



SOCIETY TO FOCUS ON SAVING TRADITIONAL BRECK BUILDING STYLES

The Breckland Society is shortly to embark on an ambitious project designed to record the area's important and distinctive vernacular architecture. The Brecks have long been known for their characteristic landscape and for the interesting and specialised wildlife that is found here, but the region's built heritage has received relatively little attention. This is all the more surprising given its richness; some of the best examples of flint and chalk construction in Britain are to be found here, as well as other interesting types of building material such as clay lump and distinctive types of brick.

At a time of intense development, with spiralling housing targets and consistently robust property prices, the vernacular architecture of England is currently under considerable pressure. As swathes of identikit housing march across the countryside, traditional styles of building, and the often highly localised materials that were part of this process, have been largely replaced by standardised techniques and forms which are rendering the building stock of one part of the country much the same as any other. Turned out of the same mould, a new 'executive' house in Beachamwell can look almost exactly the same as one in Newport, Preston or Northampton.

In some parts of Britain, such as the Cotswolds and the Lake District, the homogeneity of traditional town and village landscapes has been largely retained. This has been achieved by focusing on the conservation of vernacular buildings, those modest, everyday structures that may not be especially distinguished on an individual basis, but which collectively contribute hugely to the built environment. Sadly, such an approach seems to have passed by most of the Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks. Much of the local vernacular architecture has been removed or unsympathetically altered, and disappointingly few new buildings speak the region's traditional architectural 'language', a break with the past that goes back more than half a century.

In the 1960s and 70s, traditional Breck towns such as Brandon and Thetford, largely constructed from flint, saw their historic centres torn apart by unsympathetic infill. Much of their traditional architecture was replaced by buildings of inappropriate style and materials, with little or no regard to ensuring that the new buildings sat comfortably in their immediate environment. Even with growing conservation awareness during the 1980s and '90s, there were plenty of local horror stories: historic buildings that should have been saved, or new buildings of astounding insensitivity. The pattern today of most of the settlements in the Brecks is of a fragmented historic town or village centre compromised by garish infill, with outskirts characterised by rows of repetitive and stylistically anonymous bungalows or estate housing. Against this backdrop, local distinctiveness can be disappointingly hard to find.

The everyday architectural heritage of the Brecks is not well documented. What information does exist is more or less restricted to

the use of flint in construction, and whilst this is one of the most characteristic building materials of the area, it is only part of the story. In the south and west of the Brecks there is a long tradition of building in chalk clunch, and examples of clay lump construction also occur. Yellow brick is common in some settlements, and one does not have to go too far back to the days when brick-making was a common activity across the region, with many villages having their own brick- and pantile works. Sadly, knowledge and experience of how these materials were produced and worked is increasingly scarce, as older craftsmen and builders die and the younger inheritors of their trade are no longer required to display such expertise.

The Society is therefore working up a project designed to record the vernacular building materials and architectural language of the Brecks. This has not been done on a systematic basis before, and the project will have various components:

- a detailed and illustrated survey and report on the traditional building materials of the area, tracing their history, occurrence and distribution, and documenting each stage in the process, from quarrying through manufacture to use in a building;
- a survey and report on vernacular architectural styles in the Brecks;
- an oral history archive, compiled from interviews with craftsmen, master-builders and other members of local communities with experience of building and maintaining traditional vernacular buildings; and
- an exhibition on the architectural heritage of the Brecks.

The main objective of the project is to ensure the continuation of Breckland building styles and materials, both in existing buildings and in new construction, through raising awareness, particularly on the part of property owners and building contractors. In addition, it is hoped that the Society's report will help local planning authorities to enhance the fabric and environment of Breckland towns and villages. Research work will hopefully start in spring 2004, and an application will be made to the Countryside Agency for grant funding under the Local Heritage Initiative.

Community involvement is central to this project: **would Society members who are interested in contributing in any way please contact the Chairman, James Parry, on 01366 328676.**

VIEWPOINT

Viewpoint is an opportunity for members of the Society to air their views on subjects of interest to other members and/or of relevance to the work of the Society. We welcome members' submissions and comments, but make the point that any opinions expressed are those of the individual(s) concerned and not necessarily of the Society (although of course we always listen to what you have to say!). In this issue Elizabeth Orr Sutcliffe from Didlington argues for an eradication campaign against mink.

A dramatic reduction in the number of breeding waterbirds on the 60 acres of the Didlington Park lakes, a Site of Special Scientific Interest, has coincided with increased sightings of mink over the past few years. The American mink (*Mustela vison*), a large and successful member of the weasel family (*Mustelidae*) and a relative of stoats, otters, polecats and badgers, was brought to the UK from the USA in the 1920s to be farmed for fur production. When the industry went into a decline after the second world war, many farmers released their animals into the wild, where they began to breed successfully and have prospered ever since.

Sixty per cent larger than the European mink (*Mustela lutreola*), which is not found in Britain, American mink males measure approximately 60cm (24 inches) from tip of nose to tip of tail, and weigh around 1.2kg. The females are smaller and lighter. All the mink I have seen locally have been dark brown/black in colour, but variations of light grey and sandy-white have also been reported nearby. They breed once a year, with an average litter of five to six 'kits' born early in May in ground dens, usually near water in tree roots. They are weaned at seven weeks and usually live to the age of two, although they can live up to eight years.

The success of the mink in the English countryside is its flexibility – it lives on a varied diet of fish, birds, and invertebrates – and because it has no natural predators other than otters and man. It is very territorial (with an average territorial riparian limit of 1.6–2.8 kms) and aggressive to its own species. With mink now present on almost every British waterway, numbers are limited only by the increased presence of otters, which are known to attack and even kill mink. Where otters are now widespread (in Wales, for example), the mink population has decreased.

Well-adapted predators

Mink are rapacious predators and, like foxes, will kill even if they are not hungry. Their effect on ground-nesting seabirds on some Scottish islands has been such that a whole season's chicks and eggs have been wiped out, which leads me to the assumption that the serious depletion of young aquatic birds on the Didlington Park lakes over the last three or four years is due totally to mink predation. Their efficient and stealth-like swimming ability, matched with their extraordinary climbing skills, make them ideal for preying on ground-nesting birds. I have frequently seen them swimming along the river, hugging the riverbank and then shinning up trees, from where they have glared down at me from a great height.

A neighbouring gamekeeper has eliminated about 150 mink in the last four years along a two-mile stretch of the River Wissey. He has caught most of them along the water's edge and up to 800 metres away from the river in hedgerows or dykes. One humane way of despatching these wily, beautiful but destructive

creatures is to trap them in live mink traps set along the water's edge, and then shooting them with a .22 rifle. Any argument in favour of mink-hunting with hounds can be countered by the fact that such a pursuit disturbs fragile wetland habitats and puts the same pressure on otters as on mink. Indeed, mink hounds may kill otters and wildfowl, and will disturb sensitive species such as the endangered water vole.

Need for national policy

Surprisingly, English Nature has no policy in respect of mink and, if it were not for gamekeepers, who have a vested interest in culling them, the problem would be even worse. It is difficult to understand the passion with which English Nature supports the stone curlew in Breckland, but does nothing to support the eradication of mink. If we are to save the unique and fragile fauna of Breckland, it is my belief that a national policy on the total eradication of the American mink is a very urgent priority.

The Chairman adds:

The presence of non-native species is always going to be a matter of potential concern. Some – such as the golden pheasant, which has its British headquarters in the Brecks, most notably in Wayland Wood near Watton – appear to have little or no adverse impact on native wildlife and the environment, whereas others clearly do. The muntjac, now abundant in the Brecks, probably falls into the latter category, and the mink certainly does. The demise of the water vole has received extensive publicity, and whilst habitat destruction and water pollution have almost certainly played a role in its decline, the evidence clearly points towards the mink as the main villain of the piece.

With mink numbers spiralling upwards and voles and waterbirds suffering accordingly, the case for action is growing. There is an interesting precedent, and a local one at that. Coypu, introduced from South America to Britain in 1929, again for their fur, soon escaped and established themselves across East Anglia, including in parts of the Brecks. They proved hugely destructive, eating their way through swathes of reedbed and removing valuable habitat for birds such as bittern and marsh harrier in the process. In the 1960s the decision was taken to try to exterminate them and, despite many ecologists claiming this could not be done, the coypu were successfully removed from the native ecosystem in the 1980s. Whether or not this is feasible for mink is another matter, but Liz is certainly right to query whether it is appropriate for English Nature not to have a policy on this subject. Perhaps if mink start eating stone curlews, this will change ...

BUSTARDS IN THE BRECKS – TIME TO BRING THEM BACK?

Members may recently have seen in the media news of an exciting new reintroduction project for the great bustard, once the largest British landbird but now sadly extinct here as a breeding species. A consortium of Stirling University, the Zoological Society of London and the Great Bustard Group have recently been given permission to begin an ambitious reintroduction programme on Wiltshire's Salisbury Plain, once a bustard stronghold before the species died out in Britain during the 19th century. However, Wiltshire was not where Britain's last indigenous bustards lived. That honour belongs to Breckland, where the open, steppe-like landscape was ideal for these wary birds.

Rather like long-legged, statuesque turkeys, bustards are impressive creatures, and although mainly terrestrial they are strong fliers. Large males can weigh up to forty pounds and are at their most dramatic in spring, when they mount an elaborate courtship display in an attempt to mate with as many females as possible. Both sexes have an attractive cinnamon and grey plumage, with adult males sporting 'moustaches' of bristly white feathers near their bill.

Records suggest that great bustards were once widespread in the Brecks and, indeed, in other parts of Norfolk. In the 1670s the bird was referred to by one author as 'not infrequent in the champion and fieldy part of the county' – which would have certainly included the Brecks – and bustards sometimes featured on banquet menus. However, by the early 19th century they had become decidedly scarce, a victim of hunting and of agricultural improvement. Enclosure, and the ensuing division of land and planting of hedges, broke up the large, open spaces on which the bustards depended, and the population fragmented and declined accordingly.

The British great bustards were resident birds, breeding in the same localities year after year, but roaming further afield in autumn and winter. They were sociable, gathering in groups known locally as 'droves'. In spring the females laid their eggs – normally two – in a shallow depression on the ground, usually in winter-planted corn. Corn was traditionally sown broadcast, which provided good conditions for the nesting birds but, as tillage techniques improved, seed was increasingly sown by drill. This both reduced the amount of cover and provided greater access to the crops for weed clearance, resulting in more disturbance than the bustards could support. In his book *The Birds of Norfolk* (1870), Henry Stevenson describes the sorry tale: 'Thus, every nest made by a bustard in a wheat-field was sure to be discovered – perhaps in time to avert instantaneous destruction from the horses' feet or the hoe blades – perhaps, and this probably much the most often, only when the eggs had been driven over and smashed, and their contents pouring out on the ground.'

Bustards were also hunted. Although some landowners afforded them protection, others actively persecuted them, either by chasing on horseback or by laying down turnips as bait and shooting the birds as they came to feed. One notorious incident involved gamekeeper George Turner of Wretham, who set up a series of trigger-operated guns and once succeeded in killing seven birds with one blast. Sometimes a gun was not even necessary. At Elveden, in 1820, a shepherd saw two male birds fighting; so intent were they on the combat that he was able to run up and kill one with a stick. It was promptly sent to the shepherd's landowner in London, who ate it. As bustards became rarer, so they – and their eggs – were more highly prized by collectors and the pressure on them intensified.

No surprise, therefore, that by the early 19th century the great bustard had become a scarce sight in Britain. As early as 1800 it had disappeared from much of its former range, and the once healthy East Anglian population was reduced to two main droves: one that roamed the open country around Swaffham, particularly the vicinity of Westacre (where nineteen birds were seen together in 1819), Massingham and Beachamwell, the other around Thetford. Groups of up to forty birds had been seen on both North Stow Heath (part of the Culford estate) and near Barnham in the 18th century, but numbers had declined to a mere handful by 1810 or so. Thetford Warren was the site, in 1832, of the last known nest in Suffolk. Meanwhile, the Swaffham population lingered on, slowly dwindling from twenty-seven birds to seventeen to five to two. Sadly, the last few birds were all females, and despite their regularly creating nest scrapes each spring in anticipation of breeding (and even laying eggs on occasion), there was never a male bird to secure the future of the population. The last females died off around 1843, and with them the British great bustard became extinct as a resident species. Occasional vagrants have visited East Anglia since then; the last record was in 1987.

Great bustards are widely but unevenly distributed across eastern and southern Europe, with strongholds in Iberia and in Russia. Even here the birds are under pressure; in Russia, many nests are lost to springtime tractor activity, and it is here that the bustard project will be working to both help save local bustards and provide the means of reintroducing the species to Britain. Out in the Russian fields, fieldworkers will walk ahead of the tractors, rescuing bustard eggs and placing them in an incubator. The young chicks will then be brought to England, kept in a fox-proof pen and then relocated into an open-roofed release enclosure: so-called 'soft release'. They will leave the enclosure when they are ready, and human contact will be kept to an absolute minimum. The intention is to bring forty chicks a year to Britain over five years, starting later this year. This is considered enough to create a viable population on Salisbury Plain, where sympathetic landowners (including the Ministry of Defence) will ensure that the appropriate habitat (open grassland with nearby arable crops in which the birds can nest) and adequate protection and freedom from disturbance are maintained.

If the project is successful, then it will serve as a blueprint for future possible reintroductions elsewhere in Britain. Where better than the Brecks? As home to the last native British bustards, it would be entirely appropriate to reintroduce the bird here, if the requisite conditions could be maintained. We hope to be able to invite a representative of the bustard project to address Society members towards the end of 2004, when more detail will be available on the success of the programme to date and what the options might be for a possible phase two in the Brecks.

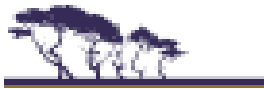
EVENTS ROUND-UP

On 15 October Bronwen Tyler of the Wayland Partnership gave a fascinating talk to the Society on the work of the Partnership and on some of the churches in and around Watton. Those of us who live near or in Watton cannot fail to have noticed the improvements that are taking place in the town. Much of this is due to the work of the Partnership and to their success in securing EU funding for civic enhancements; an example that other towns in the Brecks would do well to follow. The churches in the Watton area are full of interest, and Bronwen revealed how research into their history is bringing fascinating new discoveries to light. We hope to be able to organise a tour of some of these churches later in the year.

Chris Knights is one of the most celebrated wildlife photographers in Britain today, and on 12 November he showed many of his outstanding slides in a lecture on farming in the Brecks. Modern-day farming attracts more than its fair share of criticism, and Chris was able to demonstrate how contemporary agriculture and wildlife conservation can co-exist successfully. It is worth remembering that the vast majority of England's breeding stone curlew population nests on active farmland, most of them with the direct cooperation of the landowners concerned.

Finally, on 29 November, over sixty Society members enjoyed a theatrical treat at the Houghton Centre when Patience Tomlinson presented her splendid one-woman show on Mary Mann. The hard-hitting works of this lost Breckland novelist, Norfolk's answer to Thomas Hardy, are all currently out of print, but her impact in the late-19th century was huge and it is time that her work was appreciated once more by a wider audience. The Society is pleased to be able to play a role in her revival, and we look forward to the potential reprinting of some of her works in the near future.

NEWS FROM THE BRECKS COUNTRYSIDE PROJECT



Winter Walk

Along the Angles Way, Sunday 11th January, 10am.

Get off to a healthy start for 2004 – join the Brecks Countryside Project for a 5-mile walk along the valley of the Little Ouse from Knettishall Heath to Hopton Fen. The walk will follow part of the Angles Way (Broads-Brecks long-distance path), providing opportunities to see a variety of river valley habitats and wildlife. The walk is free, but for full details and to book a place, please contact us (see below).

This is the last in our series of Waterside Walks, but we are in the process of putting together a programme of heathland walks and events for 2004. Do get in touch if you would like to go on the mailing list for further details.

Local heritage in the Brecks

Are you interested in helping to conserve and enhance the wildlife, landscapes and cultural heritage of your bit of the Brecks? At a 'Have a go in the Brecks' day held in October, local groups demonstrated existing projects and exchanged ideas and experiences. Groups included the Suffolk WI Landscape Project, Carbrooke and Thompson Millennium Greens, Stanton Wildlife Action Group and Weeting Local History Group. In addition, Will Wall, the Local Heritage Initiative Officer presented this scheme, funded by the Countryside Agency. The day was well received and has given some useful leads to developing community initiatives.

The Brecks Countryside Project can provide information and support to local people and groups wanting to get more involved in caring for their local environment. To find out more, get in touch with Kath Daly or Celia Richardson (see contact details below).

Contact Kath Daly or Celia Richardson at

Brecks Countryside Project

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Email: brecks.project@et.suffolkcc.gov.uk

Website: www.brecks.org

WHAT'S ON

Forthcoming Society events

Tuesday 27 January

Lecture on *Warrening: The Story of Rabbits in the Brecks* by Anne Mason, an expert on the area's warrens and co-author of *Background to Breckland*, the best account of the Brecks still in print, and copies of which will be available on the night. There will also be the opportunity to examine a rare and beautiful late-18th century original map of Beachamwell Warren, kindly lent by a member of the Society. Oak Lodge, 7.30 pm. Follow signs to the Forestry Commission's High Lodge, off the B1107 Brandon-Thetford road. £2 members, £3 non-members.

Saturday 14 February

Joint event with the Campaign to Protect Rural England's Norfolk branch. Dr Tom Williamson of the Centre of East Anglian Studies at UEA will give a talk on *Reclamation and Recession: The Making of Breckland 1750-1930*, followed by a glass of wine and opportunity for discussion. Houghton Centre, South Pickenham, 7.30pm.

mid-March – date to be confirmed

Greg Britton of Breckland District Council's Planning Department will speak on planning in Breckland, outlining the implications of the Government's proposed far-reaching overhaul of the planning system. Details from mid-January from James Parry (01366 328676) or Sue Whittle (01366 328190).

Wednesday 7 April

Tour of Brandon by local historian Leigh Yeager. Historically an important river crossing and market town, Brandon is surprisingly rich in heritage. Leigh will lead a walking tour lasting 2/3 hours. 10.30am start, meeting-place to be confirmed in March newsletter.

Saturday 1 May

Evening reception at Oxburgh Hall, kindly hosted by Henry and Mary Bedingfield (subject to confirmation by the National Trust). See March newsletter for further details or contact Sue Whittle on 01366 328190.

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