



NEWSLETTER JANUARY 2008

(A letter to the Members of the Trust from the Trustees/Directors)

CLIMATE CHANGE?

A Happy New Year to you all. And the climate is warming: the night of January 18/19th was apparently the warmest ever recorded in south-east England. So what should we hope for in 2008 - aside from a more cheerful summer than last? Increased ambient temperatures will lead to changes: mobile warmer climate species, including midges and mosquitos, arrive and our cooler climate species gradually, or even suddenly, disappear. But we are also warned of possible changes in the flow of the Gulf Stream, perhaps causing the whole country to become much colder, with the disappearance of the warmer climate species that just make it to our shores today. So maybe we should just hope that the weather pattern remains much as it has been, though it seems unlikely, and from early years we learnt that variety is the spice of life. So good luck with the gardening!

WINTER ACTIVITIES: IMMEDIATE INTEREST.

There will be two significant events in the near future - On Sunday 10th February afternoon, the distinguished actress Juliet Stevenson has very kindly undertaken to join us at the Sussex Barn Auditorium at West Dean to read some of her favourite prose. As many will know, she is the daughter of one of our best loved members. We hope that you may already have this date booked, and please encourage lots of others to enjoy this unique occasion. Tickets are available from the West Dean Admissions Office (0844 4994408). The entrance to the West Dean Gardens and Visitor Centre is the one to use, off the Midhurst to Chichester Road, just south of Singleton.

Then on Thursday 28th February at 6.30 p.m. the Trust's second Francis Rose Memorial Lecture will be given by David Ball, a long-serving member of Hampshire County Council's Countryside Services. His subject will be 'The Ashford Hangers Nature Reserve', a rich section of that lovely stretch of country curving to the north of Petersfield right across to Selbourne and beyond. This talk will be at West Dean College; access by the main entrance, parking on the left just before the house, directions to the room from the security desk just inside the front door. Come and glean some insights into the richness of a particularly attractive, yet slightly remote, area.

SUMMER EVENTS

Sunday, May 11th, Heyshott Escarpment at 10.30 a.m.

A visit led by Butterfly Conservation expert Neil Hulme, whom we have recently consulted on habitat conditions for the Duke of Burgundy butterfly. We hope to see this butterfly, plus Green Hairstreaks, Dingy and Grizzled Skippers. The meeting place is at the southern end of Heyshott Village (SU900176), where the road takes a sharp bend by the entrance to Manor Farm. Car parking here is rather awkward, but it is possible to make slow progress along the rough track towards the down, with parking well over on the left after the right hand bend at SU898174, opposite a large Ash tree. This is where our working parties meet.

Weekend 21st/22nd June. West Dean Garden Event

We shall be manning our exhibit in hourly shifts as usual: volunteers for any part of the two days are always welcome. Please contact John Murray (01730 812325). The bonus is the opportunity to explore the exhibits when not on duty!

Wednesday 9th July. Old Winchester Hill National Nature Reserve, 10.00 a.m.

Barry Proctor (the warden) will take our party around this famous NNR during the morning. We meet in the main car park at SU648210. There is not much hill walking involved as the car park is sited at over 600 feet above sea-level! Bring a packed lunch.

Saturday, 15th August: Kingley Vale 10.30 a.m.

Richard Williamson has kindly undertaken to lead this visit. Meet at the West Stoke car park (SU825088). Assume a walk of 3 or 4 miles and bring a packed lunch.

Car sharing should be possible for all summer events: please contact Gerry Ryan on 01730 813971.

We are also intending to visit Bentley Station Meadow near Alice Holt Forest - an outing which was rained off last year - in the latter part of July in order to see Purple Emperor Butterflies and we have a long-standing intention of seeing the re-established Large Blue on the Polden Hills in Somerset. If you are interested in either of these events please contact Gerry, as above.

Plant and Produce Sales

Nearly everyone knows about these! This year the dates are:-

Saturday 3rd May at Bayleaves, Bepton Road, Bepton nr. Midhurst

Monday 5th May at Garth House, Bell Lane, Cocking

Wednesday 7th May at Upper Cranmore, Heyshott.

All will start at 10.30.

Contributions to the stock of plants and produce for sale will be gratefully received and can be collected if necessary. Please contact Gerry Ryan 01730 813971.

Heyshott Working Parties

These have been arranged, subject to weather, for:-

Friday 22nd February

Friday 29th February

Meet at SU898174 (see Butterfly Walk for details) at 9.30. Bring gloves and hand tools such as rakes, loppers, secateurs or bow-saws, plus a warm drink. We will have a break at 11.00 and finish by 12.30. Please contact John Murray (01730 812325).

MANAGEMENT or NOT?

The first of a series of articles looking at general and specific management issues on Murray Downland Trust Reserves.

The Trust has as its present objective the conservation of small areas of chalk downland with their associated flora and fauna in West Sussex and east Hampshire. This sounds fairly straightforward until one looks at what is meant by conservation.

To many people 'conservation' means keeping something as it 'is'. This usually refers to an idealised state, usually informed by a mixture of happy memories drawn from a number of actual sources, which can be maintained indefinitely (if only the right formula to do this can be found). Much effort has been expended and many earnest treatises developed on the road to this Nirvana. However, the reality of such a view of conservation seems as far off as ever.

The basis of the problem is that few, if any, 'natural' situations are actually static. Some may appear so to human eyes, and on human time-scales; but even mountains are gradually wearing

away. When considering situations such as those presented in realising the aim of the Trust, it rapidly becomes apparent that we are in danger of being swept away by a tide of changes. To illustrate this, take out a photo of a well-known place, your own garden. If the photo is any more than a few months old I expect that one of the first reactions will be 'Oh it's not like that now'.

We are in the same situation when we consider how to look after our Reserves. Take Heyshott Down Escarpment. As little as a hundred years ago this was an active chalk quarry - not anything like as extensive and active as a modern quarry, but, nevertheless a considerable proportion of it would have been bare, or thinly-vegetated, ground, often with a considerable scree-like quality. Indeed, only thirty-five years ago when I first discovered the old quarry, it had much more scree, the higher slopes were predominantly white and walking up them was always an interesting experience. Slowly grasses and mosses and flowering plants have covered the bare ground, not to mention the small trees and bushes often derogatorily called scrub.



Photo 1. The sharp boundary between the cut and uncut areas is very obvious in this view taken at the top of the escarpment.

A lot of time, not to mention scarce resources, is spent trying to beat back the taller members of this invading community, usually by cutting to favour the shorter ones. The net result however is that instead of the intimate mix of vegetation heights which was formerly present we end up with a short component - the grassland - and a tall component -the developing wood (Photo 1).

This dance with growth is getting ever more frenetic as the taller members grow away from the shorter ones, changing the growing conditions at ground level by shade and leaf drop (Photo 2). Not only this but changes are afoot at ground level, too. Look closely at the grass in the winter: about 50% of it is now moss (Photo 3).

Now Heyshott Down is noted for its alpine moss species, growing far too far south for their own good. These mosses are not the modern dominant ones, however. The desired species are ones which colonise areas of bare mineral soil - the small rocks of the scree - the very part which the mosses themselves are slowly destroying as the remains of previous years' growth rot down to form soil, which is in turn colonised by species which like richer growing conditions and so on.....



Photo 2 (above) The effect of shading and leaf-fall can be clearly seen under this Whitebeam.

**Photo 3 (right)
The large
amounts of moss
which have
developed on
areas of former
mineral scree
are very obvious
here.**



If we are to maintain conditions which are favourable for the plants and animals - mostly invertebrates, for which the Down is noted, then it is, to some at least, an indigestible fact that trying to hold still or only reverse these processes slightly, be it by grazing animals or physical labour, is doomed. What is needed is bold action, the outcome of which is to reverse changes on a time-scale of years, decades even; not everywhere at once, but in a significant way. It may be time to consider creating new scrapes on the surface.

Next article: The Duke of Burgundy Butterfly.