

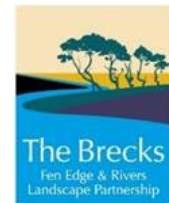


A RECENT EVENT

Report on the visit to Lackford Lakes

OTHER ITEMS OF INTEREST

Testing the water bodies of the Brecks
Fullers Mill Gardens
Graffiti in the Brecks



EVENTS

Wednesday May 24th. A guided visit to Euston Hall and Grounds near Thetford. 10.15am—2pm. Booking open from May 3rd. *This event is now fully booked but members are invited to join the waiting list.*

Wednesday June 14th. The Society AGM at Fullers Mill Gardens, West Stow 6pm, followed by an introductory talk on the garden's history and a chance to explore.

Friday July 21st. A private visit to Northwold Manor. More details later.

Further details of these events can be found on the Breckland Society website. Members will also receive an occasional message by email to inform them of forthcoming events for the year. They will also be notified by email when tickets for the Society events are available on the Eventbrite website.

THE BRECKLAND SOCIETY AND THE BRECKS FEN EDGE AND RIVERS PARTNERSHIP

Industrious Rivers, the latest Society project, is making good progress with our new project manager Matt Champion. Members are enthusiastically researching the working history of the rivers flowing west across the Brecks towards the Great Ouse.

Matt has contributed an article to this newsletter on his studies in Graffiti in our churches and other ancient buildings. It can be found on page 5.

THE JOURNAL OF BRECKLAND STUDIES

Volume 1 is available to read on the Breckland Society website.

Copies of volumes 2-4 are still available to purchase.

Contact the BrecSoc secretary for more information. secretary,brecsoc@gmail.com

LIVING AND BELIEVING IN THE BRECKS

TESTING THE WATER: A BFER PROJECT LED BY THE FRESHWATER HABITATS TRUST

The aim of the ‘Testing the Water’ project was to raise awareness of habitat loss, pollution and rare species, involving people in practical activities to get new information about the project area through citizen science surveys. Results were gathered from all kinds of freshwaters in The Brecks including ponds, lakes, rivers, streams and ditches, all of which are important for freshwater wildlife. The survey used ‘quick kits’ to assess the level of nitrate and phosphate pollution; two nutrients which can pose a major risk to wildlife if they are above natural levels. This

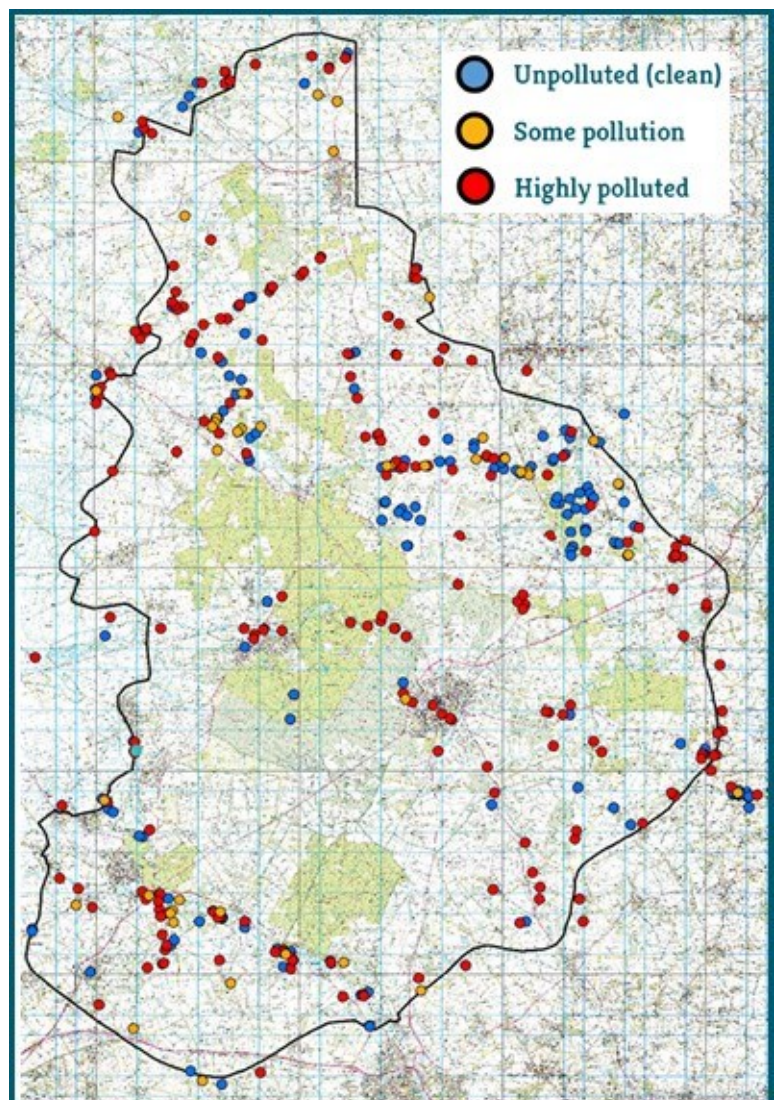


enabled the mapping of the extent of clean unpolluted water to provide a baseline for long term monitoring of water quality and guide future landscape conservation activities in the Scheme Area.

In total, 483 water samples were collected between 2nd March and 7th July 2021 from 158 ponds (33%), 27 lakes (6%), 83 rivers (17%), 68 streams (14%), 114 ditches (24%), 9 cut-off channels (2%), 17 fens (3%) and 7 other waterbodies, including springs and one well (1%). They were collected by 66 individual volunteers. 40% of sites sampled for nitrates and phosphates showed no evidence of nutrient pollution. Of these unpolluted sites, 45% were ponds, 33% ditches and 7% lakes, but only 6% of the streams and 1% of river and cut-off channels were unpolluted.

Overall, 56% of the clean water was found in standing waterbodies and 72% of polluted water was found in running waters. Of the ‘other’ waterbodies tested 67% came out as clean. The rivers had the highest proportion of polluted sites, followed closely by the cut-off channels and streams.

These results showed that although nutrient pollution was found in all the freshwater habitat types tested, standing waterbodies, including ponds, lakes and fens, were overall the cleanest freshwater habitats found in the Brecks. Like most of lowland Britain, rivers and some ditches and streams in the area were found to be polluted by nutrients. Rivers and streams drain large areas of land and are exposed to multiple sources of pollution from urban and agricultural areas. Ponds and lakes are also affected by the surrounding land use, but they naturally drain smaller areas of land. If the surrounding habitat is free from nutrient pollution, the ponds and lakes are likely to have clean water. Clean water is vital for freshwater biodiversity and these unpolluted sites can support rich and valuable wildlife communities. In the Brecks the cleanest pockets of water were found within the Stanford Training Area (STANTA) and around Thompson Common, both of which contain a mosaic of semi-natural habitats including areas of Breckland grassland and heath, as well as standing water, wetlands and many springs and streams, which are largely unaffected by drainage, pollution, eutrophication or water abstraction. Many of the clean water ditches were also found in these areas. Smaller pockets of clean water habitats were also found in other areas of semi-natural habitats including Thetford Forest and smaller woodlands and nature reserves, away from the wider agricultural landscape. A full report can be found on the following website.



<https://freshwaterhabitats.org.uk>

Anne Carter (FHT) and Julia Grover

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE BRECKLAND SOCIETY

On Wednesday June 14th at 6pm this year's AGM will be held in Fullers Mill Gardens, West Stow. IP28 6HD

Entry to the AGM will of course be free, but the meeting will be followed by a brief introduction to the gardens and then a chance to enjoy private access and a glass of wine or hot drink, for which there will be a small charge.



An aerial view of Fullers Mill Gardens Alan Clarke

The gardens were awarded the Royal Horticultural Society 'Garden of the Year for East England and the Midlands' for 2022. This is the second time they have received the award. Described as a garden to truly year-round interest, this enchanting and tranquil seven-acre creation on the banks of the River Lark combines a beautiful site of light dappled woodland with a plantsman's collection of unusual shrubs, perennials, lilies and marginal plants. The garden was created by the late Bernard Tickner MBE (1924-2017) who moved to Fullers Mill in 1958 and spent over 50 years creating the garden of today from rough scrub and woodland.

BRECKLAND SOCIETY VISIT TO LACKFORD LAKES

FEBRUARY 8th 2023

The weather was perfect for our visit to Lackford lakes, a 260 acre biological SSSI reserve managed by the Suffolk Wildlife Trust. The reserve encompasses a wide variety of habitats and is centred around a nucleus of flooded sand and gravel pits.

We were greeted by a clear Cotman-inspired cerulean sky and were fortunate to have the reserve warden, Joe Bell-Tye, join us as our guide. Sadly, our august chairman James Parry was unable to attend due to a dental emergency. His 'eagle' eyes for bird spotting were sorely missed.



Snipe

As we waited for any latecomers at the visitor centre, we were treated to close views of a Muntjac deer passing an unusually friendly Water Rail. From there, we took a short walk to an area of dry breck grassland, which had surprisingly already recovered from the high temperatures and drought of the previous summer. Unfortunately, the scrapes made here to lure passing Stone Curlew had so far proved unsuccessful. Just downslope from this area was a much wetter space, dominated by reeds and sedges and right on cue for this habitat, a majestic Marsh Harrier soared above the neighbouring trees.

In the damp areas where Alder trees abound, we witnessed the engaging antics of Siskins as they struggled and jostled to feed on the tiny seeds. On the path nearby, large numbers of Red Deer tracks littered the wet soil, bearing soggy witness to the passage of a considerable number of these animals.

Joe explained some facets of the complex hydrology of the site and how the network of sluices operated to maintain the variety of habitats. He also showed us the results of the excellent scrub clearance work done by their young conservation volunteers. Hopefully some of them may be inspired to work in this 'field' in the future.

Further on we saw a pair of Egyptian Geese waddling by with several tiny goslings strung out behind them. They had obviously ignored the textbooks and not waited until March to start procreation. A solitary Goldeneye languished in another pool forlornly trying to attract a mate with his glorious plumage and alluring head-tossing antics.

The new 'double decker' hide overlooked an area that had been temporarily drained to allow heavy machinery access. As we looked across and our eyes became wise to their cryptic camouflage, we began to see more and more Snipe. Some probed the soil for food whilst others dozed fully sated, in the afternoon sun. An astonishing twenty-six were seen, surely constituting enough to use the strange collective noun of a 'wisp' of snipe. Other species seen here included Greylag Geese and several brightly coloured Shelduck. A few Cormorant were busy drying their iridescent blue-black wings on the small islands. A Little Egret skirted the edges of the reeds, as did an obliging Heron. He soon took off and headed straight for our hide, giving excellent photographic opportunities for the 'quick of reflex'.



Nuthatch

Perhaps the oddest juxtaposition of species seen was when we watched a Nuthatch probing for food in a dead tree trunk, whilst only three meters away, another Water Rail was exploring a muddy stream bed on a similar mission.

We would like to extend our gratitude to Joe for this informative and enjoyable walk, around areas of the reserve that are not usually accessible to the public. It was a delightful experience to explore this hidden gem on such a beautiful day, with friendly and knowledgeable companions.

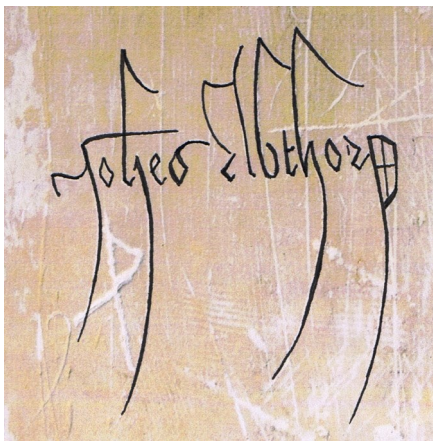
Words and photographs by Clive Sheppard

GRAFFITI IN THE BRECKS

Matthew Champion is the Society's new project manager for our Industrious Rivers project, but he is also a leading authority on many aspects of Norfolk's heritage. Here he sheds light on the surprising history of graffiti in Breckland churches.

It will always be something of an irony that the Brecks, characterised by far fewer villages and a lower population than almost every other area of East Anglia in the Middle Ages, is actually home to some of our most fascinating and interesting surviving medieval churches. Although perhaps best known for their colourful stained glass, medieval wall paintings, elaborately carved bench-ends and stone monuments, they are also home to some superb collections of early graffiti. Although today graffiti is generally regarded as being both destructive and anti-social, and certainly not something that we welcome on our historic buildings, this really is a very modern attitude. Recent studies have demonstrated that prior to the Victorian era, just about everyone, from all levels of society, had absolutely no issues with carving their own marks into the fabric of churches, castles, cathedrals and ancient monuments. Indeed, in the last four decades the study of historical graffiti has become an accepted academic discipline, giving scholars a vast array of insights into everything from medieval construction techniques, to the hopes and fears of the common man. And the churches of the Brecks are no stranger to medieval graffiti artists.

In the southern Brecks are two quite outstanding graffiti churches, both of which are crammed full of fascinating inscriptions dating back to the later Middle Ages. Perhaps the best known is St Mary's church at Troston, which has featured in a number of books, magazines and television programmes. Alongside the usual collection of names, initials and pencil graffiti left by long-dead bellringers, the church contains a fascinating collection of pre-Reformation inscriptions. These include medieval text inscriptions, images of demons, animals, fish and individuals. Of particular note is the named 'Johed Abthorp' carved in to the tower arch in gothic script, as the Abthorp family are recorded as being lords of the manor of Troston in the middle decades of the fifteenth century. The church is also



'Johed Abthorp' in Troston Church

home to some of the finest medieval walls paintings to survive anywhere in the region, and tends to be open daily. Perhaps less well known that Troston, but by no means less spectacular, is the graffiti contained within Worlington church, sitting a short distance from the River Lark. Although the early graffiti is largely confined to the pillars of the one arcade, the church can boast almost four hundred individual inscriptions. Many of the graffiti inscriptions are beautifully executed, and the church stands out for the large number of heraldic designs that have been recorded. Whilst the local tradition – that these were the coats of arms of those leaving for the Crusades – probably has no basis in fact, it is a fascinating conundrum across the walls.

Unfortunately, the study of ancient graffiti isn't just a story about new discoveries. Like all areas of heritage and archaeology, it too is also under threat. In early 2022 a devastating fire ripped through the ancient round-towered church at Beachamwell, leaving it an empty shell and open to the elements. So intense was the fire that it damaged even the stones of the walls themselves, in the process destroying several outstanding examples of medieval graffiti, including the famous 'Beachamwell demon'. Whilst such a loss is undoubtedly a tragedy, it does highlight the importance of the projects being undertaken by the Breckland Society – recording heritage and archaeology that might otherwise be overlooked, and eventually lost.



The 'Beachamwell Demon'



Heraldic Graffiti in Worlington Church

Pictures by Matt Champion.

Further reading: Champion, M., *Medieval Graffiti: The lost voices of England's Churches*, Ebury Press (2015)