

WELCOME TO THE SOCIETY

from James Parry, Chairman

It is several months now since a small group of us gathered around a kitchen table one autumn afternoon to discuss the possibility of setting up a society dedicated to the conservation of the Brecks. We were drawn from a range of backgrounds, and came to the table with all sorts of different reasons for being there: concern about the fate of local market towns, a love of the area's historic buildings, wildlife and landscapes, worries that development is running out of control locally, or just an enthusiasm for this unsung but very special part of England. We hoped that there were many more of you out there with similar interests and views, and I am delighted to say that we have not been disappointed! After a few weeks of hectic planning, we were able to launch the Society with a highly successful inaugural lecture held at the Houghton Centre, South Pickenham on 3 April. Over 80 people turned up, filling the barn, and were treated to a storming talk (technical breakdowns notwithstanding!) on the history and character of the Breckland landscape by Dr Tom Williamson of the Centre of East Anglian Studies at UEA. Tom's lecture sparked much animated discussion and contributions from the audience afterwards, and struck precisely the chord we needed to get off to a flying start.

Since then, we have worked hard to maintain the momentum and have been forging links with other groups that have similar objectives to our own. For example, we have had discussions with the Norfolk Society (the Norfolk branch of the CPRE) concerning light pollution in the Brecks (see back page) and are already working



closely with the Brecks Countryside Project to identify joint activities that will support and further the aims of both our organisations. As an independent and local body supported by a membership, we offer a unique perspective, and the next few months will see us continuing to consolidate our presence and develop a public profile, both of which will help us to articulate our concerns and commitments in an effective and meaningful way.

The Society already has over 90 members, and a full programme of events through the rest of the year. We have organised these in the hope and expectation that they will prove both interesting and enjoyable, and I look forward to meeting as many of you as possible at these events. In particular, I would draw your attention to the social evening to be hosted by our treasurer, John Davies, on 30 August. Lastly, I would like to thank our newsletter editor, Liz Dittner, for working so hard on this first issue. We welcome your feedback, both on the newsletter and on any other subjects in which you think the Society should take an interest. The Society is, after all, a membership organisation and we need your involvement and support if we are to make a real difference.

How not to take things at face value! – a visit to Bury St Edmunds

The Society's inaugural field trip took place in blazing sunshine on Sunday 4th May. A walking tour of Bury St Edmunds, focusing on this splendid town's Georgian architecture, was led by local guide Eleanor Heathcote. It soon became apparent that all was not quite as it seemed Far from being Georgian, most of the buildings in Bury's historic centre are actually much older, and were simply re-faced according to the fancy of the day.

In a constant quest to keep up with the vagaries of fashion and taste, Bury's 18th- and early 19th-century inhabitants regularly re-clad their medieval timber-framed houses in render or brick, either traditional red brick or Woolpit white, a local pale brick which remains common in the town. Window openings were altered, and additional embellishments and decoration carried out, as and when the owners could afford such 'improvements'. As Eleanor demonstrated, a short walk around the back of such houses easily reveals the extent of the artifice: in many cases the rear facade, usually hidden from public view, presents a totally different aspect from the more public face, betraying something of the building's earlier origins. Older, smaller, windows, and irregular walls of undressed flint and rubble are commonplace, and many houses in the town contain stones plundered from the city's Benedictine abbey following the latter's dissolution in the 1530s and its gradual dismantling in the decades that followed. Only the ruins of the once-immense abbey church remain, landscaped within the Abbey Gardens.

Bury's regular grid pattern of streets dates from Norman times and has survived remarkably intact, even if most of the ancient buildings – many of which would have been 'jettied', their upper floors projecting over the street below – are now hidden behind later facades.

Described by Daniel Defoe as a town 'famed for its pleasant situation and wholesome air, the Montpelier of Suffolk and perhaps England', Bury was a fashionable place to be in the 18th century, and some of the town's most celebrated buildings, such as the Athenaeum Club (1714), date from this time. Equally impressive is the Manor House (1738) on Honey Hill, once the 'town' house of the 1st Earl of Bristol, whose country seat was at Ickworth, a few miles outside Bury. Now a museum, the house was built primarily for the throwing of parties, boasting a huge ballroom and dining-room, but with only one bedroom and no kitchen (food was prepared in an adjacent building).

However, nowhere is the Georgian era's love of entertainment more apparent than in Bury's delightful Theatre Royal, erected in 1819 at a time when Bury enjoyed a lively autumn 'season'. The theatre was built – on what was then the very edge of town – on the slope of a hill, which meant there was no need to bank the seating, the natural incline being sufficient. Although the benches in the pit are long gone, the intimate interior retains its original boxes and the theatre, one of only three surviving Georgian playhouses in Britain, continues to thrive as a cultural focal point in the town.

MILDENHALL WARREN OPEN TO VISITORS

A new waymarked walk has recently been opened on part of the former Mildenhall Warren, giving visitors the opportunity to look out for some unusual Breckland birds and an interesting insight into the time when the 'Rabbit was King' of the Brecks! Called the 'Warrener's Walk', the trail leads through areas of clearfell and former heath frequented by nightjars and woodlarks, two nationally scarce bird species which are currently prospering in this part of the country. The trail also passes the recently restored 14th-century Mildenhall Warren Lodge, once at the centre of one of the most significant rabbit warrens in East Anglia.

Rabbits were once big business in Breckland. Introduced by the Normans, they were valued for their meat and fur, so much so that they were 'farmed' in huge warrens. The light, sandy soils of this area were perfect for the burrowing animals, and their commercial value was such that considerable efforts were invested in their management and protection from vermin and poachers. The warrens were basically areas of open heath, enclosed by soil banks topped with gorse, which helped both to keep the rabbits in and unwelcome intruders out. In Breckland, most of the warrens – and there were over 20 in total – were owned by the Church, and each one had a team of warreners, who would 'harvest' the rabbits using nets, ferrets and dogs (usually terriers and lurchers). The head warrener was both highly regarded and financially well rewarded, often accommodated in a purpose-built warren lodge, usually built on the highest point of the warren.

In the heyday of rabbit-warrening, during the 15th and 16th centuries, many hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of rabbits were harvested each year across England. However, their effect on the landscape could be very dramatic, and nowhere more so than in the Brecks. Where rabbit numbers were highly concentrated, overgrazing could cause the virtual desertification of the landscape, leading to extensive wind-blow. Local feelings could run high; for example, in 1549 all the

rabbits on a warren at Freckenham in Suffolk were destroyed by angry villagers following a sandstorm. Even so, warrening continued to be an important economic activity in the Brecks until the middle of the twentieth century. Decline then set in, caused by reduced demand for both the meat and fur, and the arrival of myxomatosis in the early 1950s was the final nail in the coffin of local warreners.

Originally owned by the Abbot of Bury St Edmunds, Mildenhall Warren was bought by lay owners on the dissolution of the monasteries and much of it was converted to forestry or arable farming. The interesting warren lodge became overgrown and dilapidated, despite serving as a residential dwelling until 1949, and even accommodating two Italian POWs during the Second World War! Now, thanks to a partnership between The Friends of Thetford Forest Park and the Forestry Commission, with the help of grants from English Heritage, the Heritage Lottery Fund and Forest Heath District Council, it has been restored and access provided via the waymarked trail, with on-site interpretation telling the warrener's story. Access is off the minor road connecting the A1065 Brandon-Barton Mills road (from which signed 'Household Waste Site; Elveden') with the A11 (from which signed 'Mildenhall'). Look out for forest ride 303, at the entrance of which there is a small car park and directions.

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!)

Philip Jones, of Clermont Hall, Little Cressingham, joined the Society at its launch on 3rd April, and has written of the need to curb the excesses of insensitive developers, which he feels are having an adverse impact on the environment of the Brecks, both in the area's towns and in rural locations. The problem is fuelled, he says, by lacklustre parish councils and by overworked and, in some cases, ill-informed, local authority planning officers.

Philip calls for developers to be made more aware of Breckland's local architectural heritage and to pay far more conscientious attention to detail. "A few bits of cosmetic flint here and there are not enough to make a new building appropriate to the Brecks, when such features – which amount to no more than lip service, after all – are adrift in a sea of Taiwanese Queen Anne front doors, multi-coloured pantiles and high pitched roofs. It's time to challenge this insensitive form of identikit international building design and get back to what is right and appropriate for Breckland. After all, we hear so much now about the importance of local distinctiveness and yet our planning authorities seem to be happy to encourage a rash of housing more appropriate to Milton Keynes than to the Brecks."

One other aspect of particular concern to Philip is the proliferation of 'executive' homes across the region. "There are more than enough of these. We must call for a return to the small terrace, of inexpensive two- or three-bedroom houses, located close to a village or other facilities, as well as for a more realistic planning policy for dying

villages, where time after time shops, pubs and other services follow each other into closure." He adds that parish councils (the initial stage of consultation) "must be more critical of planning applications and should scrutinise plans carefully before their consent or objection is given. It is then up to the local planning authorities to take informed and appropriate decisions and to ensure that planning permissions, when granted, are implemented accurately. One of the biggest problems with the latter is lack of time: hard-pressed planning officers are thinly spread and cannot always keep on top of all the detail that sensitive planning applications necessarily entail."

In conclusion, Philip calls for The Breckland Society to campaign for greater recognition of the local vernacular style and for the latter's application to new buildings in a much more meaningful way than is currently the case. "The Society should help promote and develop a more sensitive approach to new build, and one that is rooted firmly in the area's traditions. The Society could provide advice in such matters, so that it is consulted routinely on all planning applications in the Brecks that affect listed buildings and conservation areas. It already numbers many highly qualified people among its members, including ex-planners, architects and conservation officers. These people constitute a huge bank of expertise and experience that could both strengthen the work of the local planning authorities and help ensure that the days of inappropriate development and housing blight are put behind us'.

The Chairman adds:

Philip raises some interesting points, many of which are clearly of great concern to our members. In the short period since the Society was launched we have received more comments on insensitive local development than on any other subject. At a time when our local authorities are under huge pressure to meet targets on new housing and when house prices remain buoyant, fuelling increased development pressures, it is more important than ever that careful consideration is paid (a) to the character and size of new buildings, and (b) to the impact these have collectively on the wider landscape, both urban

and rural. The Breckland Society is emphatically not anti-development; we recognise that people need homes in which to live, but we are pro sensitive and appropriate development. The Brecks are currently littered with inappropriate styles and densities of housing, yet things can be done differently. We intend to engage with those concerned and encourage a more thoughtful and sensitive approach. A directory of local architectural styles and characteristics might be a good start, if only to heighten awareness of what makes the traditional architecture of the Brecks different from elsewhere.

MARY MANN (1848-1929) – a forgotten Breckland novelist

Born Mary Elizabeth Rackham in 1848, daughter of a Norwich cloth merchant, she lived in a fashionable part of the city and was used to a comfortable life. In 1871 she married Fairman Mann and moved to Shropham, near Attleborough, first to Church Farm and later to her husband's family seat at Shropham Manor. This set in train a sequence of events that was to see Mary Mann become the most important novelist to describe life in Breckland.

Fairman Mann farmed 800 acres. He was also churchwarden, school governor, and took responsibility for the welfare of the poor, becoming a workhouse guardian. Mary described her husband as 'a man well-to-do, kind and generous once; an excellent husband, father, master, farmer: getting now poorer in pocket, shorter in temper, year by year, a man who has struggled in a dogged, quiet fashion, but who is beaten and knows it, finding the knowledge bitter ...'. Leaving her Norwich life for a rural backwater had been a huge shock to Mary, and this had been exacerbated by the onset of severe agricultural depression. Cheap grain, flooding in from the New World, caused prices at home to plummet. The effects were all around her – abandoned fields, derelict farms and abject poverty.

She recorded the lives of the people around her in her novels, and in her short stories, particularly the 1902 collection, *The Fields of Dulditch*. Mary Mann has often been described as Norfolk's answer to Thomas Hardy, and indeed her stories also have something in common with those of D H Lawrence, in the grimness of her portrayal of deprivation. Some of her tales are downright sinister. One of her most chilling tales is *Little Brother*, included by A S Byatt in her selection for *The Oxford Book of English Short Stories*.

Little Brother tells the story of the stillborn thirteenth child of a farm labourer's wife. A charitable spinster, bringing a few flowers to lay upon the tiny coffin, finds the cot empty and the children playing downstairs with what appears to be a battered doll.

"Other folkes' child'en have a toy, now and then, to kape 'em out o' mischief. My little uns han't. He've kep' 'em quiet for hours, the po'r baby have; and I'll lay a crown they han't done no harm to their little brother."

Many of Mann's tales deal with women's struggle to keep their children fed and clothed in extreme hardship. *Ben Pitcher's Elly* tells of a teenage girl who murders her illegitimate child. Sent home by her employers, beaten and then banished to the workhouse by her violent father when she becomes pregnant, she later takes up with a gipsy who also treats her brutally. Elly sees her sickly waif as the source of all her misery, and abandons the babe on a bed of wild thyme.

There is no attempt to moralise, no over-dramatisation. The stories are told in the manner of social reportage, but with an empathy that gives them great emotional power. D J Taylor, long a champion of Mary Mann, has said, 'The best of Dulditch tales are unlike anything else in Victorian literature – hard-eyed, sympathetic, direct, unyielding.' Ronald Blyth says, 'There was a group of human beings in her world with the dice loaded against their fulfilment and happiness. Dulditch exercises her radicalism. She sees both the admirable and the feckless brought down by circumstances that are entirely out of their control.'

At the end of Mann's life, English readers were lapping up Mary Webb's Shropshire novels, such as *Precious Bane*, and would later turn to Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise to Candleford*. Both these writers, like Hardy, painted a harsh picture of rural life but nevertheless retained an affection for the old rural life. Not so Mary Mann, who saw only squalor and excruciating hardship. In his study *East Anglia, A Literary Pilgrimage*, Peter Tolhurst points out that Dulditch was contemporary with *Rural England*, Norfolk novelist Rider Haggard's account of agricultural devastation.

The money Mary earned from her writing proved vital in the support of her own four children. Romantic fiction was the route to the popular market, and her novels were very successful. Her output was impressive – 39 novels, as well as short stories, magazine stories and some play scripts.

And it can be said that she had an impact on English Literature. In a letter to Katherine Mansfield in 1919, D H Lawrence mentions his admiration of Mann's writing: in her tale *Rose at Honeypot* (1906) she tells the story of a bored naval officer's wife who meets a handsome young gamekeeper ... was she the precursor of Lady Chatterley?

Mary Mann is buried in the churchyard at Shropham, her dilapidated gravestone an open book. Her epitaph is now almost illegible, but reads: 'We bring our years to an end as it were a tale that is told'.

It is sad that a writer who enjoyed a considerable literary reputation in the early part of the twentieth century has been all but forgotten. Not one of her novels is in print today, although it is possible to find some of her remarkable short stories.

Patience Tomlinson, well known to listeners of Radio 4, has written *A Tale That is Told*, which she performs as a one-woman show, exploring the life and work of Mary Mann. Anyone who was fortunate enough to catch this at the King of Hearts in Norwich earlier this year will be delighted to learn that Ms Tomlinson has agreed to come and perform her show for The Breckland Society some time in late autumn, the date yet to be decided. We shall include details in the next Society newsletter.

SOCIETY JOINS CAMPAIGN AGAINST 'NIGHT BLIGHT'

The CPRE (Council for the Protection of Rural England) has invited the Breckland Society to take part in its recently launched campaign against 'night blight' or light pollution. Along with the British Astronomical Society, which launched its own 'Dark Skies' campaign in 1990, the CPRE has undertaken extensive survey work, using satellite data, to determine the real impact of manmade light on the night skies and assess the changes that have taken place since the last comprehensive survey was carried out in 1993. The results are alarming in the extreme: only 11% of England now has skies that are more or less clear of light pollution, down from 15%. This change is reinforced by the astonishing - and profoundly sad - fact that 55% of the British population now cannot see the Milky Way from where they live. Many children have never seen it. In many parts of England, dark night skies have been consigned to history in favour of orange 'sky glow', strafed by security lighting and the glare of overlit sports centres, retail outlets and other premises.

East Anglia, and particularly Norfolk, is still generally darker than many parts of England, although in cities such as Norwich only 60 or so stars are regularly visible, as opposed some 3,000 in the more remote and rural parts of the region. Even so, only 12% of Norfolk and 7% of Suffolk have truly dark skies at night. The remaining percentage of both counties suffers from at least some light pollution, although the Brecks are among the less affected areas. However, given the current rate of development, for how much longer will our local skies be dark enough for stargazing?

Light pollution takes many different forms, from the orange 'sky glow' caused by streetlights through glaring stadium-style installations at industrial sites to intrusive domestic security lights in residential areas, the latter being the frequent cause of so-called 'light trespass'. All these aspects have one thing in common: they have proliferated rapidly over the past decade, particularly in rural areas, wasting energy, contributing to air pollution and climate change and seriously damaging the quality and character of otherwise tranquil parts of the country. The main problem arises when light is beamed above the horizontal. It then reflects off particles in the atmosphere, thereby brightening the sky and making fainter objects - such as stars - invisible.

There are various factors behind the increase in light sources. The urbanisation of the countryside has led to the spread of street lighting into areas that were previously unlit. Furthermore, many property owners have installed extensive security lighting on the grounds that it will make their property less attractive to thieves. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that the reverse may be true, that highly illuminated premises actually make it easier for thieves to identify potential entry points and so do not serve as an effective deterrent.

One way of reducing light pollution is the fitting of hoods over lights, which direct the light downwards. 'Full Cut Off' lights (FCOs) do precisely this, reducing light pollution whilst remaining highly effective means of lighting. However, the fitting of hoods will not, on its own, solve the wider problem. Clearly there needs to be a more intelligent approach to lighting, and something that moves us away from the concept of blanket, dawn-to-dusk lighting, which is both unnecessary and wasteful. There also needs to be action against needless 'overlighting', whereby bulbs of excessive power are used, towards a policy in favour of using the minimum wattage required to perform the relevant lighting task. There are currently no government policies or targets on light pollution, but Norfolk County Council has taken a lead in this area by defining environmental lighting zones and fitting FCOs whenever lighting over which it has responsibility comes up for renewal.

Much more needs to be done. In particular, the CPRE campaign is encouraging the government to develop indicators of light pollution so that targets for reduction can then be set. At the end of the day, however, consumers - we! - can help improve the situation by being more discerning and thoughtful about our own lighting needs and about those of our communities. The Breckland Society has joined the campaign for greater awareness of what can be done, in full anticipation that the gradual erosion of our night skies can be slowed and even reversed.

Brecks Countryside Project

The Brecks Countryside Project was set up in 1992 and is working on a variety of projects designed to enhance the countryside and landscape of the Brecks and promote both appreciation of, and access to, the area. The Society has already established close links with the Project and discussions are already under way concerning potential joint activities. Meanwhile the Project has organised a series of guided waterside walks in different parts of the Brecks.

The first three of these are:

Sun 8 June 10am-2.30pm The Little Ouse, Brandon to Hockwold, 7 miles

Sun 6 July 10am-2.30pm The Great Eastern Pingo Trail, 7 miles

Wed 13 August 6.30-9pm Ixworth Thorpe, 3 miles

All walks are free, but please book in advance with Vicky Stone on 01842 761569 or email brecks.project@et.suffolkcc.gov.uk

WHAT'S ON

Forthcoming Society events

Wednesday 18 June

Evening field trip to hear (and hopefully see!) nightjars near Cockley Cley. This offers the rare opportunity to see your Chairman doing a dance with white handkerchiefs - a sure-fire way of attracting male nightjars. Numbers are very limited, so please ring James Parry on 01366 328676 to book a place. The evening will start with refreshments at the Hay Barn at 8.30, and should end at about 10.30.

Wednesday 9 July

Lecture on the Ancient House Museum, Thetford, by the curator, Oliver Bone. For further details please ring James Parry on 01366 328676.

Saturday 30 August

The Society's Treasurer, John Davies, has kindly invited members and their friends to a barbecue party in his garden at Clermont House, Little Cressingham. There will be an opportunity to tour the arboretum that John has established, featuring many unusual species of tree and shrub, as well as a newly created labyrinth. 6pm-9pm, access will be signed off the B1108 at Little Cressingham. Members £5, non-members £8, to include a glass of wine and barbecue.

Saturday 13 September

Bird-ringing with licensed British Trust for Ornithology ringer on private site at Croxton, with talk and presentation on the birds and wildlife of a Breckland garden. There will be three sessions, which, weather conditions permitting, will offer a chance to see a variety of birds at very close quarters:

8.30am - 10.00am

10.00am - 11.30am

11.30am - 1.00pm

There will be a maximum of eight people per session. Booking is essential on 01842 766085, and this event is weather dependent: please telephone the same number on the day to confirm the event is on. Refreshments will be served throughout the morning.

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