



HERITAGE LOTTERY LANDSCAPE PARTNERSHIP FOR THE BRECKS MOVES FORWARD

The development phase of Breaking New Ground, the £2.1 million Heritage Lottery Landscape Partnership for The Brecks is now well advanced. The second BNG board meeting, on which the Society's chairman James Parry sits as vice-chair, was held on the 25 April. It reviewed progress so far, specifically on the Landscape Character Assessment currently underway in the Brecks.



The Brecks have a range of distinctive landscape features, not least the pine rows that were planted in the 19th century as windbreaks.

Kate Collins of landscape consultants Sheils Flynn gave an excellent presentation outlining the Brecks Landscape Character Assessment work to date and detailing the format of the final document. The LCA will identify the different landscape types found in the Brecks, describing their characteristics and distribution as well as making proposals for potential future management. Feedback from those involved with the development of the LCA has been very positive so far and a meeting has been arranged with local authority planners — the LCA covers the entire Brecks ESA, rather than purely the *Breaking New Ground* project area, and the intention is for it to help inform and influence current planning guidance and tourism protocols for the Brecks.

Meanwhile, the contract to develop a Sources Directory for the Brecks is nearing completion. The directory will list all sources of information about the Brecks, historical and otherwise, and give details of their location and accessibility. A meeting has been held with UEA to discuss potential further additions and ways in which large archives from estates such as Elveden, Euston and Shadwell can be handled. The Sources Directory will be made available on the BNG website as a resource for those working on project development and members of the public wanting to learn more about the Brecks.

Cont'd on page 2

WHAT'S ON

Forthcoming Society events

www.brecsoc.org.uk/news-and-events

Friday 17 May, Society AGM, 6.45 for 7.00pm

West Stow Hall. Members will already have received the AGM agenda and details of the house tour. There are still a few places available on the tour: if you are interested, please contact Sue Pennell urgently on 01366 328452.

Saturday 15 June, 10.00am to 3.00pm

Breckland Flora, a field study day. Tim Pankhurst of Plantlife and Neal Armour-Chelu of the Forestry Commission will guide us at two flower-rich sites—Santon Downham and Cranwich Camp—looking for specialist Breckland plants. Free to members, non-members £5. Please book in advance with Sue Pennell.

Sunday 7 July, 11.00am

Walking tour of Thetford, led by David Osborne. An opportunity to see some of the historical sites of this ancient but often underappreciated town. Free to members, non-members £3. Please book in advance with Sue Pennell.

If you need a lift to a Society event, please contact Sue Pennell on 01366 328452, as it may be possible to arrange transport with other members. If there are any members near Necton who are able to give a member there a lift to events, please also contact Sue. Further information about events is available from Sue Pennell on info@brecsoc.org.uk

Cont'd from page 1

Project partners — including the Society, which has six projects within the wider BNG scheme — are busy working with Nick Dickson, BNG development manager, to review and develop their projects to the level of detail required for what is known as the Stage 2 bid. This is when HLF considers the detailed proposals and decides whether or not to release the funding required to deliver the projects. The deadline for submission to HLF is 11 November and, if all goes well, projects will start in March 2014 and run for three years.

Community participation is central to all the Society's projects, so we are delighted that a *Breaking New Ground* conference is being organised for 12 June at the Carnegie Rooms in Thetford. This will be a great opportunity to promote our projects, engage with the local communities and hopefully sign up some potential volunteers to help deliver the

projects when the time comes. Our projects span a wide range of subject areas, from archaeology and architecture to landscape and military history, so do please consider getting involved in one or more of them. After the success of our two previous projects, on vernacular architecture and rabbit warrens, we are very keen to deliver research and training to the same excellent standard, so please join in! More information will be available on our website very soon at www.brecsoc.org.uk.

Meanwhile, a survey is underway to gather people's ideas about the Brecks, how they use the area and ways in which opportunities for access and enjoyment can be broadened.

See www.surveymonkey.com/s/BreakingNewGround

Volunteer monitoring in Thetford Forest

Free places are still available for those who would like to train as volunteers to take part in a Norfolk Monuments Management Project to record the condition of archaeological and heritage sites in Thetford Forest.

The project gives members of the public the opportunity to visit and study the many archaeological sites hidden in Thetford Forest, develop their own archaeological skills and knowledge and provide valuable assistance to heritage professionals by collecting important data on the condition of these assets.

In September 2012 the Norfolk Monuments Management Project held two training events. Thirty-three people took part in the sessions and 13 have since signed up to regularly monitor the condition of archaeological sites in Thetford Forest. The first volunteers started work in October and since then a substantial number of monitoring visits have taken place.

Given the success of the project to date, the Norfolk Monuments Management Project will be holding a training session for new volunteers on 18 May. The event will be held in Oak Lodge at High Lodge Forest Centre (Santon Downham) and will involve an indoor classroom session followed by a guided tour of archaeological sites. Although places are free, they will need to be booked in advance.

Thetford Forest contains a large number of archaeological sites, including burial mounds, deserted settlements, rabbit warrens, historic buildings, flint mines and World War Two military remains. Many of the features survive as earthworks, with others known from below-ground remains and surface artefact scatters.

The monitoring project will run for the foreseeable future and will help to establish a regular and systematic monitoring regime for the condition of the sites. Taking part will increase volunteers' knowledge of the archaeology of Thetford Forest and help Norfolk County Council's Historic Environment Service, Suffolk County Council's Archaeological Service and English Heritage collate condition information in Historic Environment Records and make comparisons between the way different sites are managed—inside and outside Thetford Forest.

Once they have attended the training session, volunteers will be able to choose which archaeological sites they wish to monitor and how often they will visit. They may choose to visit a site once a month or once a year—all levels of involvement are very welcome.

During each monitoring visit volunteers will make written and photographic records of what they can see, including the vegetation present and evidence of domesticated and wild animals. The results of each visit will be reported to the Norfolk Monuments Management Project, which will continue to offer volunteers support and guidance during the duration of their involvement in the project.

For further information please contact David Robertson, Historic Environment Officer at Norfolk County Council on 01362 869291, 07879 877845 or david.robertson@norfolk.gov.uk.

Three rare Speedwells, unique to Breckland, excite botanists!

Breckland Speedwell (Veronica praecox), Fingered Speedwell (V. triphyllos) and Spring Speedwell (V. verna) are tiny. So small, in fact, that you can hardly see them when standing up. They grow in small colonies or as single individuals scattered in sandy soil in a handful of locations in the Brecks. All are listed in the Red Data Book of Flora of the UK as endangered species. Sue Pennell reports ...

These three Speedwells are difficult to distinguish. The leaves provide the key: Breckland Speedwell has toothed leaves with a slight purplish tinge around the edges; Fingered, as the name suggests, has three to seven long and deeply divided lobes (the fingers); and Spring Speedwell has pinnate-lobed leaves with 5-7 segments.

A typical Breckland "blow", whipping sandy soil into the air, greeted volunteers and experts on a cold April morning as they joined Tim Pankhurst from Plantlife to learn how to recognise these rare plants. The group first saw a single Spring Speedwell at one site before travelling some 15 miles to a protected location where all three species had been reintroduced on specifically managed agricultural land. Here two species were definitely identified, but the third proved elusive—even for the experts!

This was the first of two sessions to equip prospective volunteers with the skills they would require to monitor flora on behalf of Plantlife and English Nature, to protect our unique Breckland plants for future



Veronica praecox

generations. Anyone interested in joining the volunteers should contact Sue.Southway@plantlife.org.uk.

Tim Pankhurst from Plantlife, together with Neal Armour-Chelu from the Forestry Commission, will be leading our Field Study Day on Saturday 15 June, when we hope to be able to see Breckland rarities that flower in the summer. See front page What's On for details.

Hearth, Heath and Howe, Magic and Witchcraft in the Breckland

A talk by Imogen Ashwin, Friday 15 March: a report and thoughts by Lucinda Mackworth-Young

At the heart of Imogen's fascinating and well-researched talk was the notion that humanity's concerns don't change: health, relationships, pregnancies, money, personal safety and safekeeping of the home remain at the top of our priority list. And we need to feel a sense of meaning, purpose and connection with life, a special, or magical, "otherness" sometimes, and ongoing "conversation" or communion with departed loved ones.

Imogen identified three important places: hearth, heath and howe, and revealed a continuing thread of magic and witchcraft (or paganism) in Breckland from Neolithic times through Celtic (Iron and Bronze Ages), Roman pagan and Anglo-Saxon pagan to present day Christianity.

The **hearth**, the traditional, safe centre of the home, was the focus for protective actions and charms (flame *entrances*, and provides



entrances into the "other" world). Jewellery was fashioned and tools or weapons were forged over flame, all inscribed with meaningful personal or tribal symbols: a local example is an early sixth-century brooch found in Mildenhall and inscribed with the swastika, the ancient Anglo-Saxon symbol of protection.

Ingenooks were carved with hexes, or stuffed with hooves (usually goats') for protection: Oliver Bone is proud to show these in the Thetford House Museum fireplaces.

"Witch bottles" dating back hundreds of years have been found locally. Made by witches to protect people's homes from evil curses or spells, they were filled with nasty things from the home's own inhabitants (hair, nail clippings and urine) and placed by the hearth.

The **heath**, or outdoors—woods, mines and wells (low points) and hills (high points)—was the place to commune with the spirit of nature, feel cleansed, re-energised, and grateful for life (as it still is). It was in Emily's Wood, part of Thetford Forest near Santon Downham, that Imogen had her own first sense of the inherent "otherness" of the natural world, as a child.

In Ashill, a deep ritual shaft (low point) was discovered during the construction of a railway line, dating from the Iron Age (some 2,500 years ago). It contains many layers of highly structured depositions, including hundreds of pots and carefully selected animal parts, thought to be offerings to Mother Earth—or to the Gods. A similar shaft was found at the recently discovered Iron Age ceremonial enclosure at Fison's Way, Thetford. In nearby Grimes Graves (a low point), special arrangements of objects were found, including antlers, a bird's skull and an axe hewn from Cornish stone, dating from 4,000 years ago.

The **howe**, or burial mound, was a traditional place to meet, commune with ancestors and deceased loved ones, and petition the unseen forces for private hopes and wishes (much as churches are used today). It is no coincidence that many churches, complete with graveyards, are found in open country, or near the apex of a hill (St Mary's, Houghton-on-the-Hill, near Swaffham) or a well (Saint Helen's, near the Holy Well in Santon Downham). As Pope Gregory the Great instructed Abbot Mellitus, "The temples of the idols in England

should not on any account be destroyed. Augustine must smash the idols, but ... we ought to take advantage of well-built temples by purifying them from devil-worship (paganism) and dedicating them to the service of the true God (Christianity)."

And, as Imogen asked, can religion really be separated from magic? Both are means by which people connect with, worship and pray to unseen forces, that force being differently described as God, the Life Force, or, as the Chinese call it, Chi. (Interestingly, the pagan Roman god, Faunus, was worshipped in Thetford!) When in great need, we turn to whatever will help. If our conventional practices can't or don't, we seek alternatives: Emily, the White Witch of Weeting (circa 1700) and after whom the wood was named, cured warts, broken hearts and infertility as well as dealing with unwanted lovers and pregnancies; Elizabeth Fyson (1717-1803) at Holme Hale was famed far and wide for her charms, poultices, potions and cures. Even today there is a regularly consulted "witch doctor" in Weeting.

However, given our tendency to fear anything we don't understand, prove ourselves "right" and others "wrong", we have a capacity to defame and even torture and kill those whose ways and beliefs differ from our own. In this, the ruling forces of the time, whether Christian or pagan, men or women, logical or intuitive, hold sway.

King Edgar (959-975) decreed that pagans could still continue in their ways, weaving their magic while singing incantations, but they had to sing the words of the creed rather than any words they had previously used.

In North Elmham and Litcham churches there are depictions of eight women who were all tortured and killed for their faith in the Middle Ages (AD 1200-1400). It was feared that they had "supernatural" powers as a result of their "marriage to Christ", or celibacy.

The Witch Hunts of the Mediaeval era are well known. Pagans, or witches, those whose ways differed from the established Christianity of the time, were deemed "black", and greatly feared. Such was the fear that people who claimed to be able to "reverse spells" were in great demand. Among them was a schoolmaster from Harpley. As late as the middle of the 17th century there was a Witch Finder Generall, Matthew Hopkins, who was still encouraging the accusation of any and all single women who had knowledge of herbs (for healing) and a pet or two ("familiars"). For those found guilty, the punishments were forfeiture of all belongings, and death.

Even today, the story of the ruined church of St Mary's, Houghton-on-the-Hill being rescued from Satanism (1992) has caught the popular imagination. Imogen is not alone in thinking it much more likely that the people who occasionally used the age-old, ruined church on the hill were pagans, or witches ("white"): lovers of nature who worked with the Life Force, "otherness", or magic.

Spreading the word ...

There is a network of community newssheets and parish magazines distributed across the Brecks. We should like to tap into this network to promote the Society's events. So far we have found three groups of parishes that have agreed to publish our notices free of charge and, although we have several more parishes in the pipeline, we should dearly love to tell the whole of the Breckland community about what we are doing.

Can you help us find more small local magazines? Do you receive a community/parish newssheet in your area? If you do, please would you send the contact email address to Sue (suemark@f2s.com) so that she can ask the editors if they too would be willing to help us spread the word.

NEWS FROM THE NORFOLK WILDLIFE TRUST IN THE BRECKS

In recent weeks attention has been focused on habitat management and restoration at the Trust's reserves. Fences have been repaired at Weeting Heath, Cranberry Rough, Thetford Heath and East Wretham Heath, where the enigmatic Breckland mere, Ringmere, has been the focus of scrub clearance around its margins. The remaining blackthorn has also been layered to help improve its suitability for breeding birds such as warblers. Both Langmere and Ringmere have filled rapidly with water and wildfowl numbers are increasing. Also at East Wretham, restoration has been carried out to a roadside pond that is particularly important for rare water-beetles.

Woodlarks were singing on their breeding territories from late February onwards, but there has been mixed news regarding Stone-curlews. The first birds arrived back at Weeting on 20 March, fresh from their winter quarters in southern Europe and north Africa. With snow, frost and ice still much in evidence at that time, they were struggling to



*Back in the Brecks?
The next few years
could see the return of
the polecat to our
woods and hedgerows.*

find enough to eat. Sadly, several dead birds were found across the Brecks, their emaciated condition indicating that they had starved to death.

Meanwhile, there has been a lot of pony movement recently, with 22 animals rounded up and moved off Weeting Heath to Hockwold Heath next door, where they will help control scrub encroachment and maintain the conditions required by specialist Brecks plants and invertebrates.

Particularly exciting was the discovery of a dead polecat on the edge of the Battle Area a few weeks ago. It has been handed to Dave Leech, the Norfolk mammal recorder, for further examination and, if confirmed, could be Norfolk's first-ever definite record! It follows one found dead on a road at Red Lodge, just outside the Brecks, in 2006, which was the first Suffolk record for a century or more.

With thanks to Darrell Stevens, NWT Brecklands Reserves Manager

Free Guided Walks with the RSPB

Join the friendly and knowledgeable RSPB Brecks Guides for a guided walk along the Thetford river walkways, looking out for the great wildlife that can be found there. River and woodland birds, plants and, if we're lucky, a kingfisher or otter sighting!

- Wednesday 15 May
- Wednesday 5 June
- Wednesday 7 August
- Wednesday 9 October

1–2.30pm. Meet at the Captain Mainwaring statue in town. Please bring outdoor clothing, sturdy footwear and binoculars if you have any. Donations welcome.

Nightjar Walks

On Tuesdays 18 June and 9 July the Forestry Commission will be leading two summer evening walks to hear and hopefully see nightjars, traditionally known as gabbie ratchets or goatsuckers! They fly all the way from Africa to breed in the forest and sound like no other bird you will ever hear.



Please come along to the entrance to Fire Route 5 off the B1106 Brandon to Elveden Road (Grid Ref TL792841) for an 8.30pm start on both dates.

The Suffolk Walking Festival 2013, 11 May to 2 June

Treasured Suffolk—Santon Downham

Monday 27 May, 10.30 am

Location Santon Downham

Duration 4 hours

Distance 6 miles

Cost Adults £3, children under 16 £1.50

To book a place on this walk, see

suffolkwalkingfestival.wordpress.com/suffolk-walking-festival-2013/42-treasured-suffolk-santon-downham-monday-27th-may-1030am

THE THETFORD DIPPER

—AND THEN THERE WERE TWO!

Readers will recall from the last newsletter how a rare black-bellied dipper had taken up winter residence in the middle of Thetford. Local birders did a double take when, on March 11, a second bird appeared—the first time two individuals of this race have been seen together in the UK! Hopes that the union might end with a clutch of baby dippers were later dispelled when, following a spat of mutual antagonism, one bird disappeared and then the other. Nether has been seen since March 30th.

If you would like to contribute to the Breckland Society Newsletter, please contact the Editor by email: lizdittner@tiscali.co.uk or tel 01366 727813