

Mendip

the
mendip
society

Caring for the Mendip Hills

The Newsletter of The Mendip Society

Issue No. 157 • November 2019

WHICH WOULD YOU RATHER SEE? – THIS



**MINDLESS,
SENSELESS
VANDALISM IN EBBOR
GORGE, JUST DAYS
BEFORE THE FINAL
EVENT OF THE
MENDIP ROCKS
FESTIVAL, WHEN ALL
THE 'INFO' BOARDS
WERE DESTROYED.**

**OR THIS – THE SAME PLACE FILLED WITH
VOLUNTEERS GIVING FAMILIES THE
OPPORTUNITY TO ENJOY AND LEARN ABOUT
OUR MENDIP HILLS COUNTRYSIDE?**



**HANDS UP IF
YOU THINK
ONE OF THE
MAIN AIMS OF
THE SOCIETY
TODAY,
SHOULD BE
TO HELP
PEOPLE TO
CARE FOR,
PROTECT
AND ENJOY
THE MENDIP
COUNTRYSIDE
NOT DESTROY
IT?**

Photos Adel Avery

In this issue

Read all about Yeo Valley Farms' plans for the future; projects we are supporting; Curious Stones; life in our Reserves; the MendipRocks! Festival, and events coming up for you to enjoy.

**OUR AGM 2020 IS ON FRIDAY
27TH MARCH IN PRIDDY
VILLAGE HALL
See details inside, page 5.**

The views and opinions of our contributors are not necessarily those of The Mendip Society. We are always happy to receive items for publication if they are signed; although we will withhold the name if asked.

WE HAVE ENJOYED

FRIDAY 26TH JULY –

NIGHT JAR GUIDED WALK IN STOCKHILL WOODS

On a perfect July evening, a group of Mendip Society members and friends met at Stockhill Woods full of hopes and expectations of experiencing the elusive nightjars one of our most fascinating summer migrant birds.



Chris Sperring, naturalist and conservationist explained his project surveying woodland sites in the south west for long eared owls which happen to share the same habitat as nightjars. These ground nesting birds which spend winter in Southern Africa, eat moths and other insects which they hunt at dawn and dusk. Availability of suitable breeding sites is critical and Chris explained the great importance of managing the cycle of woodland cropping in a way that can benefit them. An area of cleared forest that can look unattractive and sterile is exactly right for nightjars.

Over a couple of hours as darkness fell we listened and watched but the bird remained elusive apart from a distant churring which was our bird. However, a bonus was the repeated call of the grasshopper warbler (which many of us wrongly identified as a cricket), another elusive summer migrant. This event apart from informing us about conservation in our area, was an opportunity to feel closer to nature and we thank Chris Sperring warmly for this. – **Judy Newberry**

TUESDAY 2ND AUGUST – GETTING DOWN AND DIRTY IN MENDIP A VISIT TO THE SANDFORD LEVY MINE & CAVE – by John Clutterbuck

On 6th August, a baker's dozen of Mendip Society members gathered raggedly at the Mendip Activity Centre in Sandford. Our two local guides handed out hard hats with lights, though there weren't quite enough to go round... The rain eased off as we followed our guides through the woods at the base of Sandford Hill, pausing briefly to peer down into a dark little hole they identified as a red ochre working known as King Mine. Eventually we came to the Levy Mine, with a slightly less forbidding entrance: a sort of slot to be slithered through - one way or another - into a roomy passage (rather like getting into a house through the letterbox...).



Higher up on the hill, we were told, lead ore had historically been mined from the surface in a number of 'rakes'. The Levy Mine was an exploratory tunnel driven in about 1830 hoping to intersect some of these ore-bodies at greater depth. We followed the main passage straight into the hill-side for nearly 500 yards, admiring the patches of 'flowstone', and avoiding the many roped-off bits where 'cave pearls' were being allowed to develop. It was head-high (for most of us!) and about 5ft wide, presumably to allow space for wagons to take out the broken rock. The remains of drill-holes were often visible in the side-walls.

Also visible in the walls near the entrance, oddly enough, were the remains of mosquitoes, 'fossilised' in flowstone as black splodges. Quite a few of their living relations were flitting about there too, along with a number of moths.

The floor wasn't entirely flat, and we had to negotiate many muddy pools of water; the whole place was distinctly cool. We passed two 'cross-roads' where side passages had explored potential ore-bearing veins, the second one showing signs of bulk sampling. But we were told

that no mine-worthy ore was found; and a bit further on the passage became much narrower, then - beyond a nice large patch of flow-stone - it just ended. A frustrating day that must have been for the adventurers.

On the way out we heard about the group of Home Guard vigilantes who had hidden in the mine during the war, when a German invasion was thought to be imminent. That's why near the entrance there were some paving slabs on the floor, and bits of timber lying about. These men, trained in sabotage, were to have formed a resistance cell if the worst had happened. Our Chairman, Richard, showed us an old photo of these brave chaps in the very place where we were so happily strolling.

We crawled blinking out into the daylight, and remarked at how warm the air was. All in all it had been a fascinating - and at times sobering - experience.



SUNDAY 18TH AUGUST – HOCUS POCUS AT WOOKEY HOLE

Unfortunately we only had one taker for the evening magic and illusion entertainment at Wookey Hole Caves so we had to cancel our group booking – this must mean that this sort of thing is not to the taste of our members? We would really appreciate it if members would in fact let us know what does appeal to them so we can arrange an event or a visit accordingly; or better still it would be a pleasure if a member of the society had a good idea or a burning desire to do something or visit somewhere and went ahead and planned it.

WEDNESDAY 28TH AUGUST – WINE TASTING VISIT TO FENNY CASTLE VINEYARD

This too had to be cancelled for lack of bookings, we thought maybe it was too soon after the previous years' visit and that maybe it was a bit too expensive for many of us, but thank you Terry for doing all the arrangements for it.

THURSDAY 12TH SEPTEMBER –**“THE GLASTONBURY PILGRIMS WAY – A new Somerset Trail” by Chris Sidaway**

Chris Sidaway has worked for many years to get several exciting and interesting Heritage Walking Trails designated in Somerset. Often it takes months, even years of research and negotiations between land owners, Councils, Trusts and other groups of all kinds, plus imagination and an historical eye on the landscape to finally have a trail which can be enjoyed by all walkers. A very enjoyable meander, with photographs, along this new Pilgrims Way, which we hope to follow in fact very soon, as part of our walks programme.

TUESDAY 8TH OCTOBER –**A PHOTOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF MENDIP”- 2.30PM**

BY BERNARD SELICK & DAVID DAGGAR at Wells & Mendip Museum, Cathedral Green, Wells.

A collection of the most superb and pleasing photographs of Mendip that it is possible to see, lovingly taken and presented, and well received.

AND NOW, TO LOOK FORWARD TO –**WEDNESDAY 6TH NOVEMBER –****“THE FUTURE OF THE MENDIP HILLS AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY”**

A talk by Jim Hardcastle, introduced by Les Davies MBE. at Wells & Mendip Museum, Cathedral Green, Wells at 7pm- 9.30pm.



This is a joint event with the Mendip Society and the Mendip Hills AONB, held in conjunction with the ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY & IBG (The Institute of British Geographers).*

Jim, who is the Manager of the AONB Unit, will explain the future management of the Mendip Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB); his theme will be “The good, the bad and the alarming” with an insight into the future of this very special protected landscape.

There is no charge for entry but donations to the Mendip Hills Fund are asked.

Doors open at 6.30pm. Teas/coffee/biscuits available. Parking is limited outside the museum, with some disabled bays. There is normally ample free parking within the City after 6pm.

Please book with Les - les.davies@westcountryman.co.uk / Tel; 01458 445233.

*The RGS (with IBG) is the UK's 'learned society' & professional body for geography, founded in 1830 for the advancement of geographical sciences.

THURSDAY 28TH NOVEMBER –**“A HISTORY OF KNITTING PATTERNS” – 2.30PM**

AN ILLUSTRATED TALK by SARAH HARRIS of ‘The Spinning Weal’ in Clevedon. ST.JAMES’ CHURCH HALL, WOODBOROUGH RD, WINSCOMBE.

This is much more fun than it might sound! We will see how social history is expressed through knitting patterns, from the earliest printed patterns, through to the current revival of the craft. This is a nostalgic journey for those who once suffered the indignities of a knitted swimsuit, with a look at the fashions of a bygone, but not necessarily, more innocent, age. Illustrated with slides of patterns from Sarah's extensive collection.

Details from Richard - 01275 472797 / richardfrost608@gmail.com



ALSO ON THURSDAY 28TH NOVEMBER Danielle Schreve will be giving an illustrated lecture in Wells on the changing environment of Gully Cave, Ebbor Gorge. For details of this please see the report on our visit to the cave in June this year, page 13.

TUESDAY 10TH DECEMBER –

“THE INVENTOR OF NATIONAL PARKS – WHO WAS JOHN MUIR?”

AN ILLUSTRATED TALK BY TERRY GIFFORD AT THE WELLS MUSEUM – 2.30pm



John Muir c1900

Known as the father of the American Conservation Movement, John Muir never lost his Scottish accent. His idea for a series of National Parks is said to be America's gift to the world, so why the opposition to them in Scotland by The John Muir Trust? How is Muir's ecological philosophy from the 19th century relevant to landscape issues in 21st century? What can now be seen as John Muir's errors from our modern perspective? Terry Gifford is editor of the complete works of John Muir and more recently of eight famous books (and ebooks) by Muir published by Vertebrate Publishing. Terry is a world authority on the Scot who became known as America's wilderness sage.



SATURDAY 11TH JANUARY –

“THE MENDIP SOCIETY WASSAIL” of Fry's Lane Orchard, Burrington; from 6pm onwards.

We have booked the Burrington Village Hall this year so meet there at 6pm; parking respectfully in the Square please. – **Master of Ceremonies will again be our President, Les Davies**, and we welcome the Barley Rye Choir, for our Wassailing singing in all the right places, and dancing with Ladies Somerset Morris, so come prepared for an evening of joining in; there is usually a charity collection by both groups.

Joining the wassailing is free, and everyone is welcome; very warm clothing, good shoes/boots for grass and a torch for light are all advisable. (The ceremony requires a lot of noise to drive away the bad goblins so bring something noisy to bang).

A very nice seasonal curry, fragrant rice and flat breads will be available afterwards in the hall **but must be booked by e-mailing orders@thevegetablediva.com by January 7th** (so that Sonya knows how many to cater for - £5pp pay on the night)

For information contact Les on 01458 445233 / LesDavies@westcountryman.co.uk or Richard on 01275 472797 / chairman@themendipsociety.org.uk

FRIDAYS 14TH and 21st FEBRUARY 2020 –

HEDGE LAYING DAYS WITH TINA BATH and CHRIS CLAXTON at Tania's Wood, Woodbridge Farm, Ubley.

As before tuition days are open to members and non-members, both beginners and those with some experience, and for one or both days. There is a max of 8 places each day, which must be booked; shelter, parking and toilet facilities are on site.

This year we are able to provide this expert training at no cost to the participants, (it is hoped that non-members will be able to make a donation to our Heritage Grant fund.) We would also hope that participants would be able to help on at least one work day in Tania's wood after the training (it consolidates what you have learnt as well as helping the Society).



We will provide a hot soup, rolls, etc. lunch and drinks all day for £5. Directions, times and other details will be sent on booking by ringing 01275 874284 or email judith.tranter1@btinternet.com. Please note - places fill up very quickly, so don't delay.

If booking in January please contact Richard on 01275 472797 / chairman@themendipsociety.org.uk instead.

TUESDAY 14TH JANUARY 2020 –

“THE WORLD OF ROCK CLIMBING PHOTOGRAPHY”

by Ian Smith, introduced by Terry Gifford. 2.30pm Wells Museum

Ian Smith is a rock climbing photographer and editor of climbing guide books to the Southwest and North Wales. In this illustrated talk he gives us an insight into those obsessed by the attractions of unforgiving vertical rock, their challenges, rewards, issues and rivalries. As an editor, Ian will reveal behind the scenes ethical and environmental debates, together with publishing competition. With great photos of rock-climbing in the Mendips, Somerset, Devon and Cornwall, amongst others, this promises to be an opportunity to learn what you did not know about this subject. It will also offer a glimpse into the secrets of the strange world of rock-climbing by a professional photographer.



Ian Smith



TUESDAY 25TH FEBRUARY 2020 –

“CAVING AND CAVE RESCUE” – by Martin Grass, of MENDIP CAVE RESCUE – 2.30pm at Wells Museum

Mendip is synonymous with Caving, and cave rescue is vital to activities in our area. Martin will give us an insight of the actions undertaken by this valuable, highly trained group of volunteers. (You may be aware that Martin played a major role in the search & rescue of the group of youngsters who were rescued in Thailand. Not to be missed! L- starting them early is the secret.

Entry for all talks (unless stated otherwise) is £2 for members and £3.50 for non members, includes free refreshments.

Contact Richard Frost 01275 472797/richardfrost608@gmail.com



FRIDAY 27TH MARCH 2020 –

**THE MENDIP SOCIETY AGM – 7.30pm IN PRIDDY VILLAGE HALL
GUEST SPEAKER, JULIE MERRICK, FROM NATURAL ENGLAND**



All the papers necessary for the business of the meeting will be in the March issue of the 'MENDIP' as usual. Refreshments served after the business of the evening. Julie's powerpoint presentation (with lots of lovely photos) will be about Natural England's Somerset national Nature Reserves, focussing on the Avalon Marshes landscape in particular. All welcome, including non-members.

An Avalon sun set



THE SOCIETY IS VERY PLEASE TO ANNOUNCE that it is sponsoring the kit for the new young Rangers who have started their 2 year training this autumn they are the future wardens of our countryside – we wish them well on their adventure.

Lauren Holt – YR Co-ordinator

Entrance to all talks, unless otherwise stated, is £2 for members and £3.50 for visitors. This includes light refreshments.

From the Chair

By Richard Frost

I must start by giving a hearty thanks to our team of Planning Scrutinising Officers who do so much valuable work on behalf of us all as they labour in a seemingly never ending manner to question and oppose the growing number of building applications spreading like a plague across our precious Mendip Hills. And it would be remiss of me not to include the unsung and very important similar work being undertaken by the A.O.N.B. and the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE).

Our present Government seems to constantly urge developers to build more houses, which often appear to be planned for where they are not required, on a Greenfield site, not making use of better Brownfield sites.

A drive along the A38 from the south Bristol area towards the Axbridge sector reveals one field full of "new builds" after another. The village of Churchill is badly affected. Housing is nibbling away at the Bristol Green Belt and no doubt trying to join up with the wholesale development planned for Banwell.

When are our so called leaders going to grasp that once a field or a Rural view has been built on, it can never be recovered. According to latest figures, Somerset has 260 hectares of brown field land and this figure is growing, - enough for over 6300 homes.

If you feel the same way as me, then there is nothing stopping you going online to view all the current applications in your area, and voicing your opinion. After all, we are supposed to live in a Democracy! Don't forget to question your local MP, because after all this Brexit nonsense is over, they might be looking for something to do.

And last but by no means least, our particular gratitude must go to one of our longest serving planning scrutinisers, Desmond Donovan, who has very nearly reached his Centenary (I'm sure he won't mind my telling you this amazing fact) who in his own words says ***'I have been a member since the Mendip Soc started, but there comes a time...'*** Desmond has recently had a spell in hospital but is now home recuperating – we wish him well in his 'retirement' from The Mendip Society.



OPINION:

URBAN DEVELOPMENT OF THE COUNTRYSIDE by Mike Rolfe

Mike is the Society Planning Scrutiniser for Sedgemoor District

Construction work throughout the country aimed at building 300,000 habitable dwelling houses each year continues apace. At the moment the annual house build is just over 200,000 per annum.

Local Authorities are required to meet the Government's dictate and are consequently under extreme pressure to approve applications for both large and small developments and house extensions.

Since 2015, there have been close to 940 Planning Applications to build dwellings in Cheddar and Axbridge; 268 have already been approved, 632 are awaiting Sedgemoor DC's decisions, with the remainder having been refused or withdrawn. There are also many applications to build house extensions most of which have been approved.

Needless to say if, or most probably when, the further 632 dwellings are approved there will be a substantial negative visual impact on The Mendip Hills, both looking outwards across the Somerset Levels or inwards towards The Mendips.

Reluctantly accepting that, even if it is mindful to do so, the public is unlikely to prevent the inevitable expansion of Cheddar and, to a lesser extent Axbridge, arising from the new buildings, there is also the question of the impact on the existing infrastructure such as schools, doctor and dental surgeries and our local highways. Currently, there are no specific plans to upgrade the road system to meet the higher demands. Without substantial improvements sections of the highway such as the so called 'magic roundabout' at the top of Upper New Road Cheddar, Cross Lane and the crossroads at The New Inn junction of the A38/371, will become even more lethal.

The countryside to the north of the Mendip Hills is also under threat with around 6000 homes planned for Banwell, Sandford and Churchill.

It may be that there is an urgent need to build millions of new homes in our countryside. It may also be true that the loss of countryside and its flora and fauna is, on balance, an acceptable consequence of the human demands for homes. However, there may also be those that consider urbanisation of our countryside to be an unsuitable legacy to leave our children and grandchildren.

ED: Over to you, the reader. What is your opinion on this conundrum?

MENDIP'S 'CURIOUS' STONES by John Chapman

An article appeared in the November newsletter last year about the discovery of what members/geology experts of the Avon RIGS and Bristol Naturalists Group have identified as being 'a limestone pavement', up on Backwell Hill. Society member John Chapman, who has lived all his life on Mendip, was rather doubtful about the identification, thinking it is purely the quite common appearance of limestone rocks in certain areas. Here he gives us his version of such 'curious stones'

Mendip is famous for its limestone gorges and caves, all formed over millions of years by the reaction of the limestone to the acids in rainwater. They have attracted visitors to Mendip for many years. However, hidden from view by the layer of topsoil covering the surface of the limestone rock is yet another product of the reaction of limestone to the acidic rainwater. Rainwater draining through the soil eventually lies on the surface of the limestone and gradually etches it into shapes that would have pleased the sculptor Henry Moore. In the more Northern parts of England the Ice Age glaciers have skimmed off the topsoil and the areas of rock thus exposed we call Limestone Pavement. In the South of England, not being subjected to the scraping of glaciers, are areas of this waterworn rock still lying beneath the soil and therefore going unseen.

The interesting shapes of this waterworn stone made it excellent material for ornamental rockeries and grottoes and much was used in the building of artificial grottoes on the estates of the landed gentry in the 18th. and 19th centuries. Back in those days the word 'curious' could mean 'rounded' and so was used to describe these waterworn stones. Quantities were used building the walls and follies on Bishop Law's estate at The Caves, Banwell. Much of it is supposed to have come from nearby Bleadon Hill but William Beard, manager of Law's estate at Banwell, records in his accounts that in 1829 he "Paid for landing 'curious stones' from Torquay at Bristol post for the Bishop's rockwork 2/-" and again "Pd. Edward Fay Ditto for Curious stones to build the seat at the top and entrance to the Bone Cavern 15/-". These Curious Stones shipped from Torquay would have come from the limestone quarries in that area. Why they were brought from Torquay, Beard does not record. Waterworn stone from Black Rock quarry in the valley leading from Cheddar Gorge to Charterhouse, was taken to Black Rock Gate in the gorge where there was a crane for loading it onto lorries. Mr Ron Bennett who had worked at the quarry until it closed in 1940 said most of it went to London to make rockeries. A wooden frame that was part of the crane lay near the gate for many years. My house in Cheddar has it's garden wall topped with this waterworn stone and more of them make rockeries in the garden. One of the stones from the wall has even found its way to the churchyard to be the tombstone of a previous owner of the house. Of course I cannot say where these stones came from but the house was built by William King, a quarry owner and limeburner who lived in Cheddar Gorge. There are plenty of other examples of this waterworn stone decorating walls and gardens in the village and I guess they were obtained locally.

When out walking on Mendip and visiting our villages keep a look out for examples of Mendip's Curious Stones both as ornaments and in the wild.

Photos - John Chapman. Water worn stone on the top of his garden wall and the tombstone in the churchyard,



Here at Yeo Valley we are putting nature first

Information supplied by Julie Standard of Yeo Valley Farms

This is Our Vision – the world we want to see. A world where food is produced in a more sustainable way and where we all put nature first. And we want to invite people to share in our vision; to encourage our consumers, the community and visitors to access the West Country outdoors, facilitating vital social interactions in our communities and the places where we farm.

So we'd like to share with you our extremely exciting idea to open up our farmland and farm sites. We have about 2,000 acres of land on or adjacent to the Mendip Hills of which 70% is farmed organically and has been for 15 years now. The remaining 30% is grass and woodland along with a brown field site at Burrington Combe, which was previously airport parking/storage and a Pub.

We are at the very early stages of our plan, and it's our aspiration that it will bring numerous benefits to the local and larger rural economy, by giving opportunities to new or existing businesses, charities, local authorities and organisations to be involved in the plan's development. We hope the local economy will benefit by seeing an increase in visitor numbers to the area, that new businesses, charities and volunteers will be enabled to educate visitors on the environment around them, on how to farm sustainably for the future and also help us reduce our own carbon footprint.

The envisaged plan goes like this: -

- Visitors to the area will start their journey at the Burrington Combe site, which we would like to develop to act as a gateway to the Mendips.
- The Journey will continue up Burrington Combe to our Ubley Warren Farm site, where, because of the limited amount of parking down in the Combe, we propose to create a parking area.

Ubley Warren is at a center point from where visitors can explore the Mendip Hills in any direction. Our weather is somewhat inclement and there is the notorious 'Mendip Mizzle', so we would like to provide some complimentary experiences within the "Winter Zone".

- By opening up tracks and trails so visitors can experience the fantastic views from the escarpment at our Hazel Manor site



Whilst the plan is formed by Yeo Valley, it cannot be undertaken in isolation. It is our intention that it will be shaped through consultation and collaboration with our local authorities and key stakeholders that include local people, businesses, and other organisations.

This approach will help to ensure that the final proposals deliver the maximum benefits for the local economy; we will be launching a website shortly where you can access information or register an interest.

ED - Julie told me also that members who are interested in finding out more about contributing to the project are very welcome to call in at the office which has been set up at the site of the old Burrington Inn.

Top photo – Burrington Combe / Lower photo – Ubley Warren
Next page – Hazel Manor

Hazel Manor**At the same time as new beginnings start—**

An era comes to an end. On Wednesday 28th August the Society was in Burrington Combe at the Family fun Day, part of the Mendip Rocks Festival. It was a wet and draughty day, which rather reflected the mood when I went along to the Burrington Inn to see 'Mine Hosts', Jason and Sharon.

At the end of that week with a big old 'knees up and party' they would be hanging up their aprons and leaving the Inn after a couple of decades of giving the public friendship, nourishment and entertainment. Although obviously sad to leave it behind, they were also looking forward to a new set of opportunities, not too far away in Blagdon. The Society has on many occasions happily held events of all sorts, over the years, and we, along with all their customers, wish them the best of luck and say - thank you, Sharon and Jason.



L-R – Linda; Sharon and Jason

RESERVES SUMMER ROUNDUP

Well, it's been an odd summer weatherwise, but on the whole all the flower species seem to have liked it – and have grown profusely and lasted well. Of course, so have the ones which we rather wish wouldn't – bracken, meadowsweet, brambles and nettles; though they are really useful for the wildlife. All except the bracken – this will have to be tackled again next year with a vengeance – we got rid of it all some years ago by pulling it several times a year for five years but it is very invasive and persistent and a survivor!.

The new hedge we planted in spring is doing well with only a few failures. Government policy is to plant as many trees as we can cram in everywhere to help the global warming situation, we don't have many gaps though. We managed to scythe the meadow this year, it was made a hard task by the tussock clumps which had formed under the vegetation over the last two years, it will be easier next year. We hope to run scything training days in 2020 in line with our policy of being an organisation which keeps alive the traditions of the Mendip countryside. Keep an eye on the spring programme.

Some unwelcome news – the wheelchair height seat dedicated to Pat and David Addison has been attacked by the weather and a bit of rot set in. It is always popular with groups going through and we think one such group must have sat together on the high back- maybe pushed a bit- and whoops, the back has snapped off completely. We plan to keep the back, with its dedication plaque, and make it into a bench.

With the frequent high winds there have been several large branches down from the old oaks along the top of the bank of Yadley Lane which is a bridle way and our boundary; one blocked the lane completely.

Whilst we were clearing it away (technically the Council's job but they had no workers or time available), four horses came down to follow the lane out to Winscombe. So I welcomed the first four legged equine visitors to Slader's Leigh; they loved it and took their time munching their way down the path.



Tania's Wood also benefitted from the periods of heavy rain and then the sunshine and was very lush and green all summer, in fact it needed a couple of work days of very hard effort to keep the growth under control and our volunteers excelled themselves. With the clearing of many of the overgrown glades there were more butterflies around – like this lovely Comma. This is one species which is benefitting from the increasingly warm weather and is rapidly extending its territory northwards and southwards in England. The hedges laid during training days run by Tina Bath and Chris Claxton in January this year are already growing and regenerating strongly. On the programme pages of this issue you will find details of the next two days in February 2020; as I have said above, we aim to be able to offer these free of charge in the future thus encouraging the next generation of skilled volunteers.

Tania's Wood once again hosted the Blagdon Primary School children in their weekly Forest School activities, it's a great thing to see them enjoying the wood as a classroom and we received a lovely 'thank you' card made from the natural materials they found there. Lunch they make themselves on the camp fire is always good – and welcome as fresh air makes you hungry. Nicky, their Forest School leader wrote of their last week:- "Last week we stayed silent and listened to the sounds around us and reported back what we could hear- and then went to the new area up the track and wrote down things we could see and told it back to the group. It has been a lovely 8 weeks again and we thank you so much for letting the school use the woodland site."



A SCYTHING EXPERIENCE

In the March newsletter I wrote about the Strawberry Line East group and the grant they were awarded from the Mendip Hills Fund to buy five Austrian scythes; they wanted to manage areas of the old Wells to Dulcote railway line, which they have cleared to become wildflower glades. We promised to teach them how to use the scythes at the right time of the year – this happened on Sunday 1st September. Four of us, David, Nick, Richard and myself walked along the track to meet their group of volunteers, all eager to go. They were from several different groups and also members of the public, responding to Richard Jones's advert for help. Their main flower area looked as tangled and profuse as ours at Slader's Leigh does so we knew it wouldn't be an easy learning curve for them.



The first task was to set up their scythes to their individual sizes and make them aware of the safety measures to be taken for themselves, other scythers and people walking along the Strawberry Line, which has public access at all times. A demonstration of the correct hold and swing of the scythe, then finally the highly necessary task of keeping the blade sharp, which makes all the difference to progress. As we got straight onto it the day got hotter and hotter; such was the enthusiasm enforced breaks had to be made so no-one dehydrated, some had to go after a couple of hours, others came to join in, two members of the public even stopped by to be shown how to use their own scythes. But it was a good result for the group and satisfaction for us, knowing they are now securely 'hooked scythers'.



Sharpening blades is hard at first.



Visitors keen to learn.



All done – a useful cut.

A MEMORABLE “WALK WITH A VIEW” Saturday 19th October by Richard Frost



As part of the regular weekend walking programme, twenty five members and visitors met up at Sand Bay N.T. car park to enjoy a walk around the promontory of Middle Hope and Swallow Cliff. We could not have chosen a better venue for a combination of wonderful views over the Severn Estuary to Wales, with the peak of Sugar Loaf clear in the strong sunshine and towards Worlebury Hill and Woods to the South. It was a bit of a clamber down to the northern shore where we viewed the remains of a 140m year old volcanic eruption which showed just how the lava had cooled and created "pillow lavas" at that time.



A small breakaway group could not resist going to the end at Start Point, just because it was there! On the way they came across a huge crop of rather large field mushrooms with mixed amongst them a horse mushroom or two. Great for supper that evening! I just wish that all our walks were blessed with a combination of weather and views such as we enjoyed that day. Photographs by Martin Arnold, Clive Burton and Sheila Dixon.



THE MENDIP PONDS PROJECT

by John Dickson of The Reptile & Amphibian Group Somerset. (RAGS)



This year the Society was delighted to award RAGS the final £1000 they needed to complete the first phase of their ambitious project, here John, Project Co-ordinator, tells its story.

Over the past few years the Reptile and Amphibian Group for Somerset (RAGS) has been busy restoring a network of dilapidated ponds within the Mendip Hills AONB to reconnect a fragmented population of great crested newts. The Mendip Ponds Project began in earnest in 2016 when the group was awarded a £50,000 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, which has subsequently been supplemented by smaller grants from a wide range of organisations including the Mendip Hills AONB Unit, the Mendip Society, Tesco, Wessex Water, Nature Picture Library and ARG-UK, to restore the ponds.

The permeable geology of the Mendip hills means there is little standing water, so during the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries, as land on the Mendips was enclosed for the keeping of livestock, a large number of ponds were built to provide them with drinking water. These dew ponds also provided ideal conditions for newts.



The ponds are exquisite structures reflecting the amount of care and hard work that went into their construction. They consist of deep excavations, surrounded by retaining walls with sloping cobbled bases providing a hard seal, impervious to damage from the hooves of livestock. Three designs occur: One of these is a large square excavation with retaining walls on three sides, while the fourth side consists of a cobbled ramp down into the bottom of the pond allowing access to the water for livestock. A similar design has the retaining walls on only two sides with sloping ramps at either end. Often these are found straddling a field boundary, allowing access to livestock from two adjoining fields. The third design is simply a large saucer without any retaining walls, allowing access all around.

Sadly, the widespread installation of water troughs has caused the loss of most of these ponds and the majority of those that are left are in an advanced state of deterioration. Many have been deliberately filled in, while the walls of others have collapsed, cobbles have come adrift in the bases, and most are completely filled with silt and detritus allowing trees to establish in them. (Left) They no longer provide the necessary conditions for crested newts to live or breed.

Recognising this problem, in 2014 RAGS undertook an intensive survey of crested newts across an area stretching from Cheddar Gorge to Priddy and south to the A371. The results of the survey confirmed that the crested newt population in the area is highly fragmented with newts found in small isolated pockets, long

distances from one another, each centred around single ponds that are still of good enough quality to sustain them. This fragmentation of populations leaves them acutely vulnerable to local extinction.

The survey also identified a number of dilapidated ponds that, once restored, would provide stepping stones between these isolated populations, connecting them back up into a network and allowing the all-important gene flow across the entire population.

The funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and others made the restoration of these ponds achievable and is expected to greatly increase the chances of the species persisting on Mendip into the future.

RAGS have never attempted such an ambitious project before. In order to complete the entire network we aspire to restore a total of 46 ponds, and it has proved to be a steep learning curve! However, the response from volunteers wanting to help has been overwhelming and teams have been deployed clearing all the detritus out of the ponds, enabling contractors to move in and repair the crumbling stonework.

Simply writing that teams of volunteers have cleared the ponds of detritus fails to illustrate the sheer effort that this has involved. All of these ponds contain many tons of rocks, silt and stinking anaerobic sludge, all of which has to be shovelled out by hand. Why people return time and time again is beyond me, but their efforts are greatly appreciated and it's not difficult to see the benefits of their work both for the historical structures themselves and the wildlife that depends on them.

Rebuilding of the ponds, once they have been cleared out, is being painstakingly and expertly undertaken by Tina Bath, occasionally assisted by further volunteers, using the lime putties and mortars from which they were originally constructed. To date we have subjected a total of 28 ponds to some degree of restoration work. Of these, 16 have been entirely restored, with all the cobbles reset into the bases, the collapsed walls reconstructed and the entire structure repointed. The remaining 12 have been completely emptied of silt and debris and await reconstruction if or when further funding can be secured.

The Mendip Society has been one of the organisations contributing toward the project and is responsible for the reconstruction of a beautiful square, single-ramped pond alongside Stancombe Lane above Westbury sub Mendip. The pond was entirely full of silt and took four days for teams of volunteers to dig out, including two days when we were assisted by volunteers from Osprey Outdoors, an organisation based in Weston-super-Mare, helping the long-term unemployed back into work. We are extremely grateful for their enthusiasm and hard work.



amphibians in the county, so we have some expertise in this area. Since 2014 we have trained an army of volunteer surveyors who every spring are assembled into small groups, each led by a crested newt licence holder, to survey an allocated cluster of the restored ponds. *Pictures – Our pond, before, after clearance and being restored by Tina Bath.*

Dispersal among newts can be slow, they only have small legs after all, but early results are encouraging. Crested newts have returned to breed in all of those ponds where they were already resident prior to restoration, but they have also colonised a further three of the ponds which were not previously occupied and we are optimistic that in time all of the restored ponds will get colonised.

– **John Dickson**



ED – John's seemingly limitless enthusiasm and energy leads him to attend many events for groups like ours to introduce families, especially the children, to the amphibian world and where there is no natural pond to dip in, he will have the 'pond' in a tank, in which swims the great crested newt or curls the dry shiny grass snake. The gentleness of their hands and the wonder on their faces is a joy to behold, and proves that the saying 'you must catch them young' is very true.

Once the pond had been cleared the extent of the damage to the stonework became apparent, one of the retaining walls had almost completely collapsed, and Tina Bath has spent the last few weeks undertaking repairs. These are now nearing completion and the pond will refill over the winter. There are other ponds in the vicinity already occupied by great crested newts so we are optimistic that this one will be rapidly colonised.

Repairing the stonework is an expensive undertaking and all the available grant money, has now been spent! We will continue to seek grants for the reconstruction of the remaining ponds; however, funding will not define the project. We are not dependent on a continued stream of funding in order to continue with the project. Ideally of course we would like all of the ponds to undergo stonework repairs to ensure their greatest longevity, but in reality not all of the ponds require reconstruction in order to provide suitable habitat for crested newts and it is our intention to continue to dig the ponds out after which they can refill naturally with rainwater and newts can recolonise them. If funding should become available in the future it will be a simple exercise to drain the ponds down for any necessary reconstruction work.



MENDIP ROCKS FESTIVAL BEGINNING AND END

LAUNCH DAY – IT'S A BLAST

On August 10th The Mendip Rocks! launched with "IT'S A BLAST" in Westbury Quarry, courtesy of Alford Technologies, the owners. It was quite a wet, blustery day so we weren't sure the public would turn up in numbers. We had Nigel Taylor organising the blowing up of the car, as last year, Peter Hardy and Danielle Schreve would lead fossil walks and had their large collections of same on display, the AONB dry stone walling group were demonstrating their skills and the 'Mendip Cave Rescue' team were there with their equipment and displays.

But people did come, perhaps as a result of last year's publicity, to have a chance to press the button for 'the bang', and to see the inside of the quarry not usually available for the public to visit.

No more words – just a few pictures: the car, Sophie who blew it up, Peter Hardy's walk, walling and cave rescue.



Photo: Mark Adler



What have you done Nigel? Photo: Mark Adler



FINALE DAY – FAMILY FUN SUNDAY IN EBBOR GORGE

The Festival finished for 2019 with a family day of rocky activities in Ebbor Gorge, just outside Wells. The woods of the gorge were showing their seasonal colours and an autumnal nip was in the air, but it didn't keep the visitors away. To be enjoyed, admired and joined in with, were making and painting clay fossils, leaf and flower printing, badge making, sandpit fossil digging, story telling and guided walks to gorge and caves, with the Mendip Hills AONB rangers. Plus, Somerset Earth Science Centre, the Wildlife Trusts, Natural England and National Trust as well as The Mendip Society. Danielle Schreve led two walks to the Gully Cave site and Bob Corms, of Natural England (retired), enthralled visitors with his informative geological walks around this iconic Mendip Hills Gorge. A great finale.



Photo: Adel Avery



Hanging out the washing? Making prints?



Photo: Adel Avery

News from the Hills

**From Jim Hardcastle
Manager of the
Mendip Hills Unit**



Big ambitions following national review of Designated Landscapes

In the summer of 2018 the Glover Review began gathering evidence for the Designated Landscapes Review, which the government commissioned in response to the 25 Year Environment Plan. Since then members of the panel of six have been to every English National Park and Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) as well as to National Parks in Scotland and unprotected landscapes for which people have hopes, from the canal sides of Digbeth in Birmingham to the moors above Halifax.

The recommendations have now been published. "We need to reignite the fire and vision which brought this system into being in 1949. We need our finest landscapes to be places of natural beauty which look up and outwards to the nation they serve. In essence, we've asked not 'what do national landscapes need?', but 'what does the nation need from them today?'"

You can download the full report from this page. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/designated-landscapes-national-parks-and-aonbs-2018-review> In summary key recommendations for AONBs are;

"We also think that what are now AONBs should be strengthened, with increased funding, governance reform, new shared purposes with National Parks, and a greater voice on development. We think the current cumbersome title 'AONB' should be replaced. Our suggestion is that they should be called National Landscapes."

- A strengthened place for national landscapes in the planning system with AONBs given statutory consultee status, encouragement to develop local plans and changes to the National Planning Policy Framework
- A stronger mission to connect all people with our national landscapes, supported and held to account by the new National Landscapes Service
- AONBs strengthened with new purposes, powers and resources, renamed as National Landscapes
- A new financial model – more money, more secure, more enterprising
- National landscapes should form the backbone of Nature Recovery Networks – joining things up within and beyond their boundaries.

A President's View



Dear all,

Where is this year going! Here we are into winter and already I'm looking forward to Spring. As always the Society is involved in a huge amount of work. News from the Reserves and updates from the walks and talks programme, all of which are bound to keep us interested and busy.

Yes, Christmas will soon be upon us and then it's into 2020. If you fancy a little lift after the Christmas period, I'm organising this year's Wassail on January 11th at Burrington. Sorry no pub this time, but we will have some delicious home spun catering in the Parish Rooms BS40 7AD. Details are in the programme events on page 3 – everyone is invited to the wassailing ceremonies but if you wish to have the supper as well this MUST be booked as detailed by January 7th please.

As always Christmas is important. Families will come together, but there may be loved ones who cannot be home for the festive period. They will always be in our thoughts. So with that in mind may I wish you all the very best for this festive season and hope that 2020 brings you all that you could wish for. If you are stuck for a Christmas present, why not give a Mendip Society Membership for the year. Just contact Peter Janes, Membership Secretary.

Finally, I find going into Winter is always a time for reflection.... It hasn't been a bad year and the sun has shone. My memory is always very kind to me and allows me to re-call the good stuff. So with that in mind, here is an amazing sunset on Mendip from August!



SOCIETY ROUNDUP

Litter Update – from Peter Janes.

"At the end of the walk on 15th September several members remarked on the number of drinks cans in the grass by the roadside outside the sports club in Chilcompton. I subsequently returned and collected 51 cans, this was from about 100 yards of verge". This then prompted Peter to pen the following :

Earlier this year we reported that the Government was consulting on introducing a deposit return scheme for drinks bottles and cans in England and Wales (the Scottish Government is already committed to doing this), the aim being to improve the rate of recycling and to reduce litter. The large majority of responses were strongly in favour of such a scheme and of including a wide range of sizes and types of containers. The Department of Environment and Rural Affairs has said that it intends to introduce a scheme to start in 2023 and will consult further on detailed legislation. More information may be seen at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/introducing-a-deposit-return-scheme-drs-for-drinks-containers-bottles-and-cans>

ED: We are strongly supporting the CPRE in their campaign to bring this about – there is a strong anti lobby by the drinks industry (to be expected) which wants to exclude certain types and sizes of bottles so please support the CPRE in their fight.



Important Update on ECO_BRICKS. In the last newsletter 'Replenish Weston' in Meadow Street in Weston was quoted as a collection point for stuffed bottles for the Grove Park Friends Group compost bins project. They have told me now that they have enough collected for the moment – however there are a couple of places in Bristol which are active, one is 'The Canteen' in Stokes Croft. The contact is Brickingitbristol@gmail.com

The well known Farrington Farm in Farrington Gurney is now a registered drop off point. The picture shows our stand at 'It's a Blast' with one of our Forest School pupils showing his parents how to make an eco-brick

WALLING SUCCESS: You may remember a couple of summers ago we ran a w/e of dry stone walling training; those participants went on to form the AONB walling team, now in great demand all over Mendip.

This October seven of the team entered the walling competition in the novice class, at the 150th Mendip Ploughing Match, sponsored by Yeo Valley and the AONB, rather apprehensively it has to be said.



David above and left John and Mike

But they did well – very well. They were awarded 1st, (Mike Gooding), 3rd David Tranter and 4th John Steers. All three are Society members – congratulations lads! and -Watch out next year folks!

Members Space: In July Carenza Ellery asked about car sharing to walks from the Bath area and has had NO replies; surely we can do better than this? I told her I would give it another go – so here it is. If you think you can link up with her (South Bath area) please contact her **01225 835599 or 07962 076370/ cbx550mini@gmail.com**

Yeo Valley Farm is 25 years old



CONGRATULATIONS FROM US

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