

RECENT EVENTS

The Christmas Party

Once again the Breckland Society gathered at the Crown Inn in Mundford for the Christmas party. And again the event was well attended by members and their guests, who enjoyed a convivial evening of fine food and good company, with wine provided by the Society.

It is always helpful to receive comments after an event, and according to the feedback following this occasion the hubbub of conversation and laughter during the evening did indeed indicate that all concerned were enjoying the party.

This was an informal occasion without a formal speaker, save for a few words of welcome by committee member Bob Baker. The principal aim of the evening was to give members an opportunity to get to know one another better. The photographs shown here were taken by the Society's secretary, Sue Pennell, and record yet another successful Society party.



We have what we believe to be a full and varied programme of events for 2013 and hope that as many members as possible will be able to participate in some, or even most of these. However, should you have any ideas for future Breckland Society events, please contact a committee member – all suggestions are welcome. *Delia Cook*



A RARE VISITOR FROM THE EAST

Birders from all over the UK have been flocking to the centre of Thetford in recent weeks to see a very unusual avian visitor. First spotted on 6 November, a black-bellied dipper has been frequenting the river in the centre of Thetford, ranging between The Bridge pub and the Nuns' Bridges.

Black-bellied dippers are the Continental race of the native British dipper (which has a brown belly) and are extremely scarce visitors to the UK from Scandinavia. Only one or two at most are recorded in the UK in any one year, and one has not been seen in Norfolk since a bird at Letheringsett in 2009. However, if they find a particular place to their liking they will often take up residence for several weeks.



Photo by Neil Calbrade/www.neilcalbrade.co.uk

Although it does disappear for a few hours from time to time, to date the Thetford dipper has proved quite obliging and easy to watch as it plunges into the water in search of food. Undaunted by the bitter temperatures and snow of recent weeks, it has continued to stay faithful to its chosen haunts. Get along and see it while you can!

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



A WINDOW ON THETFORD'S IMPOVERISHED PAST

*The current economic downturn is a sobering reminder that, historically, poverty was a fact of life for many Brecklanders. The excellent new exhibition, **Hard Times: Life for the Poor of Thetford 100 years ago**, at the Ancient House Museum provides a revealing insight into the lives of impoverished rural communities in the early 1900s.*

Edwardian Britain is sometimes described as a "golden age", but the harsh living conditions endured by many people had changed little since the early Victorian period. Insanitary slum housing, disease, poor working conditions, low wages and the fear of destitution and the spectre of the workhouse were part of daily life for a large proportion of the town's inhabitants. In 1901 for example, Thetford's death rate was higher than that of 22 of England's largest towns and even by 1929 remained well above the national average.

This fascinating exhibition examines the town's slum housing and inadequate drains, which led to outbreaks of deadly cholera and typhoid epidemics in the late-nineteenth century. Dr Stevens, who was asked to investigate the sanitation of the town in 1868, discovered that the wells were contaminated by sewage from nearby cesspits. No surprise, therefore, that Thetford continued to suffer from outbreaks of disease until the first modern sewerage system was completed in 1952.

Henry "Henny" Knights, rag-and-bone man of Pike Lane, Thetford, with his home-made barrow, in the 1920s. His cry of "Rag-a-bone" was familiar to everyone as he walked along the street collecting rags and rabbit skins



Courtesy of Thetford Ancient House Museum

Attention is also paid to the working conditions of the poor, in particular the workers at Fison's Fertiliser Works and the Tannery in the town centre. Those who lost their jobs or fell ill risked ending up in the Thetford Union Workhouse, the feared last resort for the destitute. Objects and photographs from the Workhouse feature in

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WHAT'S ON

forthcoming Society events

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

Friday 8 February 2013, 7.00pm

Roman Roads in the Landscape: a talk by archaeologist James Albone, who will explore how Roman roads have helped shape the landscape through which they pass and how the changing countryside has in turn influenced their survival. Barnham Village Hall. Directions: Access is off the A134 Thetford-Bury road. Coming from Thetford, go straight on at the traffic lights, ignoring the signed turning to Barnham on the left. Then take the next left, also signed Barnham, and the Village Hall is the first building on your right. Members £4, non-members £7, to include refreshments.

Friday 15 March, 7.00pm

Hearth, Heath and Howe: magic and witchcraft in Breckland. A talk by Imogen Ashwin. Swaffham Community Centre. Members £4, non-members £7, to include refreshments.

Friday 17 May, 6.45 for 7.00pm

Society AGM, to be held at West Stow Hall and followed by a tour of this superb 16th-century manor house. Refreshments will be served after the tour. Members may of course attend the AGM free of charge, but a charge will be made for the tour/refreshments: members £12, non-members £15.

If you are concerned about driving in the dark, or simply need a lift to a Society event, please contact Sue Pennell, as it may be possible to arrange transport with other members. In particular, if there are any members who live near Necton and would be willing to give a member there a lift to events, please contact Sue Pennell on 01366 328452. If you need any further information about events, please contact Delia Cook on 01842 820663.

the exhibition, as does a focus on workers in domestic service. Employment opportunities for women were very limited, and in 1911 over a third of women workers worked “below stairs”. Life for these servants, both men and women, was often arduous but arguably preferable to the alternatives.

A fascinating 1899 photographic album of “Thetford Characters”, taken by Mr Chalk of Bury Road, is on display. It shows street snaps of local characters, including Mr Keldale the cow herder, Dick Butters (who committed suicide in the river), Billy Bunn the wart charmer, Mr Diver of the Salvation Army and Arthur Lockwood, who died in the Workhouse.

Thetford continued to struggle economically, and the depression of the 1920s saw the government setting up work camps for the unemployed in Thetford Forest, at West Tofts and High Lodge. Hundreds of men toiled in these “Hardening Centres” in return for their meagre dole money, whilst, for the town’s poor, soup kitchens were set up in Thetford Town Hall in 1922.

Hard Times looks at the hidden stories of real people in Thetford in the years of the early twentieth century, using objects, photographs and documents from the museum collections.

The exhibition can be viewed at the Ancient House Museum, White Hart Street, Thetford until 13 July. The museum is open from Tuesday to Saturday, 10am to 4pm. Admission is free until 31 March. For more information contact the museum on 01842 752599.

Courtesy of Thetford Ancient House Museum



Workers at Burrell’s electrical generator in Thetford, 1916

NEWS FROM THE NORFOLK WILDLIFE TRUST IN THE BRECKS

With thanks to Darrell Stevens, NWT Brecklands Reserves Manager

Habitat maintenance and restoration has been at the top of the agenda in recent weeks. Rotovation – the breaking up of the soil surface – has taken place at Thetford Heath, East Wretham Heath and Weeting Heath to help create the disturbed conditions required by specialist Breckland flora such as the perennial knawel. We have also cleared scrub and secondary birch trees around Ringmere and Langmere, which we hope will improve the water quality in the meres. Ringmere is currently filling up, but Langmere still has no water despite the very wet summer and autumn!

Dartmoor ponies are grazing Weeting this winter. Twenty-six animals have been on the site since October and are doing a good job at reducing the grass biomass and thereby giving scarce plants a better chance of survival. Meanwhile, the NWT’s “flying flock” have placed sheep on Thetford Heath for the first time, as our external grazer has given up this site, and turf has been stripped off the old runways at East Wretham Heath. Its removal was designed to help the basil-thyme case-bearing moth, a real Breckland speciality. As a result, many young basil-thyme seedlings have appeared, providing extra food plants for this endangered species.

Recent invertebrate highlights have included the discovery of several unusual species at Grimes Graves. These have included *Myrmica karavajevi*, a very rare workerless social parasitic ant, which was found in pitfall samples; the small bee *Hoplitis claviventris*, which had only seven previous records from Norfolk; and the localised bee species *Osmia bicolor*, locally abundant in the Brecks but rare elsewhere in Norfolk.



Rare Breckland plants thrive on areas of bare soil, as here at Thetford Heath



Ponies are a valuable management tool on heathland

SAVING BRECKLAND’S WARRENING HERITAGE

Ickburgh Warren was one of the warrens researched during the Warrens of Breckland project, but all that’s left of Ickburgh Warren Lodge today is one standing corner. In 2011–2012 volunteers from the Breckland Society and Friends of Thetford Forest, in partnership with the Forestry Commission and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, worked to consolidate the remaining structure. Anne Mason reports on the latest discoveries at the site.

Archival evidence for Ickburgh Warren is patchy. It is named on Faden’s 1797 Map as Langford Lodge (the parishes of Langford and Ickburgh were united in 1775) and a mortgage deed of 1742 refers to “the field by Langford Lodge”. The earliest written date is a 1476 Indenture providing for the “lease for 5 years from the Feast of Candlemas the conyger at the downe and Claper Hill and from thence unto Musden Lyng to Shakerswaye”.

In April and May 2012 the volunteers, overseen by Colin Pendleton, Suffolk County Council Archaeologist, and by Rachel Riley from the Forestry Commission, carried out a surface investigation of the site. A possible doorway and the corners of the lodge building were unearthed, but it was tiny pieces of pottery and glass that were especially important.

The pottery consisted of partly glazed fragments from the 16th century; one probably from the Cambridgeshire area, of 15th–16th century date, and two of Medieval coarse ware of the 12th–14th centuries. There was also a small fragment of thin window glass of 17th–18th century date, the first time that any has been found on a lodge site.

During August and September 2012 Joe Orsi, a historic buildings consultant and member of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, carried out conservation of the standing corner to the agreed specifications. He was helped by several volunteers who sorted materials to be reused from the rubble and learned how to layer the flints in the lime mortar.

A grant of £2,800 from Norfolk County Council to Friends of Thetford Forest and a contribution from the Forestry Commission enabled this work to take place, but it would not have happened without wonderful support from the volunteers. They gave 220 hours which, costed at the recognised rate of £50 per day for heritage

projects, amounts to £1,571. When the “in-kind” contributions from Suffolk County Council and the Forestry Commission are included, the total is an amazing £5,179.

There will need to be a further two weeks’ work this spring to complete the consolidation of the standing remains. An interpretative panel will be placed on the site and then a celebratory event will be held to mark yet another successful project to save the Brecks’ warrening heritage.



From the left: Peter Goulding, Mark Lockett and Colin Pendleton

NEWS FROM CPRE

New Norfolk Trail welcomed – but threat to footpaths remains

CPRE Norfolk has welcomed Norfolk County Council’s plans for a new Wensum Way trail in mid-Norfolk but is urging the Council not to forget their existing obligations to Norfolk’s network of footpaths, which are under threat from poor maintenance and signage. The new 12-mile trail will stretch from Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse museum to Lenwade, joining up the Norfolk Trails network and making it possible to walk right across the width of Norfolk from Great Yarmouth in the east to King’s Lynn in the west. This is undoubtedly a welcome boost for tourism and will widen access to the countryside, but we remain concerned about the hundreds of miles of “ordinary” footpaths which have been neglected following council budget cuts last year.

And also on footpaths...

CPRE Norfolk has been given a grant by the Heritage Lottery Fund to run a pilot project enabling three communities to research, publicise and celebrate the footpaths in their parish. The grant will pay for training and resources, so if you think your parish paths have a story to tell, and would like to find out more, do get in touch with CPRE Norfolk: info@cprenorfolk.org.uk.

Thank you

to all those members who have sent their email address to Sue Pennell! This is a great help when we need to let you know of future events.

If any of you has yet to do so, please email her at suemark@f2s.com or write to her at 16 All Saints Way, Beachamwell, Swaffham, PE37 8BU.