



RECENT EVENTS: Three churches tour

On 16 June, the Society enjoyed a 'Three Churches Tour' led by Anne Mason, on what must have been one of the few calm and fine evenings of the summer.

The tour began at the thatched Beachamwell Church, with its late-Saxon round tower, topped by an octagonal belfry that was added in the 14th or 15th century. As well as admiring the architecture of the building, the group heard about the history of the settlement and manors and that two other churches had once existed there.

It was a special privilege to visit Shingham Church, since it is privately owned. The red sandstone Norman doorway was the subject of much discussion as to its origins, and everyone was charmed by the simple, atmospheric interior. Of special interest were the carved pew ends and pulpit, which may be Jacobean.

St Mary's at Barton Bendish, now in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust, was the third church, again thatched, and with a Norman doorway which came from the ruined All Saints, one of the three early churches of this complex settlement. The group learned how the churches were linked to the history of the landscape, and how the fortunes of the area's churches reflected the ups and downs of rural life.

Above left: the carved pulpit at Shingham Church

Right: the group discuss the possible origins of the red sandstone Norman doorway at Shingham Church



Green Buildings In Norfolk – Open Days

In September, CPRE Norfolk will be running a series of free guided tours of award-winning energy-efficient buildings. From the Zuckerman Institute at the University of East Anglia to an earth-sheltered social housing scheme in Honingham, all the buildings have been designed to conserve energy. This is your chance to see inside these groundbreaking projects, meet the people who live in them and learn first-hand about renewable energy technologies.

The buildings use techniques such as passive ventilation, earth sheltering, rammed earth construction, solar orientation and thermal massing to conserve and store heat. Some have grey water and rainwater recycling systems to re-use water. Many incorporate the very latest in renewable energy technologies, such as photovoltaic panels, ground source heating, solar water heating or wind turbines.

The Open Days will take place between 6 and 9 September. Each building in the scheme will be running guided tours with the owner or architect, up to four times a day.

Tours must be booked using the booking form available from The Greenhouse on Bethel Street in Norwich, from the CPRE Norfolk website at www.cprenorfolk.org.uk/opendays, or from CPRE Norfolk, telephone 01603 761660.

Open green buildings in Norfolk

1. Holly Barn, Reedham
2. The Old Barns, Upper Stoke
3. The Greenhouse, Norwich
4. Honingham Earth Sheltered Social Housing Scheme
5. Deepdale Farm, Burnham Deepdale
6. ZICER and Elizabeth Fry Buildings, UEA
7. Jasmine House, Blakeney
8. Cedar House, North Elmham
9. Ralps, Plumstead
10. Dragonflies, Little Snoring
11. Hill House, Gimingham
12. The Church of the Annunciation, Little Walsingham

VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITION

The exhibition consists of 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. Launched in July, the exhibition will tour around the Brecks to a series of venues, as follows:

Ancient House Museum, Thetford 26 July – 10 September 2007
The Forum, Norwich 26 – 27 September 2007

Building Conservation Fair 15 September 2007
St Nicholas's Chapel, King's Lynn
Mildenhall Museum 2 – 16 October 2007

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ARCHITECTURE PROJECT EXHIBITION ON THE ROAD

The culmination of the Society's Vernacular Architecture Project was celebrated on Saturday 7 July with the launch of an exhibition and illustrated report. Entitled The Vernacular Architecture of the Norfolk & Suffolk Brecks, the exhibition is the final element of our three-year-long Heritage Lottery-funded project.



Concerned by the impact of modern development on the region's towns and villages, the Society proposed a study of local architectural styles and in August 2004 was awarded a £25,000 Heritage Lottery Fund grant through the Local Heritage Initiative. Over forty volunteers surveyed nearly 1,000 pre-1920 buildings across the Brecks, recording their building materials and key features. The Society also organized a series of workshops demonstrating the use of traditional building materials such as chalk and flint.

The exhibition and report showcasing the survey's results were launched at Santon Downham Village Hall on Saturday 7 July. The report and the exhibition panels examine the history of Breckland architecture and at the different styles and types of building found there.

Dr Tom Williamson, of the University of East Anglia's History Department, compiled the key sections of the report: "With so much new housing earmarked for the Brecks, there has never been a better time to raise awareness about what makes the traditional local architecture so distinctive".

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Starting at the Ecotech Centre in Swaffham on 9 July, it then moved to the Ancient House Museum in Thetford, and from there will proceed to The Forum in Norwich and finally to Mildenhall Museum. Further information about the exhibition venues and dates are on page 4 of this newsletter.

Copies of the report are available from Anne Mason on 01760 755685.

WHAT'S ON forthcoming Society events

Thursday 11 October

A talk by local historian Janet Smith on the remarkable history of cattle droving in Norfolk.
 Wayland House, Watton, 7.30pm
 Tickets £5, to include refreshments.

Thursday 22 November

Ornithologist and wildlife photographer Alan Hale presents an illustrated talk on Birding in Norfolk.
 Beachamwell Village Hall, 7.30pm.
 Tickets at the door, £3 to include refreshments.

Saturday 15 December

Christmas Concert, featuring local young musicians.
 The Houghton Centre, South Pickenham, 7.30pm.
 Tickets in advance only, £13.

Please contact Sue Whittle on 01366 328190 for information about bookings, tickets, etc.

VIEWPOINT

Affordable rural housing

The subject of affordable rural housing is a perennial hot topic nationally, but has particular resonance in rural Norfolk. Robin Birkett of CPRE Norfolk has been doing some research, and in this article he sums up his findings, some of them perhaps controversial.

In July 2005 the Affordable Rural Housing Commission (ARHC) was set up by DEFRA [Department for the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs] and ODPM [the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister]. The following year, this Commission reported that there was an acute shortage of affordable rural housing throughout England. This was not surprising as, for many years, average house prices had increased at a greater rate in rural areas than in urban areas. In addition, significantly fewer houses had been built in rural areas and, of those that had been built, a far smaller proportion could be categorized as affordable housing. Furthermore, while the overall stock of housing association and local authority housing had declined in all areas, the reduction has been particularly acute in rural areas, partly because of the high take-up of Right to Buy.

In the 1950s, planning policies had been designed to protect the countryside and focus development in towns and cities, whereas the aim of government housing strategy is now that: "Everyone should have the opportunity of a decent home at a price they can afford, in a place in which they want to live and not leave, that promotes opportunity and a better quality of life in a secure and attractive environment".

This utopian aim implies a need for affordable housing in rural areas, so that those who were brought up there, but are on insufficient income to enable them to rent a property themselves, could live, and possibly work, in the country. This would enable families to support each other, the argument goes, for example by providing childcare for the young, and helping the old with their shopping and other needs. According to the ARHC report, without affordable housing, rural communities will increasingly become dormitories for the better-off who work elsewhere, or places where people go to retire or visit for the weekend. Local services such as schools and shops will become increasingly difficult to maintain without a full-time resident population to use them.

Housing the nation

CPRE policy appears to be generally consistent with the above. In one way it goes further. In its report *Housing the Nation* (Nov 2004) CPRE says that it strongly believes that affordable housing should be "indistinguishable, in terms of its character and location, from other types of housing: it should be mingled with market housing to avoid creating areas where only people on low incomes live".

Affordable housing can be provided in many different ways. In its most familiar form it is provided by local authorities, normally for rent at a discount to the market rate. At one time this was known as council housing but is now called social housing. However, much of the social housing stock is now owned by Housing Associations who let out the properties on a similar basis to local authorities. Affordable housing may also be available for purchase at a discount, or the equity in the house may be shared with the local authority or the housing association. Whether the property is available for rent or for purchase, eligibility is limited to those satisfying certain criteria and is prioritized on the basis of need. It is worth quoting at this point the concluding paragraphs of CPRE's report *Housing the Nation*:

"Too often in the past decisions on new housing developments have been based on the simplistic consideration of household projections and market demand. Policies for the provision of new housing based on these considerations will continue to produce too many executive homes on greenfield sites, way beyond the financial and physical reach of those in need of affordable housing.

Instead housing should be based on careful judgements about environmental capacity and social need to ensure that more affordable housing is delivered in the right place at the right time. Providing adequate levels of affordable housing for rent and low cost home ownership in suitable locations is essential if the Government is to deliver truly sustainable communities."

The Barker Review

A review by the economist Kate Barker of housing supply in the UK concluded that supply is not meeting demand, causing the highest rate of house price inflation in Europe. Her report suggested that an extra 120,000 private sector homes would be required each year in order to reduce house price inflation to the European average. Another of its proposals was a Planning Gain Supplement, a form of tax on the landowner to be raised when planning permission is granted, which could be used to fund the provision of affordable housing.

However, CPRE questioned many of the findings of the Barker Review. It did not believe it would bring house prices within the reach of the vast majority of those needing affordable housing. The proposed house building programme could have hugely damaging consequences for the environment in both town and country. CPRE again emphasized the need to distinguish between the demand for housing as expressed through the open market, and a need for affordable housing. Trying to meet the crude demand for housing by providing more market housing tends to result in the better off owning more and larger houses, either as second homes or as buy-to-let investments - with little benefit to those in need of affordable housing. In support of this statement CPRE estimated that the number of households with a second home in England had risen to 295,000 by 2004, an increase of 30 per cent over two years. In addition, there was a 48 per cent increase in people taking out buy-to-let mortgages in 2003.

CPRE also put forward the view that a large quantity of land identified to meet the need for affordable housing is instead being used to provide open market housing over and above requirements. Also, CPRE noted that the average density of new housing was still "woefully inadequate" at around 30 dwellings per hectare across the whole of England.

This summary of what is a complicated issue concludes with some personal thoughts. At the risk of sounding politically incorrect I wonder about the real level of need for affordable rural housing. Is this fairly derived from people living in the country - or is it what others less familiar with their circumstances think they need? Housing is not the only high-cost factor to be considered by those living in rural areas. There are increased needs and costs for travel. Getting to shops and other local services (eg post office, garage, GP surgery) is more difficult. Schooling (other than primary schooling) is more difficult for the same reason. Few villages offer much in the way of leisure facilities and activities for young people. Do many of today's families work on a traditional patriarchal or matriarchal basis with older members of families helping younger members and vice versa? With regard to employment in the countryside, there are obviously fewer opportunities and surely many young people would be seeking employment elsewhere, where there was better pay and prospects.

What do you think? Please let the Editor know your views.

Please note that *Viewpoint* is a forum for discussion, and opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the Breckland Society.

RECENT EVENTS

Wildflowers and nightjars

On 19 July a group of members enjoyed an evening walk at Santon Downham with Neal Armour-Chelu, ecologist with the Forestry Commission. Blessed by warm, calm and sunny weather - a rare commodity indeed so far this summer - a slow procession took place through the areas of open grassland and heath adjacent to the Thetford-Brandon railway line, heads-down in search of botanical rarities and invertebrates.

Carefully managed by the Commission to maintain optimum conditions for a range of special wildlife, the site is home to several of Breckland's great floral specialities. These range from the impressive Tower Mustard, several stands of which were found, to such tiny but scarce plants as Perennial Knawel and Mossy Stonecrop. Of particular interest were species such as Sand Sedge, normally a coastal plant but one that does well in the Brecks thanks to the sandy conditions here, and Wood Small-reed, an attractive plant but one that is causing headaches to conservation managers because of its habit of crowding out less robust species.

Like much of Thetford Forest, the rides around Santon Downham are also good for butterflies. Meadow Brown, Gatekeeper and Small Heath were all seen, but especially exciting was the discovery of a dead Small Skipper, clamped to a plant stem and guarded over zealously by a Crab Spider. Not equipped for web-building, spiders of this group feed by hiding underneath foliage and flowerheads and then seizing insects as they alight to rest or take nectar. The spiders are surprisingly powerful and able to overcome much bigger prey than themselves.

With the sun setting, a small group of us remained to try and hear Nightjars. These ground-nesting birds are summer visitors to Britain from Africa and are doing well in Thetford Forest, where they favour the open areas of clear fell. The male's churring "song" is one of the most extraordinary of any bird, and usually only heard after dusk. On this occasion, however, we were treated to a fine display from one male before it was truly dark, and as if to make the point, he then sailed past us within a few metres or so, giving excellent views of his cryptic plumage. We then enjoyed the spectacle of the male and his mate hawking for insects around us and repeatedly alighting on the ground a few metres from where we were standing - they were doubtless feeding chicks.



Nightjars lay their eggs on the bare ground, with no pretence at nest building, and rely on camouflage to escape the attentions of predators. Research in Thetford Forest has revealed that one of the highest causes of the loss of nightjar eggs and chicks comes from a seemingly unlikely source: Hedgehogs, which are partial to crunching their way through eggs and young birds. Wet and cold weather can also be a threat to chick survival, and it is likely that the downpours of recent weeks will have had a serious impact on all ground-nesting birds. Hopefully the young Nightjars will have survived and be on their way to winter quarters in Africa in a few weeks' time.

CRANES NEST AT RSPB'S LAKENHEATH FEN RESERVE

For the first time in 400 years, cranes have been found breeding in the Fens of East Anglia. The huge birds were nesting at the Lakenheath Fen nature reserve in May this year, on a site that was a carrot field until the RSPB bought it 11 years ago and began to transform it into a wetland reserve. Staff discovered a nest by chance, while carrying out a routine survey of the site.

With a seven-foot wingspan and a loud, bugling call, the crane is a spectacular bird. The adults have a grey body and black, white and red markings on the neck and head. Persecution and the large-scale drainage of the Fens for agriculture led to its disappearance as a breeding bird in Britain by about 1600. A small number returned to the Norfolk Broads in 1979 but, while they have bred there successfully, the population has remained isolated and vulnerable.

Common Cranes are among the biggest European birds. They nest in marshy vegetation, and populations all over Europe have dwindled with the disappearance of wetlands. The birds had a long history in England, their presence recorded in place names such as Cranfield and Cranbrook.

Their arrival at Lakenheath Fen earlier this year offers hope that they may now be starting to spread into the Fens. The birds' decision to nest on the reserve was totally unexpected, but was testimony to the wonderful work done on the site by the RSPB, who transformed it from carrot fields to a site to welcome cranes in 11 years.

Lakenheath Fen is a superb example of what can be achieved by restoring wildlife habitats on a large scale and proves that when it comes to wetlands, bigger really is better. The RSPB opened its new visitor centre at Lakenheath Fen in May. See the RSPB's website: www.rspb.org.uk/reserves/guide/1/lakenheathfen

