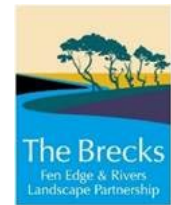


# Newsletter 73 August 2024



## RECENT EVENTS

The Barrows of Middle Harling  
Preparing our contribution to the centenary exhibition at The  
Ancient House Museum, Thetford  
Visit to Watermill Broad  
AGM and visit to Mildenhall Museum



## OTHER ITEMS OF INTEREST

Mildenhall Museum: 1951 to the present day  
Conserving Breckland's Common Curlew population  
The Brecks Outdoor Festival in September

## FUTURE EVENTS

Friday September 27th. Guided visit to  
Lynford Chapel, including a walk through  
the Arboretum.

Sunday October 13th. Fungus Foray at  
Didlington.

Further details of these events can be found  
on the Events page of the [Breckland Society  
website](#).

Booking for tickets for all Society events  
opens three weeks before the event.

## THE BRECKS FEN EDGE AND RIVERS PARTNERSHIP (BFER)

This lottery-funded scheme is coming to  
an end towards the end of 2024. To  
celebrate its success, the opportunity is  
being taken to bring together the many  
and varied programmes that have taken  
place over the last five years.

The Brecks Outdoor Festival will be  
launched at an event on Jubilee Fields,  
Mildenhall on September 7<sup>th</sup>, with a  
programme of activities for all ages  
planned across the Brecks in the following  
two weeks.

For more information about this please see  
page 7.

# LIVING AND BELIEVING IN THE BRECKS

## Guided walk to the barrows at Harling Woods, Sunday March 17<sup>th</sup> 2024

Members of the Society gathered in the woodland carpark near Middle Harling where we met David Robertson of Archaeology East Anglia. He explained the various types of barrows that occur in the UK and gave tips on how to identify them, advice that came in useful later when he asked us to decide which type we were then viewing. Members thought that they were bowl barrows and David agreed, adding that there were certainly more barrows in the area of Harling, but that many have been lost through ploughing etc. However, in recent times machine operators in the forest have been asked to look out for unusual landforms and have indeed identified some during forestry operations.

The two barrows that we visited were located within about 90m of each other, on what was once West Harling Heath (as shown on historic Ordnance Survey maps, where they are labelled 'Tumuli'). They stand 1.5 to 2m tall, with diameters between 25 and 36m. Neither has been excavated, but prehistoric flint artefacts have been found in the immediate vicinity. Nowadays, Forestry England keep the barrows clear of bracken and brambles so they are clearly visible.

Julia Grover



East Barrow



West Barrow

## The Breckland Society input for a new exhibition: *A History of The Ancient House Museum in 100 Objects*

On Friday April 19<sup>th</sup> five members of The Breckland Society met with Oliver Bone and Melissa Hawker (the curator and assistant curator of the museum) to select exhibits for the Museum's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of ten decades of accessions.

The Society members were given the choice of a number of objects acquired by the Museum in the 1940s and chose ten of these. They were also asked to suggest how they should be labelled and displayed in the limited space available.

The exhibition will celebrate the passing of 100 years since its opening on December 11<sup>th</sup>, 1924.

Julia Grover



# Visit to Watermill Broad Nature Reserve, Sunday May 12th 2024

Fifteen BreCoc members met at Watermill Broad for a guided tour led by Trustee Dr Dave Leech of the British Trust for Ornithology. Dave manages the privately owned reserve, which isn't open to the public, and monitors nests on site with assistance from able volunteers. Dave's father, renowned fungus expert Dr Tony Leech, was also on hand with some entertaining insights into fungi, identifying a large example spotted on the tour and which went by the impressive name of Dryad's Saddle. The reserve has been flooded since last autumn, following a breach in the River Wissey which runs alongside. Members had



The group gathers by the former Gamekeeper's Cottage

were seen on the open water. The end of the tour took in a look at the amazingly ornate Gamekeeper's Cottage, originally part of the Didlington Estate and dating from the 1880s, followed by very welcome refreshments kindly provided by Trustee Louisa Knapp. A pair of Red Kites soared overhead as a farewell!

Simon Rope

been instructed to wear wellies (Dave was dressed in his trademark wetsuit) and, despite the day's weather being perfect, sections of the reserve were still inaccessible. Other parts rather resembled an assault course, but members were as intrepid as ever, wading undaunted through knee-high water and clambering over fallen trees with gusto. There was plenty to hear and see as we made our way around. Large numbers of damselflies were emerging, as well as Brimstone and Orange-tip butterflies. Reed Warblers were abundant, with lots of singing evident. Although they are slightly down in numbers compared to 2023, Dave estimated that 60 or so males are on territory this year. Reed Buntings were also evident, and nearer to the river we heard a Nightingale singing – a species much declined in the Brecks in recent years. Even rarer was a Lesser Spotted

Woodpecker, now found at only a handful of locations in Norfolk. A pair of Hobbies circled overhead at one point and Great-crested Grebes



Fallen trees provide a good environment for fungi of many species

The Information Board. For a fuller account refer to the Newsletter of April 2020 available on the Breckland Society website

## Report on the Annual General Meeting and decision to award further small grants

The Annual General Meeting (AGM), attended by 27 members, was held at Mildenhall Museum on Friday 28 June. One of the functions of the AGM is to endorse the appointment of the committee for another year. Bob Baker, a member of the Society from its earliest days, who had served as Chairman and Treasurer at different times over the years, had decided that the time had come for him to retire from the committee. He was presented with a leaving gift and warmly thanked for his very significant contribution. Simon Rope, who had been co-opted on to the committee since the last AGM, was formally appointed and the other members re-appointed. The committee now comprises James Parry (Chairman); Eunice Warren (Treasurer), Pat Reynolds (Secretary); Julia Grover (Newsletter Editor); Alan Clarke (IT); Liz Dittner; Carol Palfreyman and Simon Rope. The Chairman's report on the activities over the previous year was noted and the Annual Accounts for 2023–4 were approved. There were no questions about the Treasurer's report, and the members present agreed with the view of the committee that the Society's financial reserves are such that making some further small grants, as has been done from time to time in the past, would now be appropriate. The Society's grant-making history is shown below.

Year	Amount	Grant purpose/organisation funded
2011	£100	Gooderstone School for coach trips to take the pupils to Breckland nature reserves
2013	£750	Breckland Bat project
2017	£400	Friends of Thetford Station for an interpretation panel at the station
2018 - 2019	£1,500	Contribution to the cost of publishing four field guides on Breckland birds, flowers and mammals in partnership with the British Trust for Ornithology
2024	£500	Contribution to the cost of interpretation boards as part of the Society's Industrious Rivers project

A paper setting out the committee's proposals for making grants had been sent to all members in advance of the meeting and comments invited either in advance or at the AGM. It was decided that we would seek to make two grants of up to £1,500 each over the next one or two financial years (i.e. up to £3,000 in total) to projects or initiatives that help support and promote Breckland's heritage, either directly through preservation or conservation, or by helping to inform local residents and/or visitors of its value. Any project should have a tangible output and a lasting benefit, and not be financially viable without the Society's contribution.

It was agreed that the Committee does not have the capacity to evaluate the large number of expressions of interest / grant applications that might result from an open advertisement, so we should seek to operate grant-making by collaborating with appropriate partners – such as the History Department at UEA, Norfolk Wildlife Trust, Suffolk Wildlife Trust, and the British Trust for Ornithology. We will invite them to recommend projects and/or individuals (e.g. students working on a particular Brecks-related project or area of study) that might be worthy of the Society's support. In this way we hope to avoid labour-intensive initial sifting, and ride on the back of deserving cases already known to whichever partner we might work with. This arrangement would also raise the possibility of working together on a match-funding basis to help bring worthy projects to fruition. The meeting agreed that Breckland Society members should also be given the opportunity to nominate specific projects. The member concerned must have no financial interest in the project proposed, and it was confirmed during the discussion that the Committee would draw on specialist expertise to assess these proposals as appropriate. Initial ideas from members for possible grants were: funding for primary schools to support the cost of coach hire to enable children to visit Breckland heritage or nature sites; part funding an apprenticeship to enable heritage conservation organisations to increase their capacity to maintain the condition of the heritage assets in their care. The Committee will firm up the processes for identifying and awarding grants and circulate the information to members after the next committee meeting.

Pat Reynolds

# Mildenhall Museum: 1951 to the present day

## Founding of the museum

The museum was founded by members of the Mildenhall Natural History and Archaeological Society, and was opened as part of the Festival of Britain celebrations on May 26<sup>th</sup> 1951. It first occupied two small rooms above the Town Hall and was open only on Sunday afternoons. It moved into larger accommodation provided by the Trustees Savings bank in 1968, survived a fire in 1972, and in 1983 moved to its present site, originally two dilapidated cottages on the corner of King Street and Market Street. A 2012 millennium lottery grant of £423,000 for an extension, including a community space for school parties and other groups, established the current museum premises. The most significant exhibits in the museum are the Lakenheath Warrior and replicas of the Mildenhall Treasure. There is also a unique collection of flints and fossils, all donated by local amateur archaeologist and enthusiast Sid Ford, in the pre-history room.

**The Mildenhall Treasure** was unearthed from a field in West Row in 1942. It comprises over 30 items of silver Roman tableware including the Great Dish, over 60 cm in diameter, and bowls, goblets and spoons. All are decorated with aspects of Roman worship of the gods. The original treasure is displayed in the British Museum, but these high quality replicas were created with a millennium grant and came to the museum in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.



The Roman Treasure



Mildenhall Museum 2023



The Warrior and his Horse

**The Lakenheath Warrior** is the remains of a man, buried with his horse and lavish grave goods, found in 1997. Their bones lay beneath a mound, in a wooden coffin, with the warrior's sword, shield and spear. The horse, in a decorated harness, was accompanied by a bucket that would probably have contained its final meal. Members may remember the talk about the Lakenheath excavations by Jo Caruth, the senior project officer for the dig, to The Breckland Society in 2022, reported in the September Newsletter of that year.

Admission to the museum is free but contributions to the Museum Society, established by the former founders and friends, are very welcome. They are used to promote interest in the Museum and raise funds for its further development.

Julia Grover

## Conserving Breckland's Eurasian Curlew population

In the context of the Brecks, the word curlew usually brings to mind that iconic rarity, the Stone Curlew, *Burhinus oedicanus*. Yet our area is also important for its breeding population of the Eurasian Curlew, *Numenius Arquata* (commonly known as Curlew and referred to as that here), a species that breeds across temperate Europe and Asia, and which is in serious decline. The UK's largest wader, with long legs and a distinctive down-curved bill, it has a haunting, bubbling call that we may associate with the Wash or northern moorland. But the Breck's heaths, military training areas and land around airfields provide



Eurasian Curlew



Eurasian Curlew eggs

important Curlew nesting habitat.

Following the loss of nearly half their breeding numbers over a 20-year-period, Curlews were added to the UK Red List of the bird species of most urgent conservation concern in 2015. At that time the UK held around 20-25% of the world's breeding population and hosted a fifth of the world population in winter, so the state of UK Curlew populations is a conservation challenge with global impact. The Curlew is now categorised as *Near Threatened* by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and BirdLife International. When species are in decline, it is sometimes appropriate for humans to step in with management actions to improve their chances of success and so a number of organisations, including the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), the

University of East Anglia (UEA), the Wildlife Trusts and the Breckland Farmers Wildlife Network, have been co-operating to support Breckland's Curlews.

Understanding the causes of species decline is obviously key to identifying effective conservation strategies. Although Curlews are secretive, particularly when incubating eggs, research has established that the main reason for Curlew decline in the UK is not adult survival rates, but low breeding productivity, linked to both the loss of suitable quality breeding habitats and nest predation. As farming intensifies, the tall undisturbed grassland swards that provide cover for Curlew nests and safe refuges for chicks are diminishing. At the same time there has been an increase in the numbers of 'generalist' predators such as foxes and carrion crows which thrive across agricultural landscapes that provide easy prey all year round.

A joint study between BTO and UEA monitored Breckland Curlew nesting attempts from 136 sites over three seasons, and showed that the average probability of a nest surviving incubation was only 25% and that mammalian predation (by foxes, stoats, weasels, badgers and occasionally hedgehogs), primarily at night, was linked to nest failure in 86% of cases. (Read more at: <https://www.bto.org/curlew-nest-survival>)



Young Eurasian Curlew chicks

A detailed study of nesting success across the STANTA military training area and Brettenham Heath, both of which have the extensive dry grassland areas needed by breeding Curlew, enabled comparison of the effect predators on breeding behaviour and success. There was continuous predator control at Brettenham, whereas on STANTA it was limited to the areas around pheasant release pens. 44 nests were visited every three to seven days to confirm whether adults were still incubating, and remotely monitored temperature sensors were placed under eggs to determine the date and timing of nest failure – incubation takes place continuously until chicks hatch, so a sudden temperature drop indicates it has stopped. Observations of the presence of shell fragments in nests, indicating that chicks had hatched, sightings of chicks and adult ‘alarming’ behaviours in response to perceived threats were recorded. In 2018 infra-red cameras were used at ten of the nest sites to identify predators. The nests were classified as being on arable land, fenced or unfenced grassland, or on ground disturbance plots created to support other conservation priority species such as Woodlark and Stone Curlew.

Of the 44 nests monitored in this study, 32 failed, of which 29 were predated, mainly overnight. The camera evidence revealed predation by Foxes, a Carrion Crow, one unidentifiable predator (due to a camera malfunction) and a sheep! Breeding success at Brettenham, with continuous predator control, was much better than at STANTA where productivity was substantially below that required to maintain a stable population.

The key finding of this research was that ground disturbance did not affect the nest survival rate across the two sites, suggesting that management interventions to create bare ground had not increased nest exposure to predators. In fact, Breckland Curlew pairs were five to six times more likely to select disturbed plots than undisturbed grassland for nests. Curlews are long lived and site-faithful, and the disturbed plots may have been created within the breeding pairs’ well-established home ranges, skewing the results on nest site selection. While more research is needed to explain this preference, it may be that using small patches of bare ground within grassland for a nest site improves predator vigilance, or enables chicks to take advantage of an abundance of the ground-dwelling insects that they feed on. Creating disturbed ground, particularly through shallow cultivating in areas with few or no mammalian predators, could provide a useful management tool for attracting Curlew to safe areas which, given the large size of their territories, could enable them to be supported within the wider landscape.

Read more at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00063657.2020.1725421> )

Pat Reynolds

## **The Brecks Outdoor Festival, September 7th-22nd, 2024**

The Brecks Fen-Edge and Rivers Landscape Partnership Scheme, funded by the National Lottery, is coming to an end towards the end of this year. To mark this milestone, a festival is being held to draw together the many and varied programmes that have taken place over the last four years. The festival will be launched at an event on Jubilee Fields, Mildenhall on September 7<sup>th</sup>, where there will be opportunities to meet representatives of local organisations, try activities such as axe-throwing and canoeing, and take a guided walk in the town.

From September 7<sup>th</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> 2024 a programme of activities for all ages is planned in the Brecks Fen-Edge and Rivers area including

- Nature study, including birds, bats and river creatures in and around nature reserves
- Walks, cycling, swimming, yoga and outdoor sports
- Museum tours, and visits to prehistoric and military history sites
- Craft workshops and opportunities for outdoor art and drawing with local artists

Read more at <https://brecks.org/brecks-outdoor-festival/festival-schedule/>

Julia Grover

