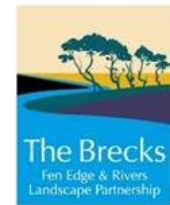


Newsletter 72 March 2024



RECENT EVENTS

Visit to Falconers Lodge
Fungus Foray at Foulden Common
The Christmas Social



OTHER ITEMS OF INTEREST

Labour Camps in Breckland
Plans for a new exhibition at The Ancient House Museum
A Great Grey Shrike in Breckland

EVENTS

Sunday May 12th
A visit to Watermill Broad, Cranwich with Tony and David Leech

Friday June 28th
Society AGM at Mildenhall Museum followed by a guided tour of the Museum. The meeting starts at 6.30.pm.

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 (BFER)

The Society's Industrious Rivers Project is drawing to a successful close in the coming weeks. Work is well advanced on the compilation of an illustrated report on the findings of the research team of volunteers and on three interpretation panels to be installed along the River Lark. On 2 March filming took place of a short conservation video at Little Cressingham Mill, featuring Society chairman James Parry, millwright Peter Goulding and Amanda Rix of the Norfolk Windmills Trust. This will be available later in the spring. Meanwhile, forthcoming BFER events can be found at <https://brecks.org./events>

Most events are free but some require booking.

LIVING AND BELIEVING IN THE BRECKS

Visit to Falconers Lodge at High Ash

On 7th October, we assembled at the Desert Rats Memorial at High Ash, north of Ickburgh. There, hidden in the forest, lies a small gem of a building, the intriguingly named Falconer's Lodge, where we were welcomed by the owner Alex Beer. Some 20 years ago, Alex's father bought the building, at the time almost completely consumed by the forest and in a dreadful state of repair, and set about rescuing it. He also applied for, and received, Grade II* listing status.

A group of us first came across the Lodge during our Military History project in 2015 while surveying the High Ash area and researching its use in 1944 during the build-up to D-Day. The 7th Armoured Division – the Desert Rats - were based at High Ash and trained for the invasion on the adjacent STANTA battle area. Ever since we stumbled across it, Falconer's Lodge has been high on the list of buildings that we wanted to visit.

In typical Breccsoc fashion, the visit started with wine and other refreshments in the garden, served by our chairman (and head sommelier!) James Parry. This was followed by a talk by Alan Clarke on when and why this building had been built in this location, and how the area around Didlington had played a crucial role in the survival of falconry as a field sport in Britain.

During the Military History project, he had become intrigued by stories of herons being hunted by falcons for sport on the Didlington estate in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and by the obvious name link to this lovely building. Then Covid struck, and researching these links turned into a lockdown project. Click [here](#) to read the full story of 'heron hawking' at Didlington.

English falconry became centred in the Brecks, particularly Didlington, for a variety of reasons, but especially the large heronry combined with many miles of open space. The most important person in the story was Colonel Robert Wilson, later ennobled as Lord Berners, who owned Didlington Hall. Wilson was involved with and later ran The Falconer's Club, informally known as the High Ash Club, for nearly sixty years, from about 1780 to 1838.

The club operated similarly to a fox hunt or golf club; members paid annual subscriptions and 'servants' ran the sport from day to day, in this case professional falconers. A big difference was that whereas foxes were regarded as vermin, and hunted to death, herons were a 'noble quarry'. The aim was for the hawks, usually peregrines or gyrfalcons, to simply down the heron; allowing a heron to be killed was very bad form.

These falconers were invariably Dutch, as falconry had been all but eliminated as a sport in England by the Puritans. The falconers arrived in East Anglia in March- April each year, along with their birds, ready for the heron hawking season in May and June.

Wilson built Falconer's Lodge around 1814, both as a clubhouse and as a base for the Dutchmen and their birds during their short annual stay. There were few trees in the area, except for the large ash tree that gave the location its name; this tree could be seen from up to ten miles away on a good day. A flag was flown from it each day that conditions were right for falconry, and sometime hundreds would then assemble to watch the spectacle.

The club was dissolved in 1838 after the death of Lord Berners, and the Amherst family later acquired the Didlington estate. They used the Lodge for picnics and other social occasions, and also watched their racehorses training on the Long Gallop, between Ickburgh and the Lodge, from the roof.

After the talk, Alex told us the story of her family's association with the Lodge and how they had lovingly restored it from an overgrown near-ruin, using local and traditional materials, including some salvaged from the grounds. She then took us on a tour of the building, including the rooftop – see photograph - and showed us some of the historic documents associated with the Lodge, including a photograph of a large shooting party which included the future King Edward VII, who was also a frequent visitor to the nearby Elveden estate.

Once more, the Society would like to thank Alex for so unhesitatingly inviting us to visit the Lodge, for hosting us, and for her family's hard work over the years to preserve this small Breckland jewel.
Alan Clarke



Fungus Foray at Foulден Common

On a lovely autumn afternoon 28 October a group of Brec Soc members embarked on a fungal foray at Foulден Common, courtesy of our hosts Stephen and Catherine Parker, who were also enthusiastic participants in the foray.

Leader of the group was Tony Leech, Norfolk county recorder for fungi. Tony brought along eminent mycologist Geoffrey Kibby, newly resident in Norfolk, as an added bonus. Foulден Common is mostly grassland, with some areas of woodland, so we saw a good variety of species both large and small. 43 species were positively identified (by our experts), who explained distinguishing features such as smell, colour, habitat preference etc. The most unusual species in the named group and only the second record for Norfolk was Yellowing Bonnet. Most exciting for the experts were two rather innocuous-looking fungi that, should DNA sequencing confirm their identity, would be only the second and third British records. A fascinating and rewarding afternoon, both for the experts and the novices. Report and photographs by Carol Palfreyman.



Scarlet Waxcap



Grooved Cavalier Fungus



Pipe Club Fungus

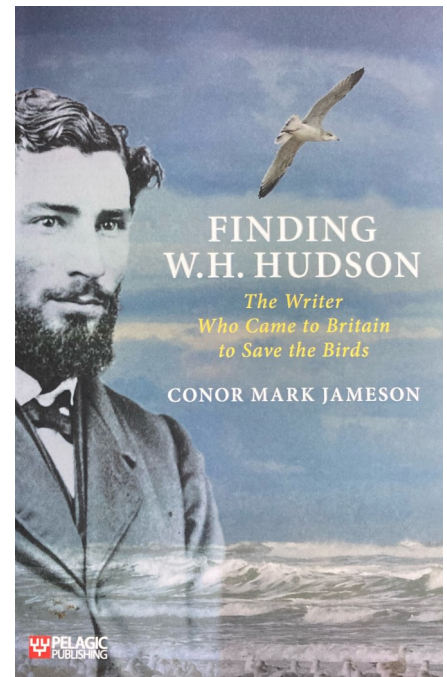


Sulfur Tuft Fungus

TALK BY CONOR JAMESON AND CHRISTMAS DRINKS AT COLLEGE FARM, THOMPSON DECEMBER 8th, 2023

Over 40 members gathered to hear a talk by Conor Mark Jameson on the celebrated naturalist William Henry Hudson, who travelled from a childhood on the wild pampas of Argentina to be the doyen of the early wildlife conservation movement in the salons of London. The evening opened with a welcome by Katharine Wolstenholme, who with her husband Richard runs College Farm at Thompson as a B&B and wedding venue. The farmhouse was built to serve as a college for priests and dates back to the fourteenth century, passing into secular ownership following the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 1530s. Conor's talk, titled 'Finding W H Hudson: Breckland Days and Other Adventures' was held in the farm's former cattle barn, now beautifully restored and full of period features.

In celebration of Hudson and his achievements, last year Conor published a biography on the great man, tracing his extraordinary life and impact on both nature writing and wider awareness of the need to protect wildlife in the face of a rapidly industrialising world. Of particular interest to the Society was Hudson's 1904 visit to the Brecks which, as Conor explained, was a pilgrimage inspired by Hudson's love of the poetry of Robert Blomefield, the so-called "John Clare of Breckland". Hudson arrived at Brandon by train, having brought his bicycle, on which he set off across the heaths for Blomefield's birthplace of Honington and then Sapiston, where Blomefield had worked as a plough boy. He also visited Troston Hall, whose owner Capel Lofft was seminal in recognising and promoting the creative talent of Blomefield, and then Euston, where the hall was being rebuilt following a disastrous fire. Conor spoke lyrically about how he had followed in Hudson's footsteps, revisiting the places he wrote about and exploring this still little-known and atmospheric part of the Brecks.



More broadly, a picture of Hudson emerged of a man deeply passionate about the environment and decidedly ahead of his time. Conor described how Hudson "was the only man in the room when, in 1889, Eliza Phillips brought together a dozen or so women to launch what we know today as the Society for the Protection of Birds." Self-effacing and often uneasy in the limelight, he was however passionate, persuasive and influential. He was the author of many books, some of which are still in print today, and further evidence of his importance and impact survives in the shape of a Portland stone memorial designed and executed by the celebrated trio of Jacob Epstein, Lionel Pearson and Eric Gill, and erected in Hyde Park in 1925.

A highly engaging talk about a fascinating figure, followed by drinks and a chance to chat with Conor and fellow members. We hope to welcome Conor back later this year to talk about another Breckland speciality: Goshawks!

James Parry



The Hudson Memorial in Hyde Park

Labour Camps in Breckland 1928 - 1939

Last September, member Chris Stone gave us a fascinating talk 'The Birth of Brookville, the Methwold Fruit Farm Colony'. Beginning in 1898 as cooperative enterprise, it was one of a number of rural colonies that developed around the turn of the century. By 'getting back to the land' colonists sought to escape unemployment or casual labour and insufficient or slum housing in major cities. Some were founded on utopian principles or led by social reformers seeking to help the unemployed and 'abject poor'. But in Breckland 30 years later a very different form of communal living was introduced by government in response to unemployment: residential labour camps.

By the beginning of the twentieth century the suggestions for dealing with unemployment were becoming increasingly punitive, with a 1905 pamphlet from the Fabian Society stating that '*There are those whose destitution is caused by the fact that they are idle and incompetent ... the weak minded and incompetent must be dealt with in farm colonies*' and General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, helping shape the first of a number of 'colonies for the unemployed' in Hadleigh, Essex. Between 1921 to the outbreak of World War Two, unemployment was a dominant political issue. It was particularly acute in the older industrial areas of the country as their traditional heavy industries were in steep decline, so that unemployment was heavily concentrated in the 'distressed areas' of the north and west of England, whilst new industries requiring labour were primarily in the Midlands southwards towards London. In 1928 the Conservative Government set up the Industrial Transference Board with the purpose of training and transferring unemployed workers, such as miners, to parts of the country with a growing demand for labour.

Initially established in 1928 to train men for colonial overseas settlement, the camps provided instruction in land clearance, drainage and fencing, but within a year their function had changed to deal with '*a class of men to whom our existing training schemes do not apply especially among the younger men, who through prolonged unemployment have become so 'soft' and temporarily demoralised [that they are] a danger to the moral of ordinary training centres andcannot be considered for transfer until they are hardened.*' Originally described as 'Hardening Centres' and later as 'Transfer Instructional Centres' they were known to most as Labour Camps. To the National Unemployed Workers Union they were, however, the Slave Camps.



Walter Burton Wild (third on the left) from Sheffield with unemployed trawlermen.

Four camps were established in Breckland by the Ministry of Labour: at West Tofts, Cranwich, Weeting and High Lodge, on Forestry Commission land. The Friends of Thetford Forest's project The Hidden Heritage of High Lodge, led by Anne Mason, stimulated my interest in the camps – you can read about the project by going to their website https://highlodgeheritage.fotf.org.uk/hhhl/landscape_heritage/high_lodge_labour_camp.php

The redundant Weeting Hall provided the accommodation for the Weeting camp, but the others had purpose-built huts. Run on strict disciplinarian lines by a manager who was usually a former soldier, their isolated locations were seen as an advantage in keeping men away from the '*depressing atmosphere*' of their home areas, preventing the camps '*being troubled by disturbing invasions of visitors*' and well away from larger villages or towns because '*a two or three mile walk prevents people from wanting to leave too frequently*', according to a 1933 handbook. The camps originally took

men for whom subsequent employment or further training could be arranged, but as the depression deepened jobs were only given to the more conscientious and this was used as a tool to maintain camp discipline. Trainees generally spent 12 weeks in the camp and working on road making, scrub clearing and other tasks that would *'ultimately prove useful in working the forests, but would not usually be undertaken for years to come'*. Tasks were supposed to be of enough use to interest the men, though sometimes pointless ones were made up – one twenty-year-old at High Lodge reputedly spent his time digging trenches and filling them in again. Some trainees attended more than one camp: Walter Burton Wild from Sheffield was in four, including Weeting Hall in 1934 and West Tofts in 1936, but despite all the training he was unable to secure employment until the end of World War Two. From 1934 onwards anyone claiming National Insurance had to attend a camp if required to do so or lose their benefit. The majority were single men, but if married, a maintenance allowance was paid to wives and children left behind. Initially trainees had been allowed to keep 4s of their benefit, but this was reduced to 1s in 1934. Whilst trainees could leave the camp before the end of their training, those that completed it were allowed to keep their trousers, according one oral history interviewee, which was a real incentive!

The trainees had little to do in their leisure time, with pubs a long distance away. There was originally a bus to Brandon running from West Tofts and Weeting, but it was discontinued after a conductress was assaulted. Some of the men in the camps were very tough – such as miners and trawlermen - which could make life hard for younger or more vulnerable trainees. The conditions in the camps, including the quality of the food, combined with the isolation could have violent and tragic consequences; there was a riot at High Lodge and one suicide in the Little Ouse at Brandon. The camps did provide some rudimentary education in gardening, joinery and so forth, but mainly supplied the Forestry Commission with cheap labour. The schemes came to an end when the start of World War Two created an entirely new situation, ending mass unemployment.

Pat Reynolds

A RARE AVIAN VISITOR FOUND IN BRECKLAND

One of the birds most likely to brighten up the dullest of winter days has turned up in the Brecks. Following a few sightings near Methwold earlier in the winter, a second Great Grey Shrike – or possibly the same one, just relocated – has spent the last two weeks on an area of clearfell forestry near Weeting. This is classic shrike territory, as the birds prefer open habitats in which they position themselves prominently on shrubs or posts, scouting out for prey. Their dramatic black, white and grey plumage makes for a stunning sight, especially when they swoop down to catch a mouse or chase a small bird. It is estimated that rodents make up as much as half of a Great Grey Shrike's diet, with tits, Wrens and Goldcrests also taken.

Once a regular winter visitor to the UK from Scandinavia and elsewhere in northern Europe, Great Grey Shrikes have declined markedly in recent years. Fewer than 15 birds are now thought to spend the winter here nationally, and there are only a handful of sightings in East Anglia each year. They do, however, tend to stick around once they find somewhere they like, so it is possible that the Weeting bird may remain for a while longer before heading back to its continental breeding grounds.

Often known as butcher birds thanks to their predatory habits, shrikes maintain 'larders' on thorn bushes, impaling dead prey and returning to it later. The Brecks was once a stronghold for a smaller shrike, the Red-backed, which was a summer migrant and quite common across the area until the 1970s. The last pair nested near Santon Downham in the late 1980s, since when the species has almost completely vanished and is now even scarcer in the area than its larger cousin, the Great Grey Shrike.



Shrikes have a characteristic black facial mask. Photo by James Parry.

James Parry

BrecSoc members' help needed.

A History of The Ancient House Museum, Thetford in 100 objects.

An exhibition to mark the centenary of its opening in 1924.

The Ancient House, a building dating back in parts to the 16th century was given to the Major and Corporation of Thetford by Prince Frederick Duleep Singh, son of the Maharajah Duleep Singh. The museum was opened on December 11th, 1924 by the Duchess of Grafton.

As the Ancient House, Museum of Thetford Life celebrates its 100th anniversary later this year, the museum team is putting together plans for a 100th birthday exhibition. We need your help! We are making lists of items that have been given or purchased for the museum collection over the last ten decades. It will be a big thank you to all our excellent kind donors and supporters. The museum team will be working with community groups to make the final selection of 100 objects for the exhibition and write the labels. We would love it if members of the Breckland Society were able to help choose some objects for a particular decade. You can email Melissa at the museum on

melissa.hawker@norfolk.gov.uk to express an interest and then come along to an evening at the museum on **Friday 19th April** starting at 7pm (to run until about 9), refreshments provided.

Some examples of items collected include:



A metal lamp found 20 foot down in a pond
Acquired in the 1930s.



A pipe in the form of a woman's head .
Acquired in the 1990s .



A Roman coin hoard found near the site of the Thetford Treasure. Acquired in the 1980s.



A GROUP TAKEN AT THE OPENING OF THE MUSEUM AT THETFORD YESTERDAY.
Left to right—The Deputy-Mayor (Mr. W. Lambert), Alderman S. Odman, the Duchess of Grafton, the Mayor (Mr. J. E. Meek), Prince Frederick Duleep Singh, Alderman J. G. Prover, Chairman of the Museum Committee.

For more information on the history of The Ancient House go to the website

<https://www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk/ancient-house/whats-here/a-history-of-ancient-house>