

RECENT EVENTS

Visit to the Stanford Training Area, 10 April

Sunshine and blue sky – perfect weather greeted us after a long, hard winter. There was a relaxed and happy mood as over 40 of us gathered on Oxborough Village Green, and we were pleased to see several new faces as we boarded the coach. Our destination was West Tofts, one of the entrances to the “Battle Area”. Here we were met by Trevor Gedge, the Camp RSM, who showed us into the lecture theatre, gave us maps of the area and a brief introduction to its history, the army presence there and other important aspects such as wildlife conservation. This was the second visit the Society had made to the Battle Area but the first for quite a few of the group and we were pleased to follow a different route from the last time. This visit saw more emphasis on military training and on conservation.

Our first stop was St Mary’s Church, West Tofts. This is a fascinating building – still very much intact, with a delightful Pugin-designed interior to the extended Victorian chancel – and well worth visiting. As we continued the tour, we saw many of the several thousand sheep – together with their lambs – which are an important conservation tool. The hefted flocks help keep scrub under control and thereby help maintain the character of the landscape.

We then passed the mock Northern Ireland Crossing Point and various other mock villages which the troops use for training. Most interesting of these was the Afghan Village, where we got off and were taken inside to see the Market Square. When in use, up to 90 troops will use this site for exercises, during which time it is apparently very lifelike, with Gurkhas dressed as Afghans manning the market stalls and helping create as close an atmosphere to Afghanistan as might be possible in the middle of Norfolk!

Detail of the Pugin interior of St Mary’s Church



View of traditional Breckland landscape from Frog Hill

After a stop at one of the area’s Forward Observation Bases, we continued through magnificent heathland scenery – once the location of important managed rabbit warrens – to Frog Hill, from which there are superb views over a landscape little changed for six decades. Trevor gave us a lively and interesting commentary throughout, and at the end of the tour we returned to the Reception building for a more leisurely look at the photographic display on the history of the area, its villages and the people who once lived there.

As always, the visit was well organised, very enjoyable and informative. One idea for the MOD, however: it would add hugely to the experience if there were a booklet available for visitors, with a summary of the history and some of the fascinating photographs which are on display. *Eileen Powell*

/cont'd from front page, Warrens Report Launched ...

2 ferret breeders and 2 private landowners. The help of staff at the Forestry Commission, particularly Rachel Riley, has been invaluable. However, this project would not have been possible without the enthusiasm, dedication and commitment of the research volunteers – the Breckland Society is deeply grateful to them. Speaking personally, it has been a pleasure and a privilege to work with such a great team and I would like to give them my special thanks.

This project is the first time that the archaeological remains of the 27 Breckland warrens has been recorded in such detail and matched by the collation of such extensive archival evidence. This has been a remarkable achievement, and the findings demonstrate that the warrens represent a unique resource, one that should be protected and valued for future generations as a heritage of potentially international significance. Although the project is now officially concluded, the warrens section of the Society’s website will continue to be ‘live’ and will be updated with new information when available.

If you would like to contribute to the Breckland Society Newsletter, please contact the Editor at The Breckland Society

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WARRENS REPORT LAUNCHED AS PROJECT SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED

The Warrens Project officially ended on 31 March, and the final few weeks proved to be some of the busiest. Project manager Anne Mason looks at the project’s achievements and their implications.

It’s hard to believe that two years have gone by since the Breckland Society was awarded £12,100 by English Heritage to research the archaeological and archival evidence of the rabbit warrens of Breckland. During this time, over forty volunteers have been involved in the project in various ways: walking the perimeters of each warren and recording the dimensions and condition of the boundary banks; searching through documents in libraries, museums and record offices; and carrying out oral history interviews with people with family connections to warrening or who worked in the fur factories.



Volunteers Diane Jackman, Tim Bridge and Eileen Wallace

The culmination of all this hard work came with the official launch of the project report on 24 April. The project’s findings are truly impressive, and already proving to be crucial in understanding how important warrening has been in the history of the Brecks. For many of the warrens we now have a detailed sequence of ownership from the medieval period to the twentieth century, as well as more information about how the warren banks were configured, how trapping banks were used and where individual lodge sites were. We also know more about the processing of rabbit skins in the fur factories, and about the various markets – both within Britain and internationally – for the meat and fur.

The project’s outcomes include the illustrated report, as well as a leaflet explaining where warren banks and lodge sites can be visited (both will be downloadable as PDFs from the Society’s website), web pages about the findings, a database and GIS mapping of all the fieldwork results. Media coverage has been extensive, with articles in one national and seven local newspapers, features



in five journals and newsletters and even an appearance on BBC Television’s *Look East*.

Overall, the project has involved 17 museums, libraries and record offices; 32 Community Paybackers; 6 secondary school students; 7 voluntary groups; 10 ex-warreners and fur factory workers;

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WHAT’S ON

forthcoming Society events

Friday 14 May

Society AGM, Cockley Cley Hall. Details have been sent to all members under separate cover.

Saturday 15 May

Natural Inspirations: Outdoors and Within, *Spring*, with the Breckland Society Committee at Clermont House, 2-5pm. Booking essential.

Friday 4 June

Talk by Nick Ashton of the British Museum on *One million years BC: The First Humans in East Anglia*. Barnham Village Hall, 7.30pm. Members £3, non-members £5.

Sunday 13 June

Field trip to Thompson Common with Nick Gibbons. A follow-up to the fascinating talk Nick gave us in February on insects. Meet 10.30am in Thompson Common car-park, off the A1075 Watton/Thetford road near Stow Bedon (grid ref TL940966). Free to members, non-members £3. Participants are invited to bring a picnic.

Thursday 15 July

Private view of the Duleep Singh exhibition at The Ancient House Museum in Thetford. 7pm, Members £5, non-members £7, to include a glass of wine and one year’s membership of the Friends of AHM.

Saturday 7 August

Natural Inspirations: Outdoors and Within, *Summer*, with the Breckland Society Committee at Clermont House, 2-5pm. Booking essential.

Answers to Quiz

- 1 Spiked speedwell
- 2 Nar, Wissey, Little Ouse, Lark and Thet
- 3 20,000 hectares
- 4 St. Mary’s Crescent, Thetford. They were built in 1911
- 5 The Stanford Training Area
- 6 Oxburgh Hall
- 7 Grimes Graves. Neolithic miners are believed to have begun work here around 10,000 BC, removing flint from the chalk for axe heads, arrow tips and spearheads
- 8 Thetford’s Thomas Paine in *The Age of Reason*
- 9 The Angersteins
- 10 At least nine woolly mammoths.

NATURAL INSPIRATIONS: Spring

The National Inspirations series of workshops continues on May 15, when Lucinda Mackworth-Young will be looking at what this season meant to our ancestors, their rites and traditions.

As the month of May arrives, bringing longer days and more warmth, we can expect to feel a new access of energy and strength. Gardens and hedgerows are more beautiful, with blossom, bluebells and birdsong, and we can begin to believe that summer really will arrive.

Celebration of fertility, Flora and Fauna

May was named after the Greco-Roman Goddess, Maia, also known as Fauna, Mistress of Wild Animals. May was also dedicated to the flower Goddess Flora. May Day garlands were made of hoops of wood bound with flowers and fixed to a pole decorated with more blooms, ribbons and sometimes a female doll representing Flora. At this time of year the morning dew was considered to hold curative properties, and it was held particularly beneficial to wash your face in the dew.

Dancing around maypoles

Part of the celebration of the coming of summer would have involved dancing around a maypole. This was originally a living tree, then a freshly-cut tree and finally a permanently standing wooden pole. Birch was most often used, representing fertility, birth and new beginnings. Ribbons were a later addition. It was believed that dancing deosil (clockwise) helped all good things; dancing widdershins helped banish unwanted things. People would dance around the pole, holding the ends of the ribbons, weaving in and out, creating beautiful plaited or webbed patterns.



Morris dancers

While there are many theories about the history of morris dancing – whether it is of Celtic or Moorish origin, for example – it is frequently seen as a ceremonial ritual dancing to “celebrate the renewal of spring and promote fertility in field, flock and mankind”. The King’s Morris annually “dance the dawn up” at South Wootton, Kings Lynn, complete with hobby horse, dragon, fool, ox horns and May garland.

English bluebells will be flowering during May

Morris dancing is an ancient tradition with thousands of adherents



Natural Inspirations: Winter

The last workshop was held on 31 January. Delia Cook writes: A light snow cover and a dry, bright January afternoon were most appropriate weather conditions for the second seasonal workshop held at the delightful Clermont House.

Firstly, members enjoyed the beauty of the snow covered gardens whilst James identified those species for which the prolonged winter had presented the greatest challenge. There were signs of life however, a few early snowdrops and a startled vole that had sought refuge under the purpose-built wildlife shelter. Our excellent hosts, Diana and John readily answered all questions and added pertinent observations regarding wildlife activity in the garden over the winter months.

Once comfortably accommodated indoors Lucinda again enthralled us with a thought provoking resume of ancient seasonal customs all of which emphasized the importance of light at this time of year for our ancestors. Also included was an accurate long range weather forecast based upon Candlemass tradition.

Tea with delicious cakes made by Sue with seasonal ingredients was an essential part of the workshop.

Liz completed the seasonal talks with a fascinating account of wool spinning, dyeing, knitting and weaving. The fact packed talk was perfectly illustrated with Liz’s own beautifully worked examples and a weaving demonstration.

As before Mark ended the afternoon with a short recital of some of his favourite poems with a winter theme.

This second workshop was another success, many thanks to all contributors who provided members with a most welcome opportunity to appreciate all things natural and their health-giving powers.

BRECKLAND QUIZ by Sue Whittle

- 1 What is the name of the flower that is the Breckland Society logo?
- 2 The Brecks are drained by 5 main rivers; what are these?
- 3 How many hectares does Thetford Forest cover? 10,000, 20,000 or 30,000?
- 4 Where are Norfolk’s oldest surviving council houses?
- 5 People were evacuated from 23,000 acres of Norfolk at the beginning of the Second World War. Where did this evacuation take place?
- 6 Which 15th-century manor house was a sanctuary for Roman Catholic priests in times of persecution; was set on fire, besieged and pillaged by the Parliamentarians during the Civil War; and held Mary Queen of Scots a prisoner?
- 7 What covers 34 acres and lies beneath the heaths of Breckland?
- 8 Who wrote “The sublime and ridiculous are often so nearly related that it is difficult to class them separately”.
- 9 Weeting Hall was the country seat of which family?
- 10 What remains have been found at Lynford quarry to show evidence of the Neanderthals 60,000 years ago?

Answers on back page

MAHARANI JINDA KAUR AT ANCIENT HOUSE

The BBC and the British Museum have joined forces to tell the story of the world in 100 objects. Museums around the country are encouraged to participate, featuring objects that have a particular significance to their region.

This headstone belonging to the Messalina of the Punjab Maharani Jinda Kaur, mother of Maharajah Duleep Singh, has been on display at Thetford’s Ancient House Museum since 2008. The two foot by two foot marble stone was discovered by chance in the catacombs of the old Kensal Green Chapel in 2006. Initially, it seemed to be just another piece of rubble but then Sikh Gurmukhi script was spotted carved into the stone. Historian Peter Bance, who translated the Gurmukhi script, said “It’s amazing that a relic of the late Maharani has been discovered. She was only in England for two years, and six months after her death her body was taken to India for its last rites, as cremation was illegal in Britain at the time. This is an exceptional Sikh Artefact’.

Ancient House diary dates

Thetford’s Inns and Pubs

Tuesday 18 May 7.30pm

An evening talk by local historian David Osborne, discover the hidden history of the many inns, pubs and brew houses that thrived in Thetford throughout the years.
£3 non-members, free to members

Life in the Burrell Works

Thursday 27 May 3–4pm

Afternoon talk, advance booking essential.
The working life of a Burrell traction engine worker with local historian David Osborne. £2/ £1.50

For further details tel The Ancient House Museum, Thetford: 01842 768500



The marble headstone of Maharani Jinda Kaur

See *What’s On* on page 1 for details of the Society’s private view of the Duleep Singh exhibition at the Thetford Ancient House Museum on 15 July.

LATEST WILDLIFE SIGHTINGS IN THE BRECKS



Wild Grape Hyacinth

- Butterflies out in good numbers: first **Brimstone** on 26 March, followed by **Orange-tip** on 9 April, and with plenty of overwintering **Peacocks** and **Small Tortoiseshells** to be seen; also **Comma**, **Holly Blue**, **Green-veined White** and **Speckled Wood**.
- Some winter birds still hanging on, with several **Fieldfares** seen on the Society visit to the Battle Area on 10 April and a pair of **Bramblings** spotted at Mayday Farm on 16 April; **Goshawk** and **Woodlark** also seen there that day, and eight **Crossbills** near Santon Downham on 18th.
- Summer birds starting to arrive, with **Swallows**, **House Martins** and **Sand Martins** all seen by 15 April, when the first **Cuckoo** also heard (at Cranwich); 4 **Wheatears** at Grime’s Graves on April 18, with displaying **Tree Pipit** nearby on 22nd.

- Reptiles and amphibians emerging from hibernation throughout April, with plenty of frogs and toads in evidence as they return to their breeding ponds. Also a spectacular male **Adder** seen at Mayday Farm on April 16.
- Some of Breckland’s special plants are now in bloom, including **Wild Grape Hyacinth**, found only a few protected roadside verges.

RSPB Lakenheath Fen is a great place to visit at the moment, with at least two booming **Bitterns** and up to eight **Marsh Harriers** showing well, as well as **Cranes** and **Hobbies**. The reserve’s famous **Golden Orioles** should be arriving any day now from their winter quarters in Africa.

Orange Tip

