material such as soil is deposited] had the effect of making southern Britain sink and eventually cut off Britain from mainland Europe. Water draining from Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire, Rutland and parts of Norfolk flooded a large area we now know as the fenland, from the Wash southward to near Cambridge. This was mostly fresh water, but in some places it became saline with water from the North Sea.

The mainly Oak vegetation once supported an ecosystem which was home to Wolf, Elk, Deer, Lynx, Wild Boar, and Bear but later this flooded. The trees gradually fell over, mostly but not all, in a north-south direction. As they were flooded the trunks of the trees, some of which were actually elms and willows, gradually rotted so weakening them. When all fell over they were gradually covered by many layers of peat and in turn the area became a completely different habitat of meres, reeds, sedges and rushes and the soil also became acid and became host to a very different animal system.. These trees became black and were preserved under as much as 20 metres of peat until this same peat dried out after having been drained in the 16th century to turn into prime farming land. Now they are gradually being revealed by farmers as the peat is disappearing through soil erosion and contraction.



Plant Sale

We made £273 this time - best ever! Many thanks to all of you for your help.



SUMMER EVENTS 2009

Sunday July 5th

Meet in Arkenstall Car Park 1:30 pm

FEN DRAIN WALK AND FAIRCHILD'S MEADOWS

This has become an annual event to see what wild flowers, butterflies and dragonflies can be found.

We may start by looking for the White-letter Hairstreak butterfly in Fairchild's Meadows

Sunday August 16th

Meet Arkenstalls Car Park 2:00 pm or at NineAcre Wood

NINEACRE WOOD AND OLD WEST RIVER

Last year the weather was not right to find all the Bush Crickets there so we will have another go.

Then we will walk along the river bank to see what else we can find, maybe even over Aldreth High Bridge and along the bank on the other side, through the cricket bat willow holt.

Sunday, early September 2:00 - 4:00 pm - look out for the posters

Park on grass verge along drove by Guppy's Pond and meet at No. 1 The Pond

BOATING ON GUPPY'S POND

Boats, life jackets and rowers provided. Relax as you glide along the waters of Guppy's Pond and see it from a whole new perspective. You will probably also have the treat of seeing a kingfisher.

Sunday September 20th

Meet by pond in Fairchild's Meadows. Start 2:00 pm

POND DIPPING IN FAIRCHILD'S MEADOWS

The pond in Fairchild's Meadows should by this date have plenty of life in it.

Come along with your young families and let's see what we can dip out of it. Great Fun!

PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPETITION AT BLOSSOMS AND BYGONES

There were many entries for the competition and lots of them were totally correct. The picture of the bird whose name had to be guessed was variously named as a shoveller, curlew, turnstone, wader and spoonbill. It was actually an avocet – which is the

emblem of the RSPB, so members of that organisation had an advantage!

In the junior section there were 4 all correct winning entries and prizes went to Ben Woodbridge, Georgina Minall and a joint prize to Hugh and Emma Scott. In the senior section

there were 8 correct entries and so 3 lucky winners had to be drawn and were Sarah Shippey, Pauline Wilson and Tim Meikle.

Well done and thanks to all who entered.

STOP PRESS ... STOP P

Brian Lanman has been bullied into accepting the position of Treasurer The Parish Council Pond Management Committee has set up a hide to watch the birds on Guppy's Pond. Turn right at the Victorian house and go to the water's edge. You will find it woven between trees, safer than the open bank.