WYCHWOOD PROJECT

Forest Update

unsung heroes
The Queen's Award for Voluntary Service 2006

The Wychwood Project Newsletter

Issue 29 **Winter 2008/09**

Hedgerow Highlights

We are now well into the season for practical hedgerow work and the Project hedgelaying group seems to be going from strength to strength with several new regular members. We have already finished our first hedge – 100m, down by the River Windrush on the outskirts of Burford, and are well through the second – 60m, to the east of Enstone. Several members of the Group did well at the recent Cotswolds annual hedgelaying competition with Richard Lane and Dave Lee again scooping a trophy.

To complement the practical work we have also been successful in getting some money from the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) to undertake a volunteer based hedgerow survey programme next year. If you are interested contact the Project office.

Hedgelaying – learning the craft

Topping Stakes

Trimming-up before laying

Forest Fair 2008 – Dodging the rain drops

Whilst it may be becoming a distant memory the Forest Fair continued to entertain local people with nearly 170 stalls showcasing conservation groups and rural businesses from in and around the Project area. New faces included the Upton Smokery, the Midshire Orchard Group and Waitrose. As ever, the organisation of the Fair was entirely done by volunteers and thanks are due to many people who gave their time and energy to make the event a success. Our lucky run with the weather just about continued – the rain holding off until the gates closed.

Left: Visitors admire John Savings' minature laid hedges

Middle: Rumplestiltskin Thatchers explain their trade

Right: Wychwood Brewery

From the Project Manager's Notebook

Nick Mottram

Nick Mottram

Apples and Orchards

This autumn there was a noticeable orchard theme in the air. It still surprises me how once we start a new activity, related opportunities appear from the most unexpected places.

Over a year ago plans were made to visit an orchard at Upper Farm in Ramsden and combine this with a talk from national apple expert Dr Barrie Juniper. Then a useful contact was made with the Mid-shires Orchard Group who subsequently attended the Forest Fair. This was followed by a contact from Common Ground, an organisation with a long history in promoting orchard management, and, finally, a recent request to help the new owner of a historic orchard find some help with caring for their trees. We don't have many old orchards left in the Wychwood area so it is good to see a renewed interest in them.

Once again the Forest Fair proved a great success. Amongst the many highlights was the recruitment of over 50 new members, considerably more than we have managed before. Whether this was the result of the Ducklington location or the persuasive power of the volunteers on the Friends stand I don't know, but it is most welcome. The Friends now have over 700 members. Let's see if we can make it 1000 before the next Fair.

Friends say "Thank you" to Sir Hugo

The Fair also provided an opportunity to say 'thank you' to one of our great supporters, Sir Hugo Brunner, formerly Lord Lieutenant of Oxfordshire and a patron of the Project since its earliest days. As a token of our thanks Ken Betteridge, Chairman, awarded Sir Hugo honorary life membership of the Friends of Wycwhood.

One measure of the change in awareness of Wychwood as a place is the increasing number of organisations who use Wychwood within their name. To help protect the work that the Project has done in raising and maintaining its own profile we have recently trademarked the name Friends of Wychwood and the Project's tree logo.

Ditchley Ponds Walk

Robert Bigwood

The Devil's Pool, Ditchley

A peaceful afternoon and a lovely location was the setting for our summer pond event. This started at the Lodge Farm with its gothic windows, roses in full bloom and the view over the cattle in the nearby valley backed by the woods. The farm pond was full of watercress and contained a huge variety of flatworms and freshwater shrimps. Further down the track was the Devil's Pool which had very cool clear water with broad-leaf pondweed and milfoil. The water of the pond contained lots of Daphnia and Cyclops swimming, some with green egg sacs attached, being pursued by the Water Boatmen sculling their way through the water and the occasional leech swimming in an eel-like manner. The reed mace rushes and bur-reeds acted as landing platforms for the metallic blue damsel flies.

The ponds of nearby Bottom Wood were well stocked with phantom and Culex pupae, freshwater shrimps and larvae of the great diving beetles with their large biting jaws. The last of the ponds visited contained many young newts with fine gills and delicate transparent limbs. The walk continued back along the tracks at the sides of the fields of beans with maize planted for the overwintering pheasants; scarlet pimpernel and white daisies flowered beneath the cover crops.

Ditchley's Wild Service Trees

Charles Keighley

As part of the Wychwood Ancient Habitats programme, a group of us, with the help of the gamekeepers and woodmen, have been studying the wild service trees (*Sorbus Torminalis*, also known as the 'Chequers Tree') on the Ditchley Estate.

This species, scarce in the UK both in the wild and in cultivation, spreads across Europe as far north as Denmark. It seems to do best when competition is restricted, tending to exist in isolated groups, and in the right conditions can develop into a substantial tree. There are only a handful of woods in the UK where more than 100 service trees occur.

The wild service tree has maple-like leaves, white flowers in May and June, and strong autumn colours. Autumn is the best time to identify the tree. Its fine-grained wood was used for wood-turning, making musical instruments and cogs. Its dried fruits, apparently a source of vitamin C, were sold in markets and used for making alcoholic drinks – which may account for the number of 'Chequers' inns in the south of England.

At Ditchley there is a particular concentration of service trees, previously recorded by Jo Dunn, in a block of woodland known as Big Park. A number of these have fairly recently died, either from natural aging, or as a result of being crowded out by beeches planted in the 1950s. Over the estate, we have recorded about 100 live trees, with the hedgerows to the SE of the estate yet to be surveyed.

With the help of the Cotswold Wardens and the estate we hope to protect existing trees by selective thinning of adjacent trees. We are also on the look out for suckers to protect. Somewhat unusually, these can occur many metres from the parent tree. Lastly, we are aiming to grow some seedlings to be planted in Ditchley and elsewhere in the Wychwood area.

Wychwood V off to a great start

Young volunteers with the Wychwood V Project have spent a busy summer working on a variety of activities for the Wychwood Project. Thirteen new volunteers joined the project, making a total of sixteen so far. Together they have contributed over 250 hours of work with one, Amy Booth, giving a fantastic 100 hours of her time to the project. It was a great pleasure to be able to recognize Amy's work through the award of the first V50 certificate for the project. Activities included helping to clear footpaths at Cogges Manor Farm Museum, battling with Himalayan balsam at Woodstock Water Meadows, North Leigh Common and beside the Windrush. New skills were learnt. David Rees from the Oxfordshire Woodland Group taught four volunteers the art of pruning and Trevor Townsend has been leading on the dry stone walling project at Fifield.

Alex pruning

Volunteers at Woodstock Water Meadow

An enthusiastic group of four V volunteers helped to promote the project and recruit new volunteers at the Forest Fair. In their vibrant blue V t-shirts they made quite an impact. The new initiative has received good publicity with a centre page article in the Oxford Times. A Facebook site has been set up and is monitored by V volunteers; not everyone wants to be out in the field but they can contribute to the development of the project in other ways.

If you would like help with any conservation activities or know of any young people aged 16-25 who might be interested in joining the project, contact Jane Bowley on 01993 814131 or email wychwood.v@oxfordshire.gov.uk.

An Appreciation of the English Orchard

The English orchard was once a celebrated part of the English landscape. What has happened to the orchard, and its fruit, in our national estimation? Why have vast tracts of our orchards been grubbed up in the last hundred years, and our great store of English apple and other fruit varieties been reduced to a few gaudy, cardboard examples, imported to the supermarkets – now even from China!

The Romans are thought to have brought the cultivated apple to our shores. However, certain orchard history is only reached with the monasteries, who cultivated apples for cider, medicine and contemplation. The Norman monks brought with them improved cider varieties of apples. One of the earliest known orchards (at St. Gall) was a cemetery orchard, which was intended not just as a source of food and drink, but as a place for relaxation and moral contemplation.

Cultivation of orchards spread beyond the monasteries – even in the 9th and 10th centuries Frankish Law defined an orchard as being enclosed and containing a minimum of 12 trees. Across the country there are many thousands of medieval ditched and moated sites, defined as orchard sites under Frankish Law. Their enclosed, attractive and guarded aspect evoked the Garden of Paradise and was a reminder of the need for chastity.

From the Elizabethan period it also became customary to plant many fruit trees in fields and hedges, as well as to make fruit hedges of plums and damsons, and to make attractive walks of fruit trees across fields to orchards – a feature of our countryside that is mostly forgotten.

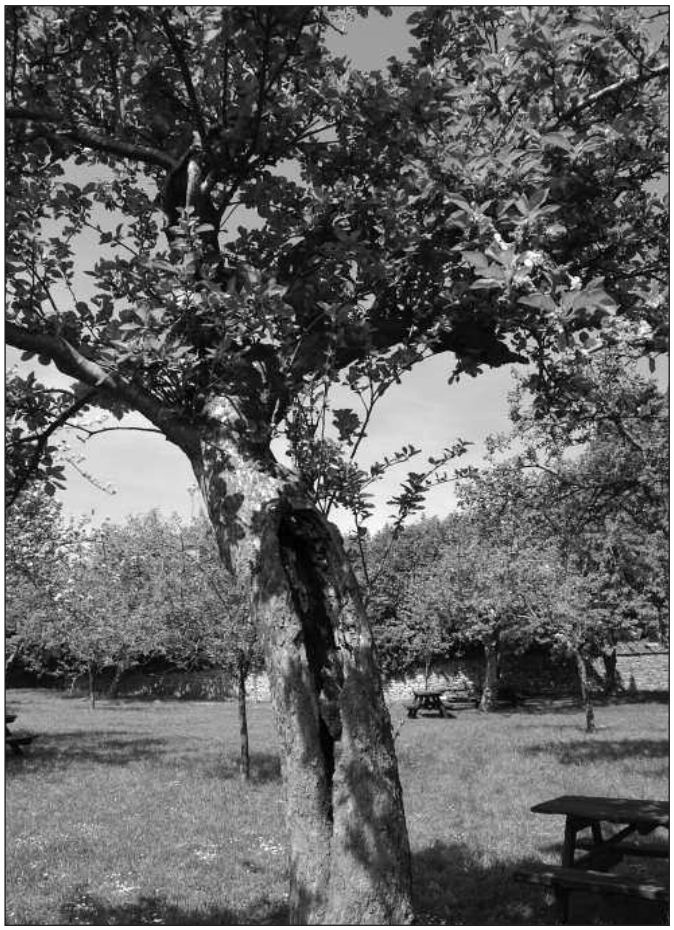
'Paradise orchards' were a passion of the 17th and 18th centuries and consisted of symmetrically planted miniature apple and other fruit trees on 'paradise stocks' set in grass plots intersected by formal paths.

Orchards continued to be very important in the rural economy across most stratas of society, supporting farms, larger houses and grand estates. Loudon, in his seminal Encyclopedia of Gardening (1878), outlines the continuing fashion of planting mixed orchards, using full standard trees, with a wide variety of fruits, to make a 'complete orchard'.

With the discovery of plant genetics, the Victorians developed many thousands of new apple varieties, and gentlemen often had show orchards purely for pomological one-upmanship, the stock reaching up to 9,000 varieties.

A fine specimen – Minster Lovell

Cogges Farm Museum Orchard



Decay in old fruit trees can benefit wildlife

The decline of the English orchard began early in the 19th century, with the import of cheap apples from America and later, New Zealand. The Cox was chosen as the national apple in the late 19th century in a bid to combat the New World fruit. Fruit growers were encouraged to give up local varieties in favour of uniformity and so-called 'National Varieties'.

Orchard culture became much more commercial and intensive. By the later 19th century, the Kentish and Gloucestershire systems of orchard culture had been developed, with a mix of bush-apple trees in rows, inter-planted with soft fruits. The modern mono-culture of bush apples in close rows, with pests sprayed into chemical oblivion, was but one step away.

During the 1970s, farmers were given subsidies to rip up their old, un-commercial orchards on full-standard trees, and British super-markets largely abandoned the English apple.

Heavy fruiter - Minster Lovell

Misty Morning near Stonesfield

Today, surely, we should re-discover the wonderful possibilities in orchards – food, natural diversity, contact with the seasons and a place for contemplation. We need orchards more than ever before and we need to return to our orchard roots.

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For further information, contact Mid-shires Orchard Group,based at Stow Landscape Gardens (National Trust), offering practical training and advice.

M. Roberts (Chairman), tel: 01295 712 272

website: www.msog.btik.com

The mysterious origins of the English apple

Jeanette Cayley

Apple Facts

1. Maloids such as apples, pears, quinces and medlars, cannot be grown from cuttings.
2. They do not self-pollinate, with rare modern exceptions.
3. They are indifferent to the variety of the pollen parent.
4. Their seeds will not germinate while in the core.
5. Their seeds need a 60-day chill period before they will germinate.
6. Apples have not hybridised successfully or become sterile.

In early September about 30 members of the Friends visited an old apple orchard in Ramsden by kind invitation of Mr and Mrs Morley. This was followed by an illustrated talk by Dr. Barrie Juniper, one of the UK's acknowledged apple experts. He explained that the famous Blenheim Orange first appeared in an ordinary garden in Woodstock and the original parent of all Bramley apples lives on as an ancient specimen in a Nottinghamshire garden. He took us through a tour of central Asia from the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates where the apple is thought to have originated and along the trading route, only much later christened the Silk Road, where the sweet apple seeds (as opposed to the crab apple) are thought to have been gradually spread by wild horses and bears. He also described his exploration of native fruit 'forests' on the borders of Kazakhstan to discover the origin of the apple. In one afternoon we touched on horticulture, conservation, geology, archaeology, history, literature and cooking. What more could one ask? We all felt that we would now savour the 'common' apple as something rich and strange

Tasting traditional apple varieties at Ramsden

'The Story of the Apple' by Dr. Barrie Juniper is published by Timber Press, Portland, Oregon

Barn Owls

Ian Anderson

It's been a 'funny old' summer as far as the Wychwood Project barn owls are concerned.

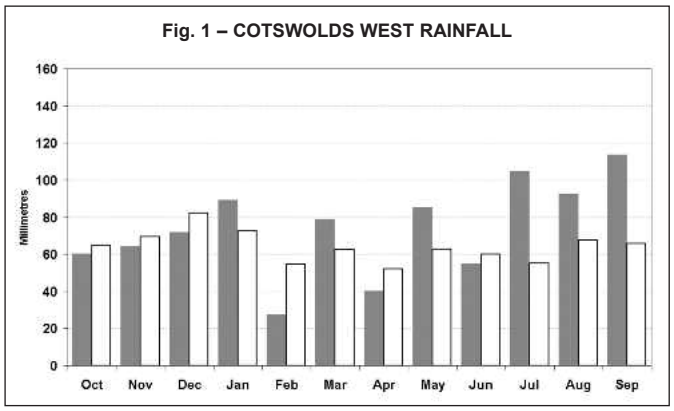
A critical factor for all wildlife (including humans!) is food availability. Barn owls rely very heavily on the short-tailed field vole. From our extensive monitoring work it appeared that populations of the latter were much lower than usual. This was not just in river valley situations where the 2007 summer floods must have taken their toll but on the higher ground as well. As a result, female barn owls were late in starting to lay eggs. More disturbingly, we subsequently found an unusually high number of our nest sites where egg laying had started but the nests had then been abandoned – another sign that food supplies were not adequate, certainly early on in the season.

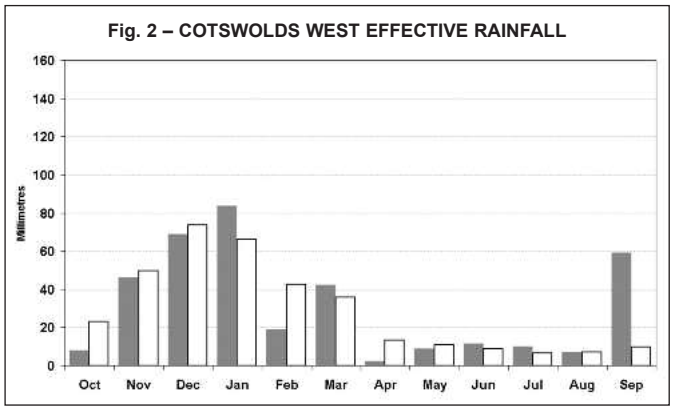
But it has not been all gloom and doom by any means although nestling numbers were lower than average. We have added further valuable local environmental data to the national recording programme. Several new nest sites have proved successful, including the replacement for the fallen tree at Shipton under Wychwood described in the last issue of Forest Update.

Water in Wychwood

Mike Owen

Water is an essential part of the landscapes and wildlife habitats of Wychwood. The River Windrush, the River Glyme and its tributaries and the flooded gravel pits south of Witney, are all very obvious occurrences of surface water. However, a large component of the natural water resource in Wychwood is out of sight, held in the underground aquifers in the Cotswold limestones that underlie much of the Wychwood area, and also in the flood plain gravels of the lower Windrush valley. These underground and surface water systems are directly connected.





Key: white bars are long-term average rainfall, grey bars are 2008's monthly totals.

[Environment Agency]

A 'water year' relates better to the natural water cycle than a calendar year and can be split into two parts, winter (October to March) and summer (April to September). Figure 1 shows the actual monthly rainfall totals for the water year 2007/08 for the Cotswolds. In winter 2007/08, the total rainfall was average while in summer 2008, total rainfall was 38% above average but without the intensity of July 2007. The diagram also shows that average monthly actual rainfall does not vary greatly.

However, in summer most of the rainfall is used by the growth of plants and, to a lesser extent, lost to evaporation. These processes, together known as 'evapotranspiration' occur at a much lower level in winter. Evapotranspiration is calculated and then deducted from actual rainfall to give 'effective rainfall'. The monthly pattern of effective rainfall for the 2007/08 water year is shown in figure 2; the difference from figure 1 is striking. In contrast to actual rainfall, effective rainfall, which generates groundwater recharge and surface water run-off, is a highly seasonal parameter, which in the past water year was clearly unexceptional until September, the third of three very wet months. Consequently, the current water year has not seen extremes in the natural water environment and there has been no repeat of the notorious floods of summer 2007 or the serious drought of summer 2006.

Puppet Talk

One of the more unusual activities of the last few months was the chance to help the BBC's channel for young children – CBeebies – find a venue for a programme on ancient trees. This fitted in well with our ongoing work to raise awareness of old trees locally. Through our local contacts we were able to arrange for children from Woodstock Primary School to come along to help the show's host, a puppet called Jelly, hunt for ancient trees in the grounds of the Oxfordshire Museum.

Jelly – the show's host

High Coppicing of Hazel

Nick Mottram

Hazel is a very common tree in the understorey of our oldest woodlands. The regular cutting-back of hazel to ground level is a traditional management technique called coppicing, that was used to produce thin straight stems for many different uses. Today the relatively high population levels of browsing animals including deer, hares and rabbits can make regrowth of hazel uncertain. The Project has used various techniques to try and overcome this browsing problem. Fencing the coppiced ground is by far the most successful but it is very expensive. Piling cut stems over the top of the hazel stool can be effective where browsing pressure is light.

Hazel browsed by deer

A high-cut 'coppard' hazel after one year, with remains of brushwood thicket

We are currently experimenting with an 'old' method known as 'copparding'. Here, the stems are cut at about shoulder height and above what appears to be the preferred (though not absolute) deer browsing height. Initial results are positive with strong regrowth where there is enough light. Whether the quality of the stems that regrow is good enough remains to be seen. If the technique proves successful it could become more widespread. One consequence would be a change in the character of our woodlands. If anyone has direct experience of this approach from elsewhere the Project Office would be pleased to hear from you.

WYCHWOOD PROJECT

The Wychwood Project works within the area that was once the Royal Hunting Forest of Wychwood.

Our Goals:

The Wychwood Project aims to raise awareness of the history and heritage of the Royal Hunting Forest of Wychwood, and to encourage local people to take part in and benefit from restoration, conservation and enhancement of the rich mosaic of landscapes and habitats within the Forest boundaries.

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