

“LOVELY OLD COUNTRY” How literary responses to the landscapes of the Brecks have motivated and inspired writers and their readers through the centuries

*“... he who has once vibrated with the thrill of the heathland is never quite the same again ...
It fascinates but few, but those who have once come under its spell are ever after its slaves.”*

So wrote historian and naturalist WG Clarke in his best-known work, *In Breckland Wilds*, published in 1925. Clarke's connection with the landscape of the Brecks was primarily through its vast tracts of wild and open heathland, which he found entrancing and inspiring. Yet his lyrical words also acknowledged that the seemingly barren and unforgiving heaths were not to everyone's taste. Indeed, earlier literary visitors to the Brecks had been less than captivated by what they found. Of particular concern were the notorious shifting dunes of sand, which at times could be an obstacle to travel and even threaten life and property. In 1668 they had engulfed the village of Santon Downham and blocked the Little Ouse River, prompting the diarist John Evelyn to remark how “The Travelling Sands ... that have so damaged the country, rousing from place to place, like the Sands in the Deserts of Lybia, quite overwhelmed some gentleman's whole estates.”

Such disruptions—and the unremitting flatness of the Brecks—were in stark contrast to those parts of England that were to inspire the likes of Wordsworth and Coleridge with their peaceful soaring hills and intimate verdant valleys. Even so, writers did the best they could with the raw ingredients to hand. The poet George Bloomfield (1757-1831) even felt moved to introduce some underappreciated local topography into his poem *Thetford*:

*O Thetford! round thy flow'ry fields I've strolled,
From Tutt-Hill's eminence and Croxton's height,
Have view'd thine ancient ruins with delight,
Thy sloping hills and wooded vallies gay,
Whose silv'ry Ouse meand'ring winds his way.*

The distinctive characteristics and understated power of the landscape and countryside termed by Clarke as “Breckland” also struck a chord with writers more concerned with depicting the grim reality of rural life than pandering to any fanciful notions of a pastoral idyll. Life in rural East Anglia was unremittingly hard for many folk, particularly so during periods of agricultural recession when labourers often found themselves out of work and their families close to starvation.

One literary figure who took up the cudgel on their behalf was Mary Mann, née Rackham (1848-1929). A merchant's daughter from Norwich, she moved to Shropham in the eastern Brecks following her marriage to yeoman farmer Fairman Mann. Shocked by the conditions of the rural poor there, she produced a series of gritty portrayals of local life, full of local dialect and bravely tackling uncomfortable social

... cont'd on page 2

WHAT'S ON

forthcoming Society events

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

Sunday 1 September

Stroll at Knettishall Heath. An opportunity to see this outstanding Breckland reserve in its prime, with the heather in flower and late butterflies in abundance, sun permitting! Free to all. Meet at 11am in main carpark. See *Summer Stroll* on page 3 for details.



Knettishall Heath:
photo by Nick Ford

Friday 11 October

Talk by local artist Pippa Blackall on her work with stained glass. Oxborough Village Hall, 7pm. Members £4, non-members £7. See page 4 for more details.

Friday 13 December

Society's Christmas Event
A talk by Stephen Pope on *The Village Craftsman*, followed by seasonal refreshments. Cockley Cley Hall, 7.00pm. Members £10, non-members £13.

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

issues that were rarely aired in public. Among her many works, Mann's collection of short stories, *The Fields of Dulditch* (1902), stand as stunning testament to her skills as a writer and social commentator, a rare combination that earned her the admiration of DH Lawrence and the sobriquet "Norfolk's Thomas Hardy".

The evocation of daily country life was also very much the strength of writer Michael Home, who was born in 1885 in Great Hockham, a Brecks village which he described as standing "with its shoulders humped, as it were, into and against the oncoming bracken". Home was a prolific author, penning over fifty detective novels under his real name of Christopher Bush before turning his attention to life and events in his village during the Edwardian era and the interwar years. In books such as *Autumn Fields* (1944) he describes with great insight and beauty the rhythm and pace of the seasons and how the land was worked and cherished by the local people—a moving elegy to a way of life that has now vanished.

While such home-grown writers saw the Brecks from the position of insiders, the perspective of visitors from elsewhere can be equally revealing. For Virginia Woolf, who spent August 1906 at Blo' Norton Hall and was delighted by the "lovely old country" nearby, it was Thetford that made a particular impression. "Often in London shall I think of Thetford, and wonder if it is still alive", she wrote in her journal, adding that "no one would notice if the whole town forgot to wake up one morning".

The Brecks were certainly awoken by the First World War, which saw extensive military activity across the area. The open and flat terrain was ideal for the creation of airfields for the Royal Flying Corps, with the largest airfield in Norfolk established at Narborough. It was here that local man WE Johns, who had worked as a sanitary inspector in Swaffham before enlisting, was stationed and worked as a pilot instructor. He later achieved great renown as the author of the

celebrated *Biggles* novels, which were inspired by his time at Narborough.

More recent decades have seen even more illustrious visitors featuring the Brecks in their works. Booker Prize double-winner Hilary Mantel set part of her novel *A Change of Climate* (1994) in the area, describing the famous pine rows and how "the bowed, arthritic pines that line the roads creep to the edges of the small towns ... they gather round the new housing estates, like witches at a christening". More recently, growing interest in the literary traditions and inspirational qualities of the Brecks has seen the establishment of the Breckland Book Festival and the reprinting of works by Mary Mann, among others. There are doubtless other local literary gems out there, just waiting to be unearthed.

Meanwhile, one of the most poignant tales is also among the oldest—that of the "Babes in the Wood", which was first published in 1595 in Norwich, as an anonymous ballad. Anecdotal evidence and folklore maintain that the story is based on real events that took place in Wayland Wood near Watton, involving two young orphans who were entrusted to the care of their aunt and uncle. In order to appropriate their inheritance, the uncle arranges for them to be killed by two thugs. These fall out with one another, one killing the other but then leaving the two children alone in the wood, where they starve to death. Such was the power of this tale, despite the lack of firm evidence definitively linking it to Wayland, that well into the nineteenth century the wood—and even a particular tree, under which the children were reputedly abandoned—was a popular destination with ghoulish Victorian sightseers. Even today, some local people maintain that the wood has a singularly sinister atmosphere, underlining the enduring potency of literary associations with Breckland landscapes.

Compiled by James Parry with research by Sue Pennell

Breckland flora: field study day, 15 June

Mid-June—and was it a gloriously hot day with sunhats required? No, not on our Breckland Field Study Day! The skies were leaden, brollies and waterproofs were at the ready. However, the enthusiasm and knowledge of Neal Armour-Chelu from the Forestry Commission and of Tim Pankhurst from the charity Plantlife enlightened and inspired those who came to Santon Downham that Saturday to look at unusual and unique Breckland flora.

The uniqueness results from a combination of our dry climate and frosts in any month of the year, and our geology of sand over chalk that has allowed plants to flourish that are normally found at the coast or on the European Steppes. The Breckland flora has also developed survival strategies: plants germinate when conditions are most favourable and flourish briefly. They may also be minute and often difficult to spot. So experts and novices went down on their knees to examine the characteristics and beauty of such species as Buck's-horn Plantain (*Plantago coronopus*), Biting Stoncrop (*Sedum acre*) and the differences between Annual Knawel (*Scleranthus annuus*) and the rare Prostrate Perennial Knawel (*S. perennis* ssp. *prostratus*).

We were also put to work, forming a long line through the trees to search for the elusive Yellow Bird's-nest (*Monotropa hypopitys*), a small parasitic plant which has no green chlorophyll and which lives on organic matter. It has not been seen for some years, and we too failed to find it, but stumbled across the leaves of both Lily of the Valley (*Convallaria majalis*) and the beautiful July-flowering Broad-leaved Helleborine (*Epipactis helleborine*).

Our afternoon location was the large fenced expanse of flowers and grasses at Cranwich Camp, which bore no resemblance to its past as a labour camp for the unemployed in the 1930s or as an army base during the Second World War. Tim explained that when the foundations of the derelict military buildings were removed the soil blossomed with plants and creatures rarely seen beyond this small area in the Brecks. The site is managed jointly by the Forestry Commission, Norfolk Wildlife Trust, Butterfly Conservation and Plantlife. Trenches have been dug, large scrapes made, and wild ponies graze, all to encourage the survival of the rare flora and endangered insects. Cranwich Camp is a site of national importance, often visited by excited botanists and entomologists.



Broad-leaved Helleborine

We noted where to find the Proliferous Pink (*Petrorhagia prolifera*)—the only site in Britain where it grows—and examined Spanish Catchfly (*Silene otites*), Bur Medick (*Medicago minima*) and Purple Milk-vetch (*Astragalus danicus*) before beating a hasty retreat as thunderclaps rent the air. We all enjoyed the day hugely and, if some botanical detail is forgotten, no doubt we shall be able to recall the name of Mouse-ear Hawkweed and remember the mantra: *sedges have edges!*

Thanks to Chris Cock for bringing his wonderful collection of historical photographs to show us.

Purple Milk-vetch



Sounds in the countryside: what do you hear?

Sharon Sanderson of the RSPB asks Society members for help with a project designed to highlight changes in the wildlife around us.

There has been a lot of talk recently about our native wildlife—many creatures are under threat, while others have increased in number. Some of us are aware of these changes and others less so, but for many of us the sounds we hear and the sights we see as we go about our daily lives affect us profoundly.

I am currently working on a project to capture the changing soundscape of our daily lives on the farm or in the countryside. The project is focused on the Brecks and I am keen to talk to people who have lived all their lives in the area about the sounds they hear today and their memories of sounds from their childhood.

What does it mean to you when you hear the first cuckoo? Do you remember the twittering of house martins at their nests on local houses? Did you once walk your dog to the soundtrack of purring turtle doves?

I grew up in an urban environment to the cheeky chattering background of sparrows in parks, gardens and stations. Today this call is notable by its absence in many places and for the next generation of children there is a real risk that it may have vanished.

Many of these sounds feature strongly in our literature and music and we take them for granted as part of the fabric of our lives. Yet for our children these sounds signalling the onset of the seasons may become mere historical footnotes.

Stepping forward into the past

“Shall we start a walking group?” she asked. “No one knows where the footpaths and bridleways are, and really as we have 24 of them criss-crossing the parish, we ought to use them.”

“Why not?” was the reply. So an invitation appeared in the parish magazine:

Come along on the first Wednesday of each month—starting this month—and walk our rights of way. Please wear walking boots and keep dogs on leads. Come at your own risk, remembering there may be stiles, ploughed fields and livestock along the way.

Fourteen folk and three dogs turned up, and so the Wednesday Walkers were born.

“Why not join the Connection Threads project?” he asked. “It’s to explore the history of your rights of way in your parish. It’s financed by the Heritage Lottery Fund and overseen by the CPRE and the UEA.”

So they did.

Now the Wednesday Walkers has spawned the Thursday evening walking group and the historical researchers, the photographers, the video film-makers and, of course, the project managers—and there is a blog. Numbers have swollen to nearly 30 villagers who regularly step out along the paths exploring and discovering the natural, geological, historical and social threads that connect our rural community across the miles and across the ages.

Among those stepping forward so vigorously into their past are 12 members of The Breckland Society. It is these members who will undertake the oral history element of the project. They are delighted that they have permission to use the Society’s audio equipment to record the memories of those villagers who walked and played along the parish’s paths in their youth.

The Connecting Threads project will be wound up by the end of this year, but the Wednesday Walkers will continue. They will still walk regularly. They intend to produce an illustrated map and a wall-hanging showing not only the paths, but also the natural and historical features of note to be found along the way, and a weekend walking festival is being planned for next summer.

And, I nearly forgot, a village history society is now about to be formed in Beachamwell ...



Photo by RSPB Images/David Tipling

The beautiful Turtle Dove is one of Britain’s fastest-declining birds. It is a migratory species, overwintering in Africa and returning to its breeding grounds in Europe each May. Its distinctive purring song can still be heard in the Brecks; Foulton Common is a particularly good site.

My project aims to capture the emotional connection we have always had with the natural music and calls around us. If you enjoy these sounds today, or this piece sparks a memory of a sound which you haven’t heard recently, then please get in touch. I’d really like to talk to you. I can be reached on Sharon.sanderson@rspb.org.uk, or tel 01603 697525.

Please make contact with Sharon by 31 August if you have memories to share.

Join us for an informal **Summer Stroll**

on Sunday 1 September 2013
and bring a picnic!

Come and join Delia and Sue at 11.00am to explore the paths of **Knettishall Heath**, one of the largest remaining areas of heathland in the Brecks and now in the care of Suffolk Wildlife Trust.

We plan a circular walk of about 2.5 miles, seeing the Exmoor ponies and the flowering heather on the heath and through the woodland, passing a Bronze Age barrow and also an earthwork from an 18th-century rabbit warren. After a picnic lunch in the glades near the car park, those who wish can then explore the shorter riverside walk for glimpses of butterflies and birds.

Summer Stroll is free to all who wish to come along!

Location: main car park, Knettishall Heath, Suffolk IP22 2TQ. Knettishall is east of Thetford and south of the A1066. It is signed from the minor roads. Car park costs £1.00.

Map reference: TL956807

GPS Info: At crossroads on road linking Rushford and Hopton head north and turn west in to main car park (there are loos here).

Dogs must be kept on leads.

Please let us know if you are coming along (tel Sue on 01366 328452)—we hope you will, and that you will enjoy a summer’s day in this beautiful and interesting place.

Walking tour of Thetford

On Sunday 7 July Society members met in Thetford for a guided walk round the town. Local historian David Osborne led the group on a circular tour along the streets and the banks of the Little Ouse, taking in some of Thetford's historic sites, including the priory ruins, the Castle Mound and Iron-age banks.



The Nuns Bridges, which took their name from the nearby nunnery. They carry the ancient Icknield Way over the Little Ouse River and the River Thet.

Castle Mound is the remains of Thetford's second castle, a 12th-century motte and bailey castle, which replaced the town's earlier 11th-century Red Castle.



Friday 11 October

Oxborough Village Hall, 7pm

Local artist Pippa Blackall

will present a talk on her life as an artist working in
stained glass

Pippa's commissions include windows for St Edmundsbury Cathedral, and for parish churches in Breckland. She has gained awards from the Worshipful Company of Glaziers and Painters of Glass, she teaches, and is closely involved with the Stained Glass Museum in Ely Cathedral.



St Cecilia, window in St Edmundsbury Cathedral

See What's On panel on page 1 for more details.

Thetford's lost Tudor sculptures

At the **Ancient House Museum, Thetford**

New exhibition showing now until 24 March 2014

The third Duke of Norfolk planned two elaborate tombs for Thetford Priory—one for himself, and one for Henry Fitzroy, Duke of Richmond and illegitimate son of Henry VIII. The tombs were never finished and when the Priory closed, parts of the monuments remained while others were taken to Framlingham, where the Duke, Thomas Howard, was eventually buried.

Over 200 years later, two of the pieces were discovered and donated to the British Museum and more fragments were later found in the early 20th century.

This exhibition reunites all the pieces for the first time, bringing together loans from the British Museum and English Heritage, and recreates the original designs of the tombs.

For more information visit the website:
www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk

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