

Mendip

the
mendip
society

Caring for the Mendip Hills

The Newsletter of The Mendip Society

Issue No. 160 • November 2020



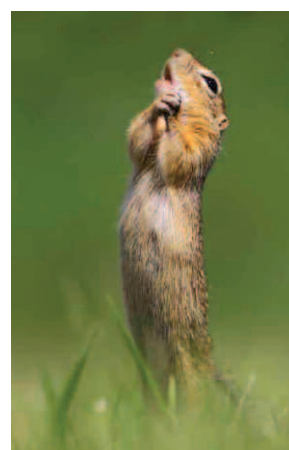
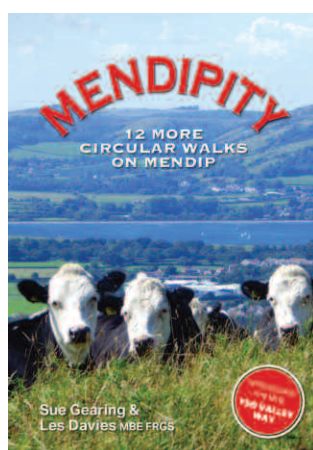
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We hope everyone is still managing to get out and enjoy the Mendip Hills in safety. We would love to hear from you for the next newsletter.

"The views expressed in these pages are not necessarily those of the society."

Above – Artist's reconstruction of the Timber Circle by Leah Marshall p4. Below left – 'Time For Tea' by Janet Sherwin; "MENDIPITY" – a new publication by Sue Gearing and Les Davies. Below right – Thank you Lord for nuts.



From the Chair

By Richard Frost

So here we are again as another restriction is placed upon us; I suppose it had to happen as the virus gets a bit more active again and our usual activities and personal travel plans are affected. And this is just at a time when our band of walks leaders was looking forward to giving us a programme for the next few months. Any ideas in this direction are back on hold for the time being.

However, all is not lost as, yet again, I refer you all to the Society web site and under the “walks” section you will see the growing number of DIY walks listed. Many thanks to Peter Janes, who thought of this good idea and I urge you all to have a look at them and have a go. And –, why not put your own ideas into practice and submit one yourself? It's not that difficult, you will have fun doing it and have a good walk into the bargain; why not give Peter a ring and he will advise you how to do it.

The same also goes for our “Links” section which, at the click of a mouse shows us what a wide variety of other groups, organisations and individuals are doing during this pandemic time – something of interest for us all. And why not share your thoughts and photos with the rest of us on our Gallery page?

This time of the year is really picturesque and beautiful as the colours change as the leaves turn a different shade to indicate the start of another season, surely something not to be missed out on.



On a more personal note – several individuals have been approached recently, asking if they would be able and willing to take over the position of Chairman when I vacate it at the year end, but for various reasons they have not been able to accept.

So I urge you again to let me know of someone whom you think would be your choice of chairman; it's a position that is not a difficult one, which just needs a few hours a week but one that is very important to the society and is a job well worth doing. –

Richard Frost

From the Editor

The major part of this newsletter was written before the present lockdown for the whole of the UK was begun (November 4th midnight) so some of the articles might not still ring as accurate at this moment. Thank you to those who have responded to my request for articles and snippets of interest, it is much appreciated and frankly makes my job as Editor so much less stressful. I think that I have more or less ‘free rein’ to include what I like in the publication (don't answer that bit Richard!), which can be fun – so if any of you budding writers and designers out there would like to be a ‘guest editor’ for an issue or two, to see if it appeals to you, please contact me to have a chat about it. New blood in any organisation is always a good thing.

That said – This issue we have some meaty articles to get your teeth into, full of information on this lovely area of ours, as well as the reports from our two nature reserves, where despite the difficulties, our volunteers have come up trumps. There are also two yearly tickets to the Wells Museum to be won and a super Christmas present opportunity from Sue and Les, our intrepid walker-authors, plus news from the AONB of future plans and new ways between places you can tread along as slowly as you like. – **Judith Tranter**

From the Secretary

Richard Frost, our Chairman, has given us good warning of the fact that he will be stepping down from this position at the end of the year and has invited any members who think they could and would be willing to take over from him to contact him. As Secretary I can fill in the ‘nitty gritty’ details of the situation. As a charity, obviously registered with the UK Charity Commission, we are governed by the Commission's rules and regulations, in place to safeguard the general public and indeed the members of the individual charity.

Under our Constitution we are required to be governed by a Management Committee which “shall have” certain stated officers, headed by a Chairman who must be elected by the membership at the Annual General Meeting. This must be held in the month of March with fourteen days notice given to every member. (Note- the Committee can call a ‘Special General Meeting’ at any time for exceptional circumstances). This means: –

- 1 That the society must hold an AGM before the end of March 2021 at which we must elect a Chairman, (with a minimum of a members' quorum of 30).
- 2 It would probably be considered by the Charity Commission that the society must have a chairman in order to be running constitutionally; at the very least it could cause some problems with the commission.

This is a challenging situation for your Management Committee and they appeal to the membership to put on its collective and individual thinking caps to resolve the conundrum. Depending on the Covid-19 restrictions in force in March next year we may be able to hold a socially distanced meeting in a hall somewhere, or we may have to hold a ‘zoom’ event at which at least 30 attendees can vote – or the third option is that we can hold a postal ballot of all members. All of which of course pre-supposes that we have a, or some, nominations for Chairman to vote upon. – **Judith Tranter**

From the Membership Secretary

Free membership Subscriptions for 2021

As our programme of walks, talks and other events has been so severely curtailed this year by the corona virus restrictions the Committee has decided to extend members' 2020 subscriptions to the end of 2021 but referring to membership categories 'single adult' and 'family' only. This means that existing members do not need to pay for next year.

Other aspects of the Society's work have continued much as normal so some expenditure has continued on, for example, the nature reserves, keeping an eye on planning matters and small grants to local initiatives. So if you wish to pay as normal i.e. make a donation, we would be very grateful. This may be the simpler option if you have a standing order as you will otherwise need to instruct your bank to cancel the 2021 payment, (and then remember to reinstate it at the end of the year!)

New members will be asked to join in the usual way. Details are on the website 'join' page at www.themendipsociety.org.uk – **Peter Janes**



CHRISTMAS PRIZE DRAW FOR EVERY MEMBER

When the total UK lockdown happened, almost overnight it seemed, in March this year, the doors were shut and the lights went out in many, many public and community places and buildings all over Mendip. And no visitors coming through the turnstiles meant no income for them, then or for the foreseeable future.

But inside many of them, work still had to go on to protect the vital running functions and the vulnerable objects they housed. One such place with which the society has a close association, not least as a venue for many of our programme of talks, is the Wells and Mendip Museum.

When a funding appeal was launched by one of the many volunteers who are an integral part of the museum and its work, to keep the building and its services to the community afloat, the society couldn't refuse and gave a donation from our Heritage fund on your behalf. For what is the Museum if not a custodian of our Mendip heritage?

In return the Museum gave us two single yearly entrance tickets to the museum. You, the members donated the money so you should have the tickets to enjoy during next year. So for a bit of cheerful news during what might well be a rather dismal time of December this year we will be holding a free Christmas prize draw. This is how it will work.....

Every present member will be allocated a random number, from 1–445 and at the beginning of December two numbers will

be drawn by an independent person who isn't a member of the society. We will notify the members with those numbers by telephone and/or email and ask what name they would like on the ticket (as each

ticket is for a single named person to be admitted to the museum and its attractions and events for the year 2021.) The museum will write out the ticket and post it to you; if you think that you will probably never use it yourself you can nominate someone else to receive it – they don't have to be a society member.

We will post the names of the lucky winners in the March newsletter, maybe they will give us some 'hot off the press' glimpses of what they have seen and visited using their tickets?



A Neolithic Timber Circle in Priddy: Dr Jodie Lewis

Principal Lecturer in Archaeology · University of Worcester

Jodie Lewis has been a friend of The Mendip Society for over twenty years from leading walks at the Priddy Folk Festival for us, guiding us around the Stanton Drew circles, being one of our very welcome speakers for our talks programme, and welcoming our groups to her summer digs of discovery on the Mendip Hills. But here for us now is her account of the latest most exciting dig.



In July 2019, I directed archaeological excavations at a newly discovered site in Priddy. The site was initially found in 2018 through geophysical survey by the local community archaeology group 'Archaeological Landscape Extreme Research Team' (ALERT). The University of Worcester and ALERT have worked closely together for nearly a decade and the excavations detailed here also form part of a research programme called the Priddy Environs Project (PEP). PEP, now in its 9th year, is investigating the origins and development of human activity in Priddy and is run by myself and Dr David Mullin.

The geophysical survey undertaken by ALERT showed what appeared to be a small circle of pits in a field close to the centre of the village. Nothing is visible on the surface so these pits must only survive below ground. Another form of geophysical survey, ground penetrating radar, was subsequently undertaken by the University of Worcester to confirm the earlier geophysical survey results and provide more detail. Together, the two surveys revealed that the circle was around 16m in diameter and comprised of 12 subsurface pits.

Prior to excavation it was apparent that the pit circle could represent only one of two site types and be of only one of two dates. Firstly, it could be a Late Neolithic timber circle, a type of monument used for community gatherings, acting as a ritual enclosure. Secondly it could be a variant of a Late Bronze Age/Iron Age round house, dating to the 1st millennium BC. If a timber circle, it would be the first confirmed example from Somerset, though examples are known from neighbouring counties. Neolithic timber circles are rare with less than 60 known from England. If a Late Bronze Age/Iron Age round house, it would be a very large example indeed. A recent survey of Late Bronze Age and Iron Age Wessex has highlighted that most round houses measure between 5-10m, with only a few unusually large buildings reaching 15m. It has also been noted that structures over 15m would have been very difficult to construct and maintain yet would have been the only ones that could contain a large number of people. Thus, if the pit circle represented a round house its scale suggests a specialised function, rather than simply "settlement" and would be another rare example for Somerset.

Answers would only come from excavation, so in July 2019, we brought a team of around 25 staff, students and volunteers to investigate this enigmatic site. The location of the circle was established using a Global Positioning System and a 20m x 20m trench was opened by hand. As the site is on private land and managed under an Environmental Stewardship agreement, permission was gained from the landowners and a derogation granted by DEFRA to allow the excavations to take place.

After removing the turf and topsoil it became obvious that the limestone bedrock was fairly close to the surface and as such, the pits must be cut into the bedrock for them to be showing up on the geophysics. It was also decided to excavate a sample of the site and leave some of it undisturbed and preserved in-situ.

After much mattocking, shovelling and trowelling, slowly the top of the pits began to reveal themselves. They were visible as broadly circular patches of soil, contrasting with the surrounding bedrock. This soil represents the filling of the pits: at this stage there was no way to be certain how deep the pits were and so excavation of the pits involved removing 10cm of this soil fill at a time. Each 10cm "spit" was given a unique identifier code which allowed any artefacts within the spit to be recorded horizontally and vertically. As is standard practice in archaeology, the pits were "half-sectioned" which means that initially only half of the soil fill in each pit was removed, leaving a clean vertical section. This allows for the profile of the pit (how steep the sides are; whether the base is flat) to be revealed and recorded before the other half of the fill is removed.



R – A pit being half sectioned, Photo Jodie Lewis



In total, six pits were fully excavated and a further two pits half-sectioned only, as they fell outside the main area being excavated. This work showed that the pits were spaced regularly at 2 metre intervals and had been cut into the bedrock to a depth of around 1 metre. Two of the postholes, in the south-east of the circle, were found to be deeper than the others and this could indicate they held larger posts, forming an entrance. Interestingly, one side of each pit in the circle was sloped whereas the other side was cut vertically.

Excavations at other sites have shown that such sloping sides acted as an aid to erecting timber posts, which could be slid into the hole and then levered up against the vertical faces of the pit.

L – A fully excavated pit, Photo Jodie Lewis.

The soil fill of the pits was remarkably uniform, apart from at the base. Here, the fill contained significant quantities of charcoal. Rather than an accidental blow-in of charcoal from fires, these are distinct, discrete pockets resulting from burning the base of timber posts to prevent rotting. The charcoal was retained and analysis after the excavations revealed it mostly to be oak charcoal, suggesting that the pits once held oak timber posts.



The pits also contained small slabs of Old Red Sandstone, which could be deliberate packing around the posts to help keep them in place.

At some point in the life of the site, the timber posts were removed, and the open pits backfilled with the uniform soil deposit described above. The only artefacts recovered from the pit fills were flint flakes and debitage. These do not seem to represent deliberate inclusions and it is likely instead they became accidentally incorporated when the pits were backfilled.

At the centre of the circle, a small U-shaped cluster of stakeholes was found and we speculate that these could represent a lightweight structure, perhaps a wattle screen. This could have hidden or contained activities happening at the centre of the site.

L – Aerial view of the pit circle after excavation, Photo by James Atkins

At the close of the excavations, we had no dating evidence that allowed us to confidently date the site. However, the charcoal, described above, along with other carbonised plant material from the pits was sent for radiocarbon dating. 11 samples were submitted for dating and apart from one rogue Mesolithic hazelnut and a post-medieval date from a disturbed top layer, the remaining nine dates cluster around 3000 BC.

This confirms that the pit circle is a Late Neolithic timber circle, the first dated example from Somerset, and a site of both regional and national importance. Timber circles were freestanding, rather than roofed, structures and represent some of the earliest circular architecture in Britain. They are monuments that acted as an arena for ritual activities, which may have included the observation and celebration of celestial events. The timbers may have been carved or painted and it is possible that they also supported lintels, as seen acted out in stone at Stonehenge itself. A characteristic of many timber circles is a central feature, suggesting that activities focused on the sacred centre of the sacred circle. The U-shaped cluster of stakeholes identified at Priddy adds further weight to this.

The Priddy Timber Circle is our latest addition to the Neolithic Mendip landscape. In recent years, we have uncovered an Early Neolithic enclosure on North Hill, close to the Priddy Nine Barrows, and a further Late Neolithic enclosure, close to this timber circle site. We also previously excavated at the Priddy Circles and were the first to confirm that the Circles also date to the Later Neolithic period. Together, this work is showing that during the Neolithic, the Mendip Hills were without doubt one of Britain's most significant ritual centres.

There is still much post-excavation analysis to carry out on this, and the other sites, but we intend to bring all the work together and publish it as a monograph. Watch this space.....

LOCKDOWN BOTANY 2020 by Karen Andrews

ED – Members may remember Karen kindly wrote the report of the talk on the Mendip Hills AONB by Jim Hardcastle at the Wells Museum last year.



Dandelion Fest at sunset © Andrews

The COVID-19 shutdown placed some of my favourite Somerset botanising sites tantalisingly out-of-reach. I could gaze at the Mendip Hills over the moors, but they were just that bit too far to reach during my daily walks. I resigned myself to making the best of sites within walking distance of home. I tried to gain some variation by setting out in a different direction every day. Intensive agriculture does not make for prime botanising. Botany was nonetheless a great distraction to alleviate lockdown boredom.

Gradually, I worked out a walking routine. I am lucky to live in such a beautiful area. I had to do some minor zigzagging for social distancing through the village. It was generally easy for me to find myself alone in a wide, open space in no time at all. Many were not so lucky during lockdown.

My walks included quiet country lanes, two woods, hills, fields, an empty golf course, ponds, rhynes, ditches and moorland. Exciting, rare plants were not likely in my immediate area. Habitats, normally dismissed as unappealing, proved more interesting than previously considered. As the weeks passed, the range of wildflowers increased. Even the unmown council land opposite the house was suddenly filled with dandelions and daisies. The countryside buzzed with more bees and butterflies than I could remember since childhood.



*Bee on Bush Vetch, Vicia sepium
© Karen Andrews*



Celery-leaved Buttercup, Ranunculus sceleratus, in a ditch in this spring's bright sunshine © Karen Andrews

Acorns, Acorns, Galore! Have you noticed that there is a glut of acorns this autumn? Last year, I seemed to be constantly treading beechnuts underfoot; this year, acorns are similarly abundant. Squirrels have more acorns than they can possibly nibble or store for winter. Willy trees rely on the animals' forgetfulness to get their acorns dispersed. Nature's design is at work. A bumper crop stands better odds of growing into mighty oaks one day. This glut is called a mast year. Research suggests that mast years happen every 5 to 10 years. What triggers a mast year is still not fully understood. A reaction to the weather? Certainly, 2020 was an extraordinary year with heavy rain early on, followed by high temperatures and drought. Do trees communicate surreptitiously to synchronise their seed production?



A Swedish research study on beech, *Fagus sylvatica*, discovered that the interval between mast years is decreasing and related it to climate change. The average interval was 4–6 years from the end of the 17th century until the 1960s, while it has reduced to 2.5 years over the past 30 years. Mast years often follow years in which summer temperatures are higher than the recorded average.

A mast year requires a tree to use an enormous amount of energy in seed production. It does not happen every year as a result. Increased mast frequency places a greater strain on trees.

A glut of 2020 acorns © Karen Andrews

The past winter's extreme storms toppled some of our local, mighty oaks. It was heart-breaking to see them uprooted at first. Then, I noticed that the springtime woodland flora was taking advantage of the breach in the canopy. Storm Ellen recently took out a huge branch from a local beech. Beech is notorious for closing the canopy on woodland floor vegetation. Fallen trees and branches end up providing homes for all sorts of woodland invertebrates and fungi.

One of my favourite English proverbs has always been: **Mighty oaks from tiny acorns grow.** This year, oaks are trying to plant a lot of acorns. They are promoting natural regeneration. Nature has a better recovery plan for climate change than any Man can put together.

ED: Karen Andrews is a Somerset-based botanist with a communications background. She writes regular blogs on botanical and environmental themes. Follow the link to Karen's website <https://botanykaren.net/blog/> for more examples of her blogs.

AUTUMN COLOURS - HOW AND WHY by Faith Moulin of Y.A.C.W.A.G.

We notice the changing seasons, especially when we are out in the countryside – never more so than in woodlands, with the beautiful colours of the trees' leaves changing almost daily.

But do we know the reason for, and the process by which this happens?

Pigments in leaves and flowers perform the same function as the pigments in our skin. They protect the plants from harmful ultra violet radiation. In plants they also help to limit the damage caused by stresses – such as salt and dryness; colourful fruit and flowers also attract the specific animals they need. The pigment that causes leaves to be green is called chlorophyll. Leaves begin to change colour when the days get shorter at the end of summer. There is no longer enough daylight for the tree to make food for itself through photosynthesis. During the growing season the chlorophyll in the leaves produces food for the plant from the energy of the sun. In autumn the chlorophyll disperses and is reabsorbed by the plant but the other pigments in the leaves remain, giving many leaves their amazing autumn colour. Often the leaves change in a patchy way as the chlorophyll is slowly reabsorbed. The most common types of pigment in flowers and fruit are called anthocyanins. They can appear as red, purple or blue, and fruits rich in anthocyanin include blueberries, raspberries, blackberries and things like black rice and soy bean. Some of the purple shades in autumn leaves are derived from anthocyanin. Another pigment for red and purple is called betalains. This is extracted from beetroot to produce a commercial food dye, but also occurs in spinach and cacti! Yellow and orange pigments called carotenoids and xanthophyll are dominant in autumn leaf colours in many tree species and are also important in colouring the flowers of many species.



L – Guelder Rose and below – native Field Maple.photos – Faith Moulin.



SMITHAM CHIMNEY REMEMBERED by Judith Tranter



When the header banner of our Face book page was changed recently to a picture of the Smitham chimney across the pond. (left), immediately we received an interesting post on it from Amanda Rees who wrote –

“My late father was one of the founder members of the restoration group and in having the chimney listed ♥ so proud”

SO - This is the story of Amanda's Father, the Mendip Society and a rescued chimney.

Now, one of the first things I remember doing when I first joined the Society at the turn of the new Millennium was a couple of days spent deep in fallen trees, bushes with tangled roots, bracken, bramble and

rocks, trying to unearth the lines of the original flues leading to the chimney. They would have been very like the ones the Society rescued in the Blackmore Reserve at Charterhouse. Sadly, the Smitham flues were irreparably destroyed and flattened by roots, weather, animals and maybe even the Forestry Commission activities.



Photo taken by Sue Gearing of the work. Les Davies left, anyone else recognise themselves?

But Amanda's post set me thinking.

I knew that the 70 foot high Smitham Chimney is the only one in existence in the south west and is a very important historical landmark and is somehow mixed up with our Society's history too. But I was woefully ignorant as to how and when.

So I wrote to Amanda asking if she knew anything about how her father, Frederick Pearce, was involved.

She told me that after his death in 1998 she had found out about his distinguished war service and his subsequent 22 years career in the Royal Navy. In 1960 (when she was born) he began working for the Department of the Environment (D.O.E.) where he looked after ancient buildings and scheduled monuments, including Stonehenge. They lived in 'The Clock House' in East Harptree, a mere stone's throw from Smitham Woods and she surmises that this is where his fascination with Smitham Chimney began.

In the early 70s a demolition order was placed on it because of concern by the owners of the land, the Forestry Commission, for the safety of the public using the footpaths through the plantation. Mr Pearce, who was involved with several local charities, (although it is not thought he was a member of the Mendip Society), was one of the founder members of a conservation trust to save the chimney. Maybe his contacts in the D.O.E. were valuable at this point as they managed to source the specialised craftsmen they needed.

Here I was lucky enough to be able to search the Society's old newsletters many of which have been collected and saved. Covering just an A4 sheet of closely typed print, three to four times a year, they turn out to be a mine of information about everything going on in a very active Society at this time, although unfortunately for Amanda they don't mention her father at all. I found it really interesting tracing the story of the chimney, its rescue and listing as a 'class 2 scheduled building', and thought that other members might too.

So, here in chronological order is the progress of the story and the players in it. (with some editing of original)

January 1971 "The Management committee has received estimates in the order of £750 for the restoration of Smitham Chimney, we have already had offers of help from The Mendip Trust and other organisations and we shall be asking for support as soon as the details have been settled. *Hon, Editor: Mr V. D. Dennison*"

July 1972 "There has been a considerable amount of public interest and concern with regard to the deteriorating condition of the historic Smitham chimney at East Harptree, it was renovated in 1919 although it had not been used since 1875. It is rather sad that it should have reached its present condition and we should like to think of ourselves as more concerned with our past history than at any time previously. The Society has initiated an extensive fund-raising campaign, sufficient it is hoped to cover the whole cost of renovation which will be in the region of £1,400. A considerable amount of interest has been shown already with donations promised from a number of bodies including the Mendip Trust, a body formed from The National Trust and the Nature Conservancy. Would anyone who is concerned for our countryside and history consider donating monies to this project; there is not very much time left but I would urge all those who would like to participate to write immediately to the Mendip Society Secretary, Mrs Anne Bodley."

October 1972 "Work has now started on Smitham Chimney, expected to take three months. We are glad that Mr David Dawson, the chimney builder has only had to remove and replace 10ft of the rotten brickwork from the top and can repair the rest by re-pointing and replacing individual bricks. An aluminium lighting conductor has been fitted; the total cost will be about £1500, with £1250 already raised. Mrs Sylvia Yeo of E. Harptree will raffle a painting, which can be viewed at Wells Museum, by the Cornish artist Lester Attack. Generous contributions have been made by Sir John Wills, Metal Agencies Co, The Mendip Trust, Clutton R.D.C., East Harptree PC, The Longleat Estate, Mendip Hunt, Somerset C.C. and many other local people & organisations".

March 1973 "The re-pointing and repair to the bottom two thirds limestone work is now completed; the upper brickwork still has to be re-pointed and the top six feet to be replaced".

July 1973 "Work on Smitham Stack has resumed, it is hoped to finish building the missing top with special radius bricks by mid June; the total monies collected, minus sundry expenses now stands at £1,384.50, however to pay for the basic brickwork requires a further £100. In fact it would be very useful to spend a further £230 on it, providing a wrought iron door to seal off the doorway at the bottom and a concrete base to keep vegetation away from the stonework. It would seem a great shame if after having done so much we cannot complete it, it commands a most imposing position and is a well-known landmark. There is a rush lined pond at its base, photographs of the chimney together with a list of contributors to the restoration fund are to be displayed at the Wells Museum".

December 1974 After the resignation of Dr. Piers Blakeney-Edwards from the Management Committee.

"It is largely due to the drive and enthusiasm of Dr. Edwards that Smitham Stack stands today, fully restored. He undertook the fund raising and worked closely with the builders and the Forestry Commission to ensure that the Stack, once rebuilt, would be maintained for future generations"



Now the story is nearly up to the present with the work parties I started with in 2003, clearing the site (which had become rather derelict again around the chimney) with the help of the Society's volunteers and the AONB Warden Les Davies. They also, on a typical Mendip winters day, in a gale, with horizontal rain, erected and dedicated a plaque, showing how the site would have looked when it was in use. Luckily Les provided hot drinks and do-nuts from the AONB trailer to unfreeze everyone before they left!

In the Society newsletter of April 2013 Paul Harley writes about the final stage of the story. He says "In 2013, when dog walking in the woods I realised that the site was looking distinctly run down, so contacted Andy Mallender

who organised work tasks for the AONB then. With help from the Forestry Commission who supplied replacement fencing, on February 26th the Advanced Young Rangers with Bob the Society's secretary replaced all the fencing and generally tidied up. As Andy said "The Young Rangers had a great day learning new practical skills, including re-pointing the walls of the plaque, whilst also discovering the history of this special site".

And in March last year the AONB Task volunteers, many of them Society members, tackled the very wet job of creating a living willow protector for the banks of the pond. Up to the present day, protected and saved, by people like Amanda's father and our members, for us here on Mendip but also for whole Nation, the site still looks and feels 'special'.



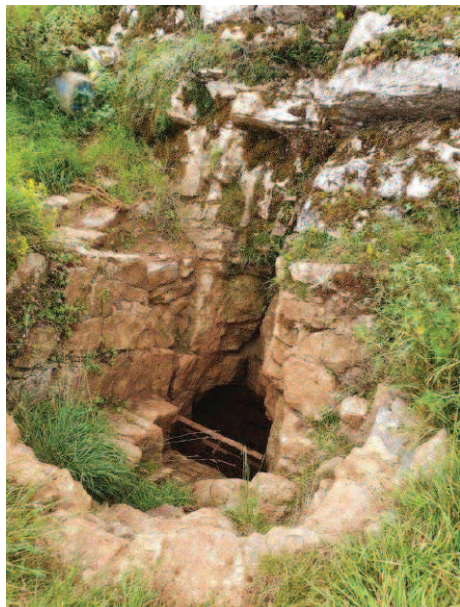
BAGPIT – EXCITING NEW DISCOVERIES

by Professor Danielle Schreve

Mendip caver Alison Moody and her team of diggers have recently been exploring Bagpit, a new cave near Draycott. When several large bones were discovered at the start of the year, the team contacted Society member Danielle Schreve at Royal Holloway University, who identified them as the fossil remains of Ice Age horse and aurochs.

Unfortunately, any plans to investigate further then had to be put on hold because of Covid-related restrictions but in September, Danielle, along with Alison and Vince Simmonds, were able to return to the site and excavate more of the bones.

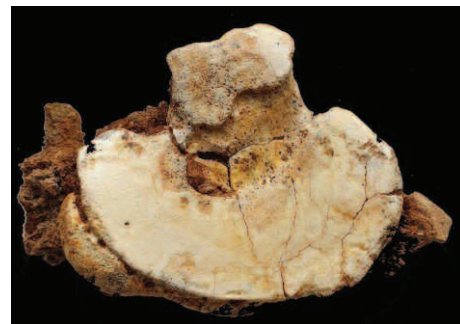
The presence of aurochs, the wild ancestor of our domestic cattle, is exciting because this animal is only found in warm and wooded periods in the past, suggesting that the site may date to an interglacial period well before the last Ice Age and making it one of the oldest known on Mendip. In addition, the large size of the aurochs remains is notable, indicating an animal over a metric ton in weight. Many of the bones were broken in antiquity and well cemented into the sediment, requiring careful excavation on site and many hours of conservation and patient “refitting” back in the lab, a job for someone armed with a lot of glue, a steady hand and a love of 3D jigsaw puzzles!



Bagpit cave entrance.



“Horse foot bone (Navicular) fresh out of the ground and after cleaning”.



Sieving of the sediment has also started to produce tiny molars and incisors of small rodents. The site looks set to yield more exciting finds in the coming months and the team are looking forward to a return visit, building on a new collaboration between local cavers and academics.

These finds have been made thanks to the goodwill and support of the landowners, Will and Jo Simmons, who are gratefully acknowledged.

OUR NATURE RESERVES – SUMMER INTO AUTUMN 2020 by J. Tranter

After restrictions on travelling to exercise and ‘working as part of a group for your charity, volunteering in open spaces’, were lifted in the summer months we were able to have regular work days for six persons in both reserves; there was no shortage of volunteers, who were desperate to get back into the countryside and do some nice hard physical work again. With much maintenance work to do in Tania’s Wood after such a great summer season plus the managing of the ‘end of summer’ sward in Slader’s Leigh, we were happily busy.

TANIA’S WOOD – Tania’s is a wood of two halves, separated by one of the banks of the Deer Leap, the drop being navigated by a flight of five

homemade wooden steps, which get a lot of wear from many feet. We repaired them when we first took over management in 2015 and now they had reached the end of their safe life. The winter weather would make them very slippery so they had to be completely replaced this time. Two of the ‘Vols’, as they are known, undertook this one wet morning and did a grand job.



Tania's Wood Continued

Recently, luckily arranged just before the current lockdown, Tina Bath, previously deputy Senior Ranger to our own President when with the AONB, and our 'resident' hedge laying tutor, came to help us plan the work programme for the reserve for the coming winter months. We wanted this to integrate into the scheme announced by the Government in November 2019 to plant 11 million trees by 2022. Trees are a precious natural asset, and as a natural carbon sink are a vital part of the fight against climate change; enhancing our small woodland area also means we are providing a better range of ecosystem and habitat benefits which boost biodiversity in the area, benefitting all of our wildlife.

Across Mendip there is a great drive towards working in partnership with the several charities specialising in woodland creation, enhancement and maintenance, all working on plans to put into action the government's scheme; this includes our own Mendip Hills AONB. We're now facing a whole host of threats as well as climate change and species decline, including tree disease, and these are all factors that are occurring at a landscape scale. Groups working together and with communities means we are also working at landscape scale, and the society is determined to be a part of it all. There will be more on this in the next newsletter.

In the meantime we have been allocated 500 little hedging whips which will bulk up the hedgerows we have laid in the last five years, plus the next stretch we plan to lay this season, and the creation of new stretches of hedge where there is only wire at the moment. So keep an eye on the website and Face Book page and occasional email circulars for appeals for volunteers for planting work parties. Alongside this we will be coppicing two rows of overgrown hazel trees, removing ground scrub and dead canopy and planting two new rows of hazels to put into the rotation timetable that hazels require to keep them in shape. Photo – The huge hedge to be laid this season on the left and the overgrown row of hazels to be coppiced on the right.



SLADER'S LEIGH FLOWER MEADOW

At the end of summer, the meadows' spent foliage has to be cut and removed so that the soil is not enriched – wild flowers need poorish soil to flourish. Usually we scythe the grasses with a good number of volunteer scythers from several different groups, most of which we have helped to learn this old countryside skill, cutting over one weekend and raking it off over the next. Last year, for various reasons, we didn't manage to cut it all and also had to leave big heaps of raked grass, nettles, bracken, flower stems etc on the side of the meadow where it decomposed all winter. It was extremely difficult to clear away when we could finally start work this spring and exposed the ruined area underneath. It would have been extremely difficult this summer to get it scythed as we wished so we hired a motorised Allen Scythe and learning the hard way, on the job, managed to cut it with the dogged, persistent efforts of six dedicated volunteers. The cut row had to be raked frantically out of the way so the new row could be cut. Scything may be thought slow and old fashioned but it is a more satisfying, stress-free method and achieves a better cut than any mechanised method. Plus it is easy on amphibians and insects hiding there – they can escape and not be mown down! So we were very glad that on this occasion Malcolm somehow saw this gorgeous Great Green Bush Cricket in front of the machine and stopped it just in time.



The following week we had the assistance of the AONB 'vols' who cheerfully raked and carried vast quantities of quite wet (it was a very wet month!), tough mixed vegetation which we had to burn, because it can't be used for any good purpose.

Pictures: L – using the Allen scythe R – They devised this efficient and socially distanced method which worked a treat. More pictures can be seen on the website 'gallery' page – www.themendipsociety.org.uk

SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING THROUGH NATURE ON THE MENDIPS

by Tim Haselden; Development Officer, Mendip Hills AONB Unit

A new three-year project called 'Somerset Nature Connections' has started in Somerset focused on connecting vulnerable people with nature to support their physical and mental health, and is a partnership project between Somerset Wildlife Trust and the Blackdown, Mendip and Quantock Hills Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). The £500,000 project is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, Hinkley Point C Community Fund, Discovery Community Fund, Somerset County Council's Prevention Fund, South Somerset District Council and Somerset County Council Public Health.

Even before the Corona virus pandemic, which has seen a surge in the number of people turning to nature for their wellbeing, there was strong evidence that time spent outdoors helps improve mental and physical health. *The project will build on work the AONBs have been delivering for the last 4.5 years through Somerset County Council Public Health funding.

During this time, across the three AONBs:-

2,345 people engaged in the project; 216 people took part in training; 515 sessions took place; 10 volunteers regularly supported the project.

The overwhelmingly positive response demonstrated the natural, intrinsic need people have to connect with nature. One participant said: *"I come away feeling content and very happy, like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. It's given me confidence to do other things too - it's acted like a snowball effect."*

Now more than ever there is a need to support local communities, and the new Somerset Nature Connections project will build on this work. It will run a targeted programme delivered in 6-week blocks at various locations for people experiencing poor mental health. The programme will include practical outdoor activities, including conservation tasks, wildlife walks and natural crafts. The project will also work with mental health charities, volunteers and local providers, and support staff working with people at higher risk of experiencing poor mental health, including adults with learning disabilities, long-term health conditions, carers and isolated older people.

Kristen Lambert, Somerset Nature Connections' Project Manager, said: *"We are really looking forward to providing a valuable service to help local people directly and assist local community groups to better support those they work with. Access to nature can be a powerful tool for helping people learn new skills, gain confidence, relax, communicate with others and be present – which can all help to manage and improve mental health and wellbeing."*

A part-time member of staff will work in the Mendips in partnership with Somerset Wildlife Trust and the Mendip Hills AONB Unit, and will start delivering on the ground from early 2021. For more information, visit www.mendiphillsaonb.org.uk.

ED: The Mendip Society was part of the initial project by being a venue (Slader's Leigh) for some of the 'open' events which provided opportunities for disadvantaged people to access the countryside in a structured way. We hope to be involved in the new Somerset Nature Connections project in a similar way.



'Hands-On Nature Conservation'
by Kristen Lambert



SLOW WAYS – RECONNECTING PEOPLE BY THE SLOW ROUTE

Historically, footpaths came into being for a population which had to walk to work, or to visit others, trade at market or go to church. Nowadays, smart phones and modern roads take us there as quickly and on as short a route as possible. Many of these well used walk ways have been lost and completely forgotten.

Slow Ways is an ambitious new project, the brainchild of geographer and explorer Dan Raven-Ellison, to create a network of walking routes between all of UK's towns and cities, as well as thousands of villages.

SLOW WAYS continued from previous page.

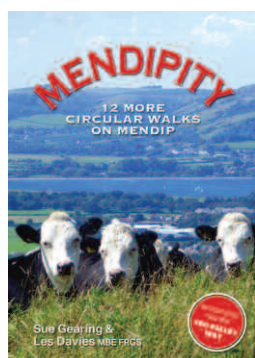
Supported by Ordnance Survey, the idea is to get people walking between locations they might otherwise drive or take public transport to – via existing off-road paths and bridleways. This is an important, positive and timely project. Walking can improve health and wellbeing, tackle the climate and ecological emergencies, save people money, improve our environment and bring enjoyment to people's lives. While there are thousands of miles of paths linking places across the



The design competition winner for the new logo for 'Slow Ways'

country, there isn't a comprehensive network designed to help us not have to walk unnecessarily long distances out of our way. There are, of course, walking apps that can show more pedestrian-friendly routes but they are, for the most part, designed to identify the best scenic route rather than the best practical walk. This is the aim of the Slow Ways. During the first lockdown, a team of 700 volunteers plotted routes, which collectively stretch for over 60,000 miles; now 10,000 volunteers are being sought to test walk them. **COULD YOU BE ONE**

OF THEM? Look on our website/walks page or go to <https://slowways.uk/frequently-asked-questions/> and sign up.



MENDIPITY FOR CHRISTMAS – from Sue Gearing and Les Davies

***Mendipity**, is an exciting new book of 12 circular rambles on Mendip, out now, in plenty of time for the important festive season of Christmas, and is another in the series of popular walks books by the duo of Sue Gearing and Les Davies.

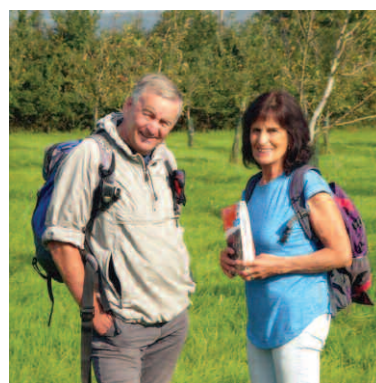
This book brings to life the nature, geology and history of the Mendip Hills. A big extra in this book is that Mendipity sees the launch of a new circular trail on Mendip, the Yeo Valley Way by Yeo Valley Organic.

The circular walks in Mendipity range from 3.25 to 8 miles and take in an ancient castle, Iron Age hill fort, a folly, former industrial landscape, lavender fields, a dramatic gorge and a glorious lake as well as stunning views.

Sue gives clear instructions on the route with the aid of OS maps, and Les, using his lifetime experience of the countryside and the Mendip hills, explains what you see en route.

Yeo Valley Organic together with the Mendip Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and The Mendip Society have all come together as sponsors.

The book is spiral bound, in full colour and imaginatively designed by Ian Taylor of Taylor Thorne Print Ltd in Weston-super-Mare who is also responsible for this Mendip Society Newsletter



Priced at £9.99, it will be available at many bookshops across the region together with village shops, tourist information offices and some museums.

These walks have been adapted from Sue's popular series in Mendip Times, in which there will be a mail order form for Mendipity. Or you can order direct by sending a cheque for £9.99 plus £2.50 p & p to Sue Gearing, 33 Garstons Close, Wrington, Bristol BS40 5QT. Contact is gearing@btinternet.com Allow a week for delivery.

***Mendipity – did you get it?** (taken from the two words-Mendip and serendipity) and as a "taster" here is a word from Sue about the new trail 'The Yeo Valley Way' to wet your appetite.

"The Yeo Valley Way, set up in October this year by Yeo Valley Organic, is a totally new trail around the Hazel Manor estate on the northern edge of Mendip overlooking the Chew Valley. It is a four mile circle around the woodland, with wonderful avenues of trees, and then a stretch in the open with spectacular views. It starts at Hazel Lodge which is at the top of the dramatic avenue of trees that used to lead to Hazel Manor. There are hills on this route, on the northern edge, but the rest is fairly flat. The new trail is in its early stages and there will be ongoing work to develop it fully to be suitable for walkers, cyclists and buggies".

ED – Our walks leaders are champing at the bit to get on with the job of leading members in the successful way they always have – this book will give new places to explore.



FIRST STEP SUCCESS STORY

Local campaigners in Cross and Compton Bishop are celebrating the completion of a pedestrian island and road crossings on the A38 just north of the junction with Cross Lane. Where there was only an uneven grass verge alongside a ditch there is now a surfaced path up to the gate into the footpath across the fields to Axbridge.

Somerset County Councillor, Bob Filmer cut the ribbon to mark the opening of the new path and said “, I congratulate them on their success. The County Council is working to increase walking and cycling routes where possible, and Cross Lane is recognised as dangerous for pedestrians and cyclists”.

Campaign chair Tess Gill said: “We are delighted to see this important step in achieving our aim of a safe off-road route for pedestrians and cyclists from Cross to Axbridge, and I especially thank Michael Clements who dedicated the land he owned at the junction of the A38/Cross Lane to the Parish Council so there could be a pathway around the junction.

However we still have more to do. The new path ends at the gate into the fields and unfortunately the landowners of those fields have not agreed to improvements on the right of way up to Axbridge so that it is accessible and safe for all. We are now consulting residents of Cross and Compton Bishop to determine the next stage in our campaign. **ED:** *The society has supported the groups’ campaign over the last 7 years and wishes them the best of luck with this next push.*



LITTER PICKING versus FLY TIPPING – No contest.



This stylish and colourful office chair is lying on top of a hedge in the lane at Grid ref. 653485, east of the A367 at Nettlebridge – Janet Sherwin

In the March newsletter members were asked to do a bit of litter picking for the Great British September Clean; I didn’t have many accounts of members doing their own picks, but I did have a twist on the story. Janet Sherwin, who told us about her new, and rediscovered, interests last time, also had a new take on littering.

She writes “I tried picking up litter once but then found a more interesting way to treat it. I now take pictures of fly-tipping and send them to the council.

Here is one with my message to Mendip.

She also made good progress with her old box of water colour paints as shown by ‘Time for Tea’ on the cover.

By the way, Henrietta, Georgina and Speckles her three hens are twice as big as when she got them in July, have just about all their feathers now and are very adventurous. She is still getting 2 or 3 eggs a day, much better and browner than they used to be. Seeing their improvement makes her very conscious of the thousands of poor creatures who spend their miserable lives crammed into cages, and she now would not dream of buying anything but “free range” eggs.

SOME IMPORTANT TIMELY FACTS AND REMINDERS

1. Our Heritage Fund is still open for applications in spite of, or possibly especially because of the pandemic. If you belong to a group which is struggling to survive, or know of one, which is part of Mendip and is commensurate with our aims and objectives please ring the Secretary to discuss in the first instance, (p.16).
2. We are still also open for your videos for our You Tube channel and your photos and self guided DIY walks for the website; contact the Secretary if you’ve forgotten how to send the videos in.
3. Peter is also still seeking a member who is able and willing to take over the running of the society website, you will remember he took it over in the summer on a temporary basis, please ring 01761 221995
4. As writing articles about activities and events from the society of years ago has shown, it is extraordinarily difficult to find any photographs to use with them. If you have any old photos at all which we could copy and return to you on any society activity or event please ring me 01275 874284.
5. We, the Committee, send everyone our seasonal greetings for the Yuletide next month.

A President's View

Photo – Graham Keating

My apologies for being absent from the pages of your last newsletter. As you can see, I am back!

How different life has become since the Corona Virus took hold of us. Adapting to change has become a part of our life. Meetings by computer, wearing masks whenever we enter a shop and a higher awareness of hand washing are just some of the things we are now becoming used to.

The Society has fared well throughout and we are slowly returning to some sense of normality, even if it is the 'New Normal'. We have to accept that change is inevitable in our lives and nothing may ever be the same again. That said, is it such a bad thing? I don't mean the virus, but more the process of having to 'change'. Nothing stands still. The Mendip I know today is not the Mendip I started work on over 30 years ago, nor is it the Mendip my Grandfather knew when he grew up here over 100 years ago. Life and the landscape is an ever changing picture.

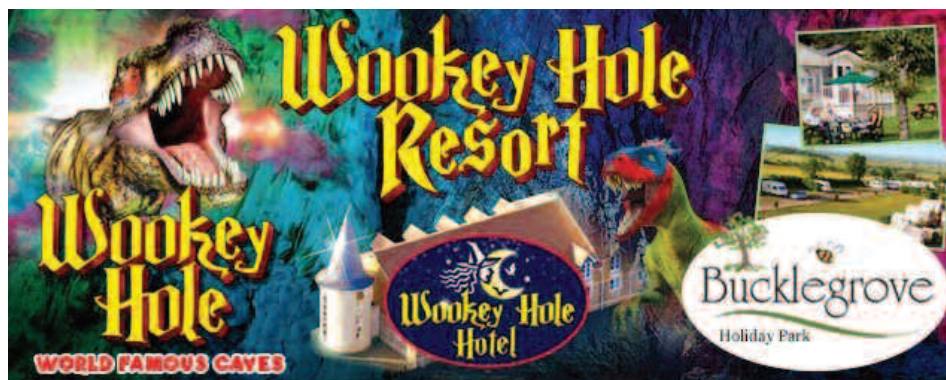
No one knows this better than our Chairman! Richard has decided it is time to hand over and he can now take a well deserved rest from being at the cutting edge. This is the man who pulled the Society back into being an influential organisation and who built an impressive team of motivated and enthusiastic people around him. It is always said that if you want to know just how much you will be missed, then put your arm into a bucket of water and pull it out. See how big a hole it leaves. Some leave a bigger 'hole' than others!! Richard Frost, you are such a person!

Well, I cannot believe that Christmas is almost upon us!! Here I am in October talking about it, but I know that there won't be another chance to say 'Thank You' to you all and have just the greatest time with your family and loved ones! My Christmas card to you all is the ubiquitous rainbow that has featured as a thank you and beacon of hope throughout this year. This one is in the Yeo Valley. **Take care and stay safe – Les**

ED: We know full well of the difficulties many groups are facing just to keep going during the time of this pandemic, and we are grateful to our two friendly corporate members; here is just a small token of our thanks for their continued support.



Update 6th October: We won't be running our regular events for the remainder of this year. We are planning to hold some pop up events at various times through the autumn and winter, so keep your eye on our website & social media to find out more. www.yeovalley.co.uk



Wookey Hole Caves have been keeping busy since re-opening in July with visitors travelling to us for a well-deserved day out or holiday. With capped capacity and Covid safety measures in place, Wookey Hole has been well-received by all our visitors over the summer months.

The Christmas cogs are turning, and we hope to launch our Winter Wonderland offering in early November, keep your eyes peeled on our website www.wookey.co.uk

IN MEMORIAM

Thank you to John Chapman and Sally Townsend for getting in touch with me about Margaret and Ralph, I believe it is of comfort to those bereaved to see how much their family member was valued by our members.

Judith Tranter

Mrs Margaret Chapman – Pat Farrant

I know you will all be very sorry to learn that Margaret Chapman died in September following a severe stroke in the spring. Margaret and her husband John both joined the Society in January 1969 shortly after its inception and served on the Management Committee for many years hosting the meetings in their lovely house in Cheddar.

Margaret was a lady of many talents. Her beautiful soprano voice enabled her to perform with the Wells Cathedral Oratorio Society as well as singing with Cheddar Church choirs where she was also the keeper of the Church archives.

Her preoccupation with all things underground inevitably meant that she was a keen caver and from a young age belonged to both Axbridge and Mendip caving clubs where she also took part in rescues with the Mendip Rescue Organisation. However, her lifelong interest was in digging up the past and more especially the study of bones where she would often volunteer with the Natural History Museum in London. She was always an enthusiastic supporter of research into the past and gave her time to participate in various excavations over the years at many Ice Age sites.

Her meticulous attention to detail made her an ideal candidate for keeping the Society's membership records, a position she held from 1989 until July 2006. This was no mean feat as then membership numbers were considerably more than today's and details were all kept on card indexes. The coming of the Data Protection Act with all its implications caused even more work and Margaret was scrupulous in

making sure the Society's records complied with the law.

Despite her many other interests, Margaret was an invaluable member of the Society helping out whenever she could and she will be greatly missed.

There will be a celebration of her life when restrictions ease.



Ralph Goodyer – by his daughter, Sally Townsend

It is with great sadness that we share the passing of former Mendip Society member Ralph Goodyer, aged 90 years.

Originally from Reading in Berkshire where he became a crop inspector, Ralph relocated to Somerset in 1969, having secured a job as Purchasing Manager for Willett Feeds in Sandford, and subsequently Bleadon. Ralph remained in the field of agriculture for his career, moving on to Sheldon Jones in Wells once Willetts closed. Ralph was also an active member of Bristol Corn Trade Guild.

Ralph was an absolute family man; a devoted husband to Jill and loving father to Paul and Sally. Many happy family times were enjoyed in their family homes in Sandford, and from 1978, in Winscombe. Numerous family holidays were enjoyed too, typically in Devon, Cornwall or Wales. Once retired, Ralph and Jill continued to travel all around the UK and Europe, via coach, ferry and train.

A keen gardener, Ralph loved the great outdoors. He was a long standing member of the National Trust, an active member of the Strawberry Line Society, and also of the Mendip Society, with whom he enjoyed many group walks and local area talks. Upon his passing, Chairman Richard Frost said of Ralph;

"I can speak for all the regular members of the walking group and say that he will be sadly missed by everybody due to his constantly cheerful nature and pleasant conversation. He always got on with everyone regardless of who they were. He was a lovely chap to walk with and his company was always sought out and the time with him was shared by us all."

Into retirement, Ralph was determined to climb Great Britain's three highest mountains. Alongside his children, Ralph climbed Snowdon at the age of 70, Ben Nevis in his 75th year and Scafell Pike in his 82nd year. A fabulous achievement!

Ralph was a loyal, selfless and consummate gentleman, who strove to live life to the full. He will be so greatly missed by many, but his love and strength will live on in those whose lives he touched.

A display board is being donated to the Mendip Society in Ralph's memory to be used at future talks, with thanks for bringing pleasure to his life.

ED: We will show the new boards in the March issue.

This newsletter has been helpfully printed by Ian Taylor of W-s-M; T. 01934 635916 M. 07760 378789
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