

## NEWS FROM THE BRECKS COUNTRYSIDE PROJECT



Next guided walk Sat 7 November 10am –1pm, FREE  
Peddars Way to Middle Harling Heath  
Book on 01842 765400

### Brecks Conference, Friday 16 September at Elveden Hall

This will be an opportunity to celebrate the achievements of the last ten years, and look forward to the new challenges facing the area, bringing together the diverse interests in wildlife and landscape conservation, the historic environment and today's land managers. Our very own James Parry will be chairing the conference!

Speakers will include Tom Williamson on New Light on the Breckland Landscape, Richard Powell (RSPB) on the future of the Brecks, and Phil Bennett-Lloyd (Norfolk CC) on the proposed Brecks Regional Park. Afternoon sessions will include speakers from English Nature and the Forestry Commission on conservation work, as well as a discussion on farm tourism. Guest speaker Richard Mabey will talk at 5pm on The Brecks Go Wild and there will be an evening reception in the Marble Hall.

The cost for the day is £30, but members of voluntary and community groups are welcome to attend from 5pm onwards free of charge. **Tickets are essential for all** and can be obtained from the Brecks Countryside Project on 01842 765400.

## VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE PROJECT UPDATE

With survey work now in full swing, Society member Teresa Squires has bravely volunteered to create and maintain a database of all the information on the survey forms. Could all surveyors please return their forms, as and when completed, direct to Teresa at The Old Stables, Hall Farm Barns, Oxborough, King's Lynn PE33 9PS, tel: 01366 328258, email [ptsquires@oxburgh2002.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:ptsquires@oxburgh2002.freeserve.co.uk). By submitting forms as and when you complete them, this will hopefully avoid a deluge later in the year! Many thanks for your cooperation.

## NEWS FROM THE HOUGHTON CENTRE

"Reconnecting with Spirit": a MusicMindMovement weekend to explore and deepen personal life paths. Saturday 27 to Monday 29 August. The purpose of the weekend is to seek the inner divine through tuning in to self and others—being, sharing, meditating, improvising and discussing, and including workshops on subjects such as healing, grounding and ensouling through nature and the arts. Twelve places available on a first come, first served basis, for an inclusive cost of £115. Enquiries and bookings to Lucinda Mackworth-Young, Houghton Farm, South Pickenham, Swaffham PE37 8DP, telephone 07850 912006, email [musicmindmovement@btinternet.com](mailto:musicmindmovement@btinternet.com).

### Corrigendum

In the last newsletter's Viewpoint, we inadvertently stated that it is illegal to kill grey squirrels. This is not of course the case!

## WHAT'S ON

### Forthcoming Society events

#### Tuesday 18 October

Evening talk by Robin Page, a joint event with the Friends of Thetford Forest. Robin Page is a founder member of honorary director of The Countryside Restoration Trust, a charity dedicated to the protection and restoration of the countryside for sustainable agriculture and quality food production. He writes and broadcasts on farming and rural issues and hosted the 'One Man and His Dog' series. Santon Downham Village Hall, 7.30pm. Tickets £3, available from Sue Whittle on 01366 328190. Refreshments 50p.

#### Wednesday 22 November

Talk by Edward Martin, Suffolk County Council Archaeologist, on the archaeology of the Lark Valley. Joint event with the Lark Valley Association, at Culford Village Hall, 7.30pm. Tickets £3 at the door.

#### Saturday 17 December (please note date change)

Christmas Extravaganza at the Houghton Centre. A celebration in words, music and song, with two talented young musicians from UEA on saxophone and violin, Tony Hopping, Andres Hernandez Salazar and Lucinda Mackworth-Young. Tickets £12.50 to include wine and "small chop", from Sue Whittle on the usual phone number.

#### Friday 17 February 2006

Susanna Wade Martins speaking on Norfolk farmbuildings, at the Houghton Centre, full details in next newsletter.

#### The Breckland Society

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## RARE ORCHIDS HOLDING THEIR OWN AT SUFFOLK SITE

*A glorious hot and sunny evening on Wednesday 22nd June saw a small group of members venture outside the Brecks on a quest to see the remarkable colony of lizard orchids on the Devil's Ditch near Newmarket. Led by local botanist Yvonne Leonard and her husband David, the group walked an outstanding stretch of the ditch, which is notable for the variety and quality of its plant life.*

The ditch is celebrated as a feat of ancient engineering. It dates back to at least the eighth century AD (although there is some evidence that it may date back as far as late Roman times, some three centuries earlier), and was constructed with a rampart to the east of the ditch proper – indicating that it was a defensive structure aimed at countering possible attack from the south-west. However, although 30 feet or so high, the ditch is only 6.5 miles long, and so would not have presented an insurmountable obstacle, more of an inconvenience or local deterrent, especially if the ditch were further reinforced by a barrier of thorny scrub, as has been suggested. During Medieval times the ditch served as the boundary between the parishes of Swaffham Prior and Burwell, but in recent years has become noted for its wildlife interest and it is now a Site of Special Scientific Interest in recognition of this value.

The calcareous soil of the slopes either side of the rampart is a haven for chalk-loving plants, particularly in an area of otherwise intensive agriculture, in which chalk grassland has become exceedingly rare. Species such as dropwort, lesser hop trefoil, rock-rose, hoary plantain, salad burnet, yellowwort, sainfoin, spiny restharrow and the splendidly named squinancywort all abound in late June, as well as several orchid species including common twayblade and many fine specimens of pyramidal orchid. The local history of the lizard orchid is an interesting one. The site has long been known for the species, which declined rapidly elsewhere in the mid-twentieth century, a victim of agricultural improvement. By the 1950s this was one of the few localities in eastern England where the lizard orchid hung on, and a warden was installed during the flowering season to protect the few surviving plants. Astonishingly, he was subjected to threats and even violence from a group of fanatical plant-collectors, who even torched his hut on one occasion. Happily, the orchids survived, and although numbers vary – there have been as many as 300 in good years, although 80 to 100 is more typical – they are generally unmolested.

Lizard orchids are tall by orchid standards, measuring up to two feet high, and are notable for two things: the generally



Lizard orchid (*Himantoglossum hircinum*)

unpleasant scent of the flowers, and the peculiar configuration of their pale limey-green and brown petals, which are said to resemble the shape of a lizard. Whilst not immediately apparent, this resemblance has given the plant its common name. The Devil's Ditch is also home to some interesting birdlife; several displaying tree pipits were seen, parachuting down from a height to the tops of the shrubs along its stretch. More common farmland species such as linnet and yellowhammer were also present. Hobbies are also regular visitors to the area.

Early spring is also a rewarding time to visit the ditch, as there are colonies of the delightful pasque flower, once common but now very scarce in the wild.



## THE DIDDLINGTON ESTATE: A SHORT HISTORY

Society member and Oxborough resident Barbara Pritchard recently assembled a small exhibition of material on the Diddlington Estate for the Oxborough VE Day celebrations, from which the following article is drawn.

**“March 10<sup>th</sup>. The owners of the vast mansion in which my Divisional HQ lives and has its being built a summer house absurdly like a miniature keep on a mound jutting into the lake. Soldiers have smashed the place up with a kind of wantonness which defies explanation. “Jess badness, plain badness” said the carpenter who was mending the locks. “Goes agin human nature.” ...He showed me a kitchen with a gate surrounded by blue and white hand-painted tiles of nursery rhymes, childishly but amusingly done. Many of these had been wantonly stripped off the plaster and smashed or skated across the lake.”**

The vast mansion with its lakes was Diddlington Hall and the tiles were Delftware. The author was Leslie Paul. The book is *Heron Lake: A Norfolk Year*, based on his diary of a year as a sergeant in the Army Educational Corps stationed at Diddlington during the Second World War. Predominantly his response to the overwhelming landscape, its flora, fauna and local characters, the book meticulously records swan-battles and bird migration, the wild young children pike-snatching in the great lakes, and the country characters of the pubs and harvest fields. Without specifically identifying it however, he also captures the lingering grandeur and sad demise of the great Diddlington estate. A 7,000-acre tract of Breckland encompassing the village of Ickburgh, half of Foulden (including the pub) and almost 20 farms, once comprised the vast and luxurious Diddlington estate. The Hall, with its origins in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was by the 19<sup>th</sup> century an opulent mansion in the Italian style, one of the architectural treasures of that century, and country seat of Lord Amherst of Hackney.



Much of this magnificence is encapsulated within a publication of the late 1890s called *The World*, in a series it ran on *Celebrities at Home*, from which the following are extracts:

... *the best partridge shooting estate in the kingdom.*  
 ... *the rare and beautiful, plumaged birds which, in two immense glass cases flank a seascape of Speeton Cliffs over the mantelpiece, are specimens of Lady Amherst’s skill as a taxidermist. In her love of ornithology, inherited from her father Admiral Milford who assisted in illustrating Selby’s British Birds, she was the first to bring the sunbird to England from Jericho.*

... *the beautiful grounds, which, with the lakes, the pavilions, the duck decoys, the herony and the emu house are objects of continual yet varying interest. The White Farm, where all the animals except the horses are white, the old training ground of lamplighter, Camarine, and Phosphorous the Derby winner (1837), whose plates are still nailed to the stable door ... and the tower having an observatory containing a small, but choice, geological collection ...*

... *When not out of doors, Lord Amherst spends most of his time in his library, one of the finest extant possessed by a private person. Here are treasures of unique interest...:Recyell of the Historeys of Troye by William Caxton [1475, the first printed book in English] ...the crimson Bible on which George III took the coronation oath ... the gold frames of the crowns of Charles II George IV and Queen Adelaide ...*

... *There is a veritable mummy of a Royal Princess buried in Thebes 1700 BC ... with numerous mummy cases. The most singular collection is perhaps that of the tablets, continuous with one exception, of the kings of Babylon ... and that of Nebuchadnezzar who took the ten tribes of Israel captive, while there are papyri dating from 2,000 BC down to 600 AD. In fit company with the ancient documents are the row of basalt figures of Phut, each holding a symbolical key of the Nile, which keep watch outside the museum, and which regard with sphinx-like gravity the gambols of some Arabian gazelle hounds, which are racing in and out among the trees planted by the Prince of Wales, the Duke of Edinburgh, the Duke of York, the late Duke of Clarence, Princess Christian, Princess Henry of Battenburg, and many other members of the Royal family who have frequently visited Diddlington, and the records of whose sojourns have found expression in the silk and bullion embroideries of their coronets and mottoes, on the hangings of their beds, while their emblazoned arms, duly framed, adorn the walls.*

... *One might easily lose oneself in the long passages of this huge mansion. One long corridor... leads to the water tower and to the turnery-room where Lord and Lady Amherst, with their exceptional talent in all mechanical work, invented a tool by which they solved the puzzle of how the Chinese intercarve one ivory ball within another. Many beautiful volumes, bound and tooled, demonstrate Lady Amherst and her daughter’s desire to restore the much-neglected art of bookbinding, while after persistent trouble and protracted experiment, she produced a lacquer hard enough to resist sea water or even boiling water. Of the result of her labours and the skill of her daughters in imitating Japanese art, her own suite of rooms attests the worth. Indeed, the more you know of the members of the family, the more your astonishment increases at their artistic and mechanical successes.*

... *In few country houses, probably, could you obtain a finer vista than through the reception rooms at Diddlington. Standing in the white and gold drawing-room adorned with a choice collection of water colours, and a bust of her father executed by Lady William Cecil, you look through an ante-room entirely hung with landscapes painted by Joseph Vernet on Cordova leather, obtained from the palace of the Popes, and dating from 1732. The next room is upholstered in gold and crimson silk brocade...among the objets d’art you may note a gilded harp once used by Marie Antoinette, and violins by Gaspar da Salu, Amati and Stradivarius. A little easel sustains a water colour by the Empress Frederick, and a small round table painted with humming birds by Mr J Gould is as charming as a similar one, the handiwork of the ornithologist Mr P T Selby. Then the eye may travel onwards to the octagonal room filled with costliest china and faience ... to the billiard room where above the lintel hangs a curious signboard bearing the device of the Duck and Trumpet, and where before you play your game you may note the removal of a beautiful yellow table-cover, part of the loot of the summer palace of Pekin...*

Other sources describe the vineries, peach houses, pineapple house, fruit and vegetable gardens, coach house, stables, deer park and legendary herbaceous border reputed to be one-and-a-half miles long and 20ft wide!

Lord Amherst died in London in 1909 leaving a widow and seven daughters; his funeral took place at Diddlington. Bought by Colonel Herbert Smith in 1911, the estate was revamped at vast expense over a period of two years by a force of tradesmen said to number about 200. During his tenure, which lasted until the early years of the Second World War, Diddlington became renowned in cricketing circles, Jardine famously playing on its fine and famous pitch. During the war it became a military headquarters, units stationed there including the Seventh Armoured Tank Regiment and the Desert Rats. As General Dempsey’s headquar-



## AN UNKNOWN BRECKLAND JEWEL

**To the south of Lynford Hall and hidden in Theford Forest lies the small Roman Catholic Church of Our Lady Of Consolation and St Stephen. Its concealment was no accident as its presence was regarded as a major irritant to the neighbouring Protestant community.**

The little church was commissioned in 1877 by the philanthropist Yolande Lyne Stephens of Lynford Hall, herself a Catholic and a former French ballerina. Local rumour has it that she had been enthusiastically encouraged in her endeavour by her husband, who did not like having to wait three hours for Sunday lunch while his wife and staff went to the Catholic church in Theford (although he died several years before the plan came to fruition).

The architect was Henry Clutton. Built of knapped flint with stone dressings and buttresses, the influence of Pugin can be seen both within and without. Unusually for Breckland churches, it has been completely unaltered, with the exception of the installation of electricity in the 1920s. All the furniture, fittings and pictures remain untouched and as Clutton designed them.

Until a couple of years ago, there was a weekly mass at 6.30pm on Saturday evenings attended by some 25 parishioners but sadly, because of a shortage of clergy and other pressures, this has come to an end, although the church remains consecrated. The hope must be that this attractive and important building will be maintained, perhaps by a preservation society, or that the Catholic diocese of East Anglia will find some appropriate use for it. But in the meantime it remains a fascinating example of Breckland social, architectural and religious life in the 19th century.

ters before D-Day, it was visited by Lord Montgomery. General Auchinleck commanded an Indian Division there.

It was during this period that Leslie Paul wrote the extract above, along with descriptions such as:

*The lawns before it are wide enough for a hockey pitch ... then the lakes begin. The top one has ornamental islands and bays and promenades, summer houses, cedar walks, beech groves, cane brakes – everything that one could cram in, including some giant grasses of tropical origin ...:giant spruces beyond the stables and next to the swimming pool. At this point a fast little trout stream runs into the top lake. The lower lake is wilder altogether ...*

Colonel Smith died in 1948 and two years later it was announced that the Hall was to be demolished and the elaborate fixtures and fittings sold off. At the time of the sale, the description included “a neo-classical swimming pool with changing rooms built in the style of a temple, together with five stone bathhouses and a wonderfully-sited folly; the whole estate a wildlife haven, the lakes an important breeding site for wildfowl and wintering populations including Bewick and Whooper swans”.

The sale lasted two days and covered 850 auction lots, which included: a carved marble canopy chimney-piece reputed to be from St Peter’s in Rome (not sold); oak panelling, architraves with fluted pilasters, headrees and transoms, together with three pairs of oak-panelled doors and four two-panelled doors (£600); an oak sprung ballroom floor 100ft by 30ft (£470); 2,000 feet of tapestry (price unknown); the heavily-carved oak main staircase, along with oak balustrade landing and gallery (£120). In 1950 the Hall was demolished, the 400-ton tower offering the most resistance, but finally succumbing to the 12lbs of gelignite.

Look out in a future newsletter for an update from Liz Sutcliffe and Fiona Dickson.  
*Heron Lake: A Norfolk Year*, Leslie Paul, published by Batchworth Press Ltd, 1948.  
 Sincere thanks to Johnny Cracknell of Foulden for source material.



The Church of Our Lady Of Consolation and St Stephen at Lynford