

RECENT EVENTS



Visit to Clermont Hall

On the evening of 21 April, some 40 Society members enjoyed an evening at Clermont Hall, by kind invitation of Philip Jones and his wife Frances. Philip rescued the Hall, which is essentially a Regency building, from almost certain demolition in 1973, and has since worked to restore it and furnish it in an appropriate style. Philip also entertained his audience with tales of his work as an artist – his bold canvases much in evidence throughout the house – as well as his successful attempts to stop the military establishment from extending the Battle Area virtually up to his front door!

Talk by Nick Gibbons

Nick Gibbons, formerly Conservation Officer with the Forestry Commission, gave a hugely informative and enjoyable talk on The Wildlife of Thetford Forest, held on 20 February at Thetford Grammar School, by kind invitation of the headmaster and school governors. The forest is largely known today for its value as a conservation and recreation resource, but the catalyst for its creation in the 1920s was the chronic shortage at that time of pit props for the nation's mines. Over 50,000 acres of Breckland were subsequently planted up with Scots and Corsican Pine, and timber production remained the forest's main raison d'être for several decades. Today, however, it is known as much for its wildlife interest as anything else, and some of Britain's rarest birds and plants are prospering here.

Foremost among the birds are Woodlark and Nightjar, with 25 per cent and 10 per cent respectively of Britain's breeding pairs found within the forest boundaries. Interestingly, both species prefer areas of clear-fell to the tracts of heathland that have been painstakingly restored in recent years! The latter is best, however, for Stone Curlews, but these birds are highly sensitive to disturbance and the Forestry Commission's policy of open access and recreational use is potentially in conflict with their requirements – a good example of how the Commission has to reconcile what can be competing priorities.

A host of scarce plants have been recorded from within the forest, with many found along the rides, which are actively managed to maintain and enhance floral diversity. The more glamorous species include Yellow Birdsnest, Broad-leaved Helleborine and Green-flowered Helleborine, but some of the more exciting (for botanists, at least!) Breckland specialities – such as Tower Mustard – are more modest in appearance and take some searching for.

What makes Thetford Forest so important for wildlife is the diversity of habitats found within it. The contemporary forest is far from being a monoculture – in addition to conifers, it includes heath, grassland, water-meadow and ancient woodland sites, and few areas in England can rival either the variety of landscapes on offer or the premier wildlife-watching that is possible here.

The Editor adds: Join Nick Gibbons on an evening walk in search of Breckland plants and birds on 19 July – see "What's On" on page 1.

The Midsummer Service
at St Mary's Houghton-on-the-Hill
will be on Sunday 17 June at 3pm
with the Reverend Robin Griffith-Jones
Master of the Temple, London
followed by tea and homemade cakes
at Houghton Barns.

There will also be an exhibition of the latest discoveries of the wall paintings (*circa* 1000–1170) at the church and at Houghton Barns that weekend.

SUMMER CONCERT

Dedicated to Irene Moreton for
All Saints Church, South Pickenham

On SATURDAY 26 MAY 2007, 7.30pm
at The Houghton Centre

(signed from B1077 at South Pickenham)
featuring a wide variety of light classical music
£13.50 inclusive of wine
and light refreshments
Enquiries: 01760 441444

TORRIANO WIND ENSEMBLE

SUMMER CONCERT

Beachamwell Hall

By kind permission of Mrs H. A. Bonning

Sunday 24 June 2007 at 2.45pm
Followed by afternoon tea

Telephone 01366 328648 for tickets

If you would like to contribute to the Breckland Society Newsletter please contact the Editor at The Breckland Society
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ARCHITECTURE PROJECT SET FOR SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION

It's been a long haul, but after three years of surveying, interviewing and research, the Society's Vernacular Architecture Project is now in its final lap. The grant of £25,000 was made by the Heritage Lottery Fund in 2004, since when over 40 Society members (and a few non-members, too!) have been working on what is the largest grant-aided project of its type.

The objectives of the project are to record the traditional building types and styles of the Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks, in order to highlight their importance at a time when rampant development threatens to compromise the character of local towns and villages. In addition, the project seeks to record the story of local craftsmen working with traditional materials, and also those people who can recall how local houses were built and maintained in the past. A series of building workshops was also organized to encourage apprentices and re-trainers to consider a career in traditional building conservation.

The culmination of all these various components will be an exhibition and illustrated report entitled "The Traditional Architecture of the Brecks". The report is being written by Dr Tom Williamson, one of the area's leading authorities – members will doubtless remember his energetic talks to the Society – and will include a summary of the findings of the original buildings survey carried out by the Society, as well as photographs of buildings and architectural features drawn from across the region.

The exhibition will comprise a series of large panels featuring important aspects of the local built heritage and drawing attention to the wealth of decorative features present in the local vernacular style. Both the report and exhibition will be launched in July and the exhibition will be toured around the Brecks to a series of public venues later this year. This will mark the culmination of a highly successful project, and one that the Society took on when it was only just over a year old. It is testament to the enthusiasm and commitment of our members – and to the dedication and creativity of the project adviser, Anne Mason – that it has proved possible for us to make such a valuable contribution to understanding and appreciation of what was hitherto a rather undersung aspect of the local scene.

WHAT'S ON

Forthcoming Society events

18 May. Society AGM to be held in the Elveden cafe at 6pm. **Please note that all places on the church tour and supper are now taken**, but members are still welcome to attend the AGM itself. The agenda is enclosed with this newsletter.

16 June. Anne Mason will lead a tour of Barton Bendish, Shingham and Beachamwell churches. See article on page 3. Meet at Beachamwell Church at 6pm. This is a free event.

19 July Evening walk with Nick Gibbons, former Conservation Officer with the Forestry Commission. We shall be looking at typical Breckland plants around Santon Downham, with the possibility of a nightjar foray afterwards. Numbers will be strictly limited, so please book in advance with James Parry on 01366 328676.

SOCIETY SUBSCRIPTIONS FOR 2007 NOW DUE!

April 5th was the renewal date for Society subscriptions – please see enclosed renewal form. The continued success of the Society depends on the involvement and support of its members. We therefore encourage you to let us know about areas of activity in which you think the Society should become engaged, and to suggest visits and lectures that you would like to see us organise.

WIND TURBINES: FRIEND OR FOE?

On 9 February 2007 Alistair Darling, Secretary of State for Scotland, cut a ribbon to signal the commissioning of another wind turbine, bringing the total amount of electrical energy generated from wind in the UK past the 2 Giga Watt (GW) mark. Not a great cause for celebration, however, as it only equates to the power generated by the largest of our conventional coal, gas or nuclear fuelled plants. And in considering such statements, one needs to know whether the 2GW figure is the summation of the rated power outputs of the turbines, or whether it is a realistic figure for the actual electrical energy generated by the turbines. This is one of the difficulties when assessing the case for wind energy. People who write or speak on this subject tend either to be strongly opposed to wind turbines, or strongly in favour. Their approach, and the data they use to support it, tends to be biased accordingly. It is difficult to get a balanced view. Robin Birkitt of CPRE Norfolk puts the cases for and against wind energy.

To protect future generations from the worst impacts of climate change, it seems to be generally agreed that we need to reduce our CO₂ emissions by at least 60 per cent by 2050. In progressing towards this target, the UK Government aims to achieve a 20 per cent reduction in carbon emissions at 1990 levels by 2010. To date, UK CO₂ emissions have fallen by about 4 per cent since 1990, although in the last few years the levels of UK CO₂ emissions have actually risen slightly. Note that one-third of these emissions come from our power stations.

There are several ways in which we can reduce our carbon emissions: we can save energy, either by using less, or by making more efficient use of existing supplies; we can try to find ways of burning fossil fuels without the release of greenhouse gases; or we can develop alternative energy sources that have no harmful emissions.

Renewable energy

Wind energy is one of several sources of “renewable energy” that could reduce our dependence on energy derived from fossil fuels. (Renewable energy sources are those based on energy flows that are replenished by natural processes). Other such sources include wave and tidal energy, solar power, hydro electric power, and bioenergy (basically energy obtained from the processing of plant or animal waste.) The combustion of fossil fuels gives rise to so-called greenhouse gases, principally carbon dioxide (CO₂), that are causing global warming with consequential changes to our climate which, scientists are saying, could be catastrophic if unchecked.

The case for and against wind energy can be considered under three headings: environmental impact, energy efficiency and economics. Space limitations for this article do not allow all of the issues to be addressed but it is considered those most important are covered here.

Visual impact

The most obvious environmental impact of wind turbines is their visual intrusion on the countryside. Many of the wind turbines now included in development proposals are mounted on towers that are 100m high or more with 80m diameter rotors. This means that they are taller than the top of the spire of Norwich Cathedral and will dwarf all the natural features of the local landscape. Some people consider that these turbines desecrate the countryside and are to be resisted; others find them graceful and aesthetically satisfying. It is a subjective judgement.

There is likely to be more shared concern over the physical damage to the countryside in the construction of access roads for the very large low-loader trucks carrying turbine components and also for large mobile cranes to raise the components into position. However, developers will claim that any physical damage will be made good.

It is claimed that the wind turbines are noisy – emitting not only audible noise but also very low-frequency noise that is inaudible but is felt as a vibration by local residents with claimed health effects. However, turbines have now to reach EU standards on noise and we are also told that it is quite easy to carry out a normal conversation when standing beneath turbines that meet these standards.

Concerns have also been expressed about the risk to birds, but the RSPB considers that there would be a concern only if the turbine were directly in the path of a migration route. In addition, even if birds

occasionally flew into the blades, the numbers killed would be minuscule compared with the numbers of birds killed on the roads by cars.

Other points in favour of wind energy are that it is a free and inexhaustible fuel and there are no waste products

Efficiency

There are more serious practical concerns regarding the availability and efficiency of wind turbines. They only produce an electrical output over a range of windspeeds – normally between about 5 m/sec and 15 m/sec. At speeds above 25 m/sec they will have to be shut down. They will achieve their maximum rated output at the highest point of this range, i.e. when the windspeed is 15 m/sec. Many of the wind turbines in the south of the country are located in an area where the average windspeed is around 5–6 m/sec, so the electrical power generated will be much less than the maximum-rated output. Because of this, many are less than 30% efficient, some considerably less.

Even where the average windspeed is quite high, there will be days when there is very little wind. Supporters of wind turbines counter this by saying that even though the wind strength may be low in one part of the country, it is almost bound to be blowing somewhere else in the UK! They also argue that wind strength can be forecast very accurately (but remember Michael Fish’s forecast a few years ago!) and so the managers of the National Grid can prepare for a wind energy low period in the same way that they manage the arrangement of the grid when a major coal/gas/nuclear powered plant has to be taken down for maintenance. Nevertheless, this does not give confidence that wind energy could ever be relied upon to provide a large proportion of our energy – we shall always need to have more reliable electricity generation plant (coal fired, gas fired or nuclear) to meet our base-load requirements.

Also, one needs to ask how effective our wind farms are in reducing CO₂ emissions. The short answer is probably ‘Not very!’. One report put this into perspective by claiming that more CO₂ is released into the atmosphere by a Boeing 747 in a year than is saved by the energy from the UK’s largest onshore windfarm.

The economic case

Finally we need to look at the economics of wind turbines. This is a complicated area where accurate information is difficult to come by. Issues include: the financial incentives to developers and landowners in the form of grants and subsidies, the opportunities for additional employment, and the comparative cost of electricity from wind energy.

There are financial incentives available which are intended to offer encouragement for those individuals and organisations that might provide financial backing for wind farm development, for the developers themselves and for owners of the land which might be used for a wind farm. Indeed some reports say that wind energy would not be viable without these incentives.

Proponents of wind energy often claim that large wind energy developments offer benefits to the local economy by providing large new opportunities for employment. However, most of these opportunities will only be short term since, once the wind farm becomes operational, the requirements for monitoring and maintenance will be small.

On the question of costs of electricity generated from wind energy,

it is difficult to get an accurate answer as many different financial considerations need to be taken into account. One of the electrical utility companies, Ecotricity, says on its website that electricity from wind power has come down in price from 11p to 2p per kWh. Friends of the Earth say that if full account were taken of the environmental damage caused by the burning of fossil fuels then the cost of electricity from coal would be three times that from wind.

This article began by observing that wind energy is a subject about which people may have strong views. On the one side there are those who are strongly against because of the damage to the countryside, because they believe wind energy will make little contribution to reducing carbon emissions, and/or because they believe that wind power is too unreliable and inefficient to provide a stable source of

CHURCH TOUR

The Breckland churches of Beachamwell, Shingham and Barton Bendish are to be the focus of an evening visit on Saturday 16 June, led by Anne Mason.

Beachamwell is a large parish at the heart of Breckland with evidence of settlement from the Neolithic period. The Early Saxon Bitchamditch or Devil’s Dyke runs through the northern edge of the parish and was constructed over a Roman Road. St Mary’s Church, with its Late Saxon round tower and window openings, is mentioned in Domesday. By the medieval period there were four churches, the others being St John’s, All Saints and St Botolph’s, Shingham which has a Norman doorway.

Barton Bendish was also a settlement with multiple churches: the two surviving ones are St Andrew’s and St Mary’s and there was a third, All Saints, demolished in the late eighteenth century.

In addition to looking at the architecture and fixtures and fittings of the churches, we will also interpret the landscape around them

MILDENHALL WARREN LODGE OPEN DAY

Mildenhall Warren Lodge will be having an open day on Bank Holiday Monday, 28 May, between 11am and 4pm, when you can learn how rabbits were farmed for their fur and meat, from the fourteenth to the early twentieth century.

The Warren Lodge is situated in Mildenhall Woods, on the minor road linking the A1065 and the A11 north of the Barton Mills Roundabout. From the A1065, the minor road is signed ‘Household Waste Site, Elveden’, and from the A11 it is signed as ‘Mildenhall.’

RARE AVIAN VISITOR LINGERS IN THE BRECKS

Late January saw the arrival in the area of a Waxwing, a colourful bird more usually associated with Scandinavia and northern Europe. First spotted in the Beachamwell garden of Society member Sue Pennell, it remained in the vicinity for several days, gorging itself on berries and allowing people to approach it down to just a few feet.

Waxwings are annual visitors to Norfolk, but in greatly varying numbers. Some years see what are known as “irruptions”, when many hundreds move south from their northern breeding grounds in search of food, whereas in other years hardly any at all are seen. In East Anglia they usually appear on the coast and are relatively infrequent inland. It is also unusual to see one on its own, as they often congregate in large flocks. This particular individual was a young male bird, probably reared last summer and so in all likelihood on its first expedition away from its natal area – which may explain why it got a bit lost!

Once they have identified a good food source, Waxwings will often stay around feeding until the supply is exhausted. The recent trend of planting ornamental berry-carrying shrubs along roads and around supermarket carparks has helped Waxwings, and they increasingly appear in suburban and urban areas, making them easier to spot.

STOP PRESS!

Latest bird sightings (April 23) include Swallows and House Martins in good numbers, Cuckoo already recorded, as well as singing Chiffchaffs, Blackcaps and Nightingale. The warm weather and southerly winds have certainly helped them on their journey north.

electrical power. On the other side there are those who believe that, in view of the catastrophic consequences that are being forecast, we must do everything we can to wean ourselves away from dependence on fossil fuels – and work round any shortcomings inherent in most of the renewable energy options. It is not an easy decision.

The Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) believes that there is a role for wind energy but its intermittency and visual impact limit the potential contribution of onshore turbines. However CPRE supports the development of windfarms offshore, which should not harm the countryside and would be in an environment where average wind strength is higher and more consistent – provided sensitive coastlines and seascapes are unaffected.

and place them in a historical context. The presence of so many churches indicates former widespread settlement and there are earthwork remains of medieval dwellings and manorial sites.

We will meet at St Mary’s Church in Beachamwell at 6pm; the evening will involve some gentle walking and travel between sites by car. It should end by 8.30pm in Barton Bendish where there is always the option of a drink at The Spread Eagle afterwards.

Meet at **Beachamwell Church at 6pm**. There is no charge, but donations in individual churches would be appreciated.



photo courtesy of Allan Hale