



SOCIETY AWARDED £25,000 GRANT FOR VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE PROJECT

August brought some exciting news for the future of Breckland's traditional buildings. Members will recall from our December 2003 newsletter that the Society was preparing a project designed to document the architectural heritage of the Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks. We were anxious to ensure that the project met a range of ambitious objectives and so spent several months working up a suitably detailed and comprehensive proposal before applying to the Countryside Agency for financial assistance. Not only was this application successful, but the Society has been awarded the maximum possible grant – £25,000, to be spent over the next three years.

This generous grant has been offered under the Local Heritage Initiative. This is a national grant scheme, launched in 2000 and designed to assist local groups to investigate, explain and care for their local landmarks, landscape, traditions and culture. The scheme is run by the Countryside Agency with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, which is administered by the National Heritage Memorial Fund, and with additional sponsorship provided by Nationwide Building Society. The range of projects that have been grant aided is very wide, but we understand that our project is the very first of its type to be awarded funding. We therefore intend to deliver results to the highest standard so that our project can be used as a blueprint for similar architectural heritage projects in other parts of the country.

The focus of the Brecks Architecture Project will be on the region's traditional vernacular buildings. These are a hugely important component of Breckland's very special character, and whilst many of the materials traditionally used are highly distinctive – flint and chalk, for example – others are less well known, their use and occurrence remaining imperfectly understood. The project will not concern itself with buildings of outstanding architectural quality; for the most part, these are already well documented. Rather, the emphasis will be on the more modest and often overlooked buildings that collectively make a far greater contribution to our everyday environment.

The project will cover the area demarcated by the Brecks ESA (Environmentally Sensitive Area). This straddles both sides of the Norfolk/Suffolk county boundary and extends roughly from Swaffham in the north – although it does not include the town itself – to a few miles north of Bury St Edmunds in the south, and from Feltwell, Lakenheath and Mildenhall in the west to Watton (again, not including the town proper), East Harling and Ixworth in the east: some 370 square miles in total! The two main towns within the ESA are Brandon and Thetford, but there is a wealth of architectural interest in the scores of villages and hamlets across the area – all of which will be surveyed as part of the project.

There are various components to the project. The first stage will be to collate all existing material and documentation on the area's vernacular building types, architectural styles and history. The next phase – and undoubtedly the most time-consuming –

will be to carry out a detailed survey of every settlement in the area, recording and describing the incidence and character of different traditional building types and construction materials. Running in tandem to this part of the project will be an oral history survey, whereby local craftsmen, builders and house-owners will be interviewed about the construction and maintenance of traditional local buildings. At the conclusion of the survey and recording phases the results will be assembled into a comprehensive database. From this information an illustrated report will be prepared, as well as a touring exhibition on the traditional architecture of the Brecks and an oral history archive. There will also be a series of demonstration workshops on the use of traditional construction materials.

The main objective of the Brecks Architecture Project is to increase knowledge and raise awareness of the area's distinctive built heritage. However, there are other, equally important, goals. One is to provide assistance to the local planning authorities in terms of their understanding of the local building stock and to encourage greater incorporation of traditional local building styles and motifs in new construction and conversions. Some local authorities have already made progress in this direction, but greater effort is required if the local distinctiveness of the Brecks architecture is to survive.

The success of the project will depend on many factors, but two stand out as being of paramount importance: community involvement and partnerships with other groups concerned with the Brecks architectural heritage. The latter partnerships are already well in hand, and organisations such as the Thetford Society and Norfolk Historic Buildings Group have already kindly offered their help and support. Over the next few weeks we shall be drawing up an implementation plan for the various phases of the project and will be actively seeking the involvement of as many Society members and local people as possible, particularly with the fieldwork for the survey. Under the direction of a Project Coordinator (whom we hope to appoint in the next few weeks), participants will be trained in architectural recording and, armed with a recording form and a digital camera, will be asked to cover a 'patch' in their local area. We are also looking for computer-literate volunteers who might be willing to assist with the compilation of the all-important database. If you are interested in helping with the project in any way, please contact the Society's Chairman, James Parry, on 01366 328676.

SWAFFHAM TOWN ENHANCEMENT SCHEME UNDER REVISION

Members will recall the debate earlier this year surrounding proposals for the enhancement of Swaffham town centre, put forward by the company Mott MacDonald on behalf of Norfolk County Council. Whilst endorsing some of the proposed changes, the Society objected to several of the recommended 'improvements' when these were put out to public consultation (see June 2004 newsletter). Our main concerns were focused on the loss of a large number of parking spaces in the centre of the town – which we felt would threaten the viability of many of the town centre shops – and the general lack of imagination in devising a scheme that was sufficiently individual for Swaffham. We do not want an 'off the peg' solution that will make the town look much the same as any other, with identikit heritage street furniture, multi-coloured paving and bland civic planting, especially at a time when resources could arguably be better spent on aspects such as the improvement of unsympathetic modern shop frontages.

At a public meeting held in Swaffham on July 19, representatives of Mott MacDonald and other involved parties such as the Iceni Partnership reported on the results of the public consultation exercise (288 individual comments were received, apparently). The single biggest concern was, not surprisingly, the loss of parking spaces, with 79 per cent of comments received being against the reduction from 199 spaces to 139. Of those offering comments, 52 per cent were in favour of the scheme as a whole (and so presumably 48 per cent were either not in favour or had no view) – hardly a ringing endorsement. Whilst a healthy majority supported the move towards more pedestrian areas, opinion was very evenly split (50/50) on the suggestion that a 20mph speed limit be introduced in the town centre. And whilst 89 per cent approved of the proposals for landscaping (something which the Society still maintains is unimaginative and an opportunity missed), 71 per cent would like to

see different paving materials used from those suggested. The proposals have now been revised – slightly – in the light of the feedback. We understand that some of the parking spaces are being restored, but that there is little scope for manoeuvre on aspects such as paving (the specification for which is determined by the county council, apparently; it is a shame that they cannot come up with something more appropriate for Swaffham). We are unclear whether there is to be a rethink of the inappropriate 'London plane' option and planters full of rhododendrons. As soon as there is news on this front, we shall let members know. Meanwhile, work on the first phase of the improvement scheme is due to start early in 2005. The Society remains unconvinced of the need for such a scheme at all, but this appears to be a classic case of the funds being made available first and then a scheme being devised to spend them on ...

'NIGHT BLIGHT' CAMPAIGN MOVES AHEAD

In our May 2003 Newsletter, we highlighted the CPRE campaign against 'night blight', or light pollution. The campaign was launched with striking images from space. Data compiled from satellite maps made it starkly clear that, in Norfolk, over a quarter of the land area experienced significant increases in levels of light pollution during the previous decade, and truly dark skies are now visible in only 12 per cent of the county. Parts of the Brecks fall within this ever dwindling percentage.

In November 2003, as part of their consultation process, the CPRE sent out a questionnaire to all (540) parish and town councils in Norfolk. The aims of this survey were:

- to assess the level and types of street lighting in rural areas;
- to remind parish councils of the recommendations in the County Council's Environmental Lighting Zones policy;
- to find out how parish and town councils are using the planning system to respond to lighting offenders in the countryside; and
- to assess attitudes to lighting generally.

Over one hundred parish and town councils responded, 89 per cent of whom were concerned about the increasing levels of light pollution in Norfolk and supported a campaign for the protection of dark skies.

The survey gave further evidence of widespread concern about obtrusive and excessive lighting. Apart from the orange glow from major roads and nearby towns, the major concerns for parishes are security lighting on residential and business properties, as well as floodlighting in a variety of places ranging from sports facilities, prisons and aircraft bases to country clubs and farms. These findings contribute to a body of evidence pressing central government for action. A co-ordinated and intelligent response will be essential in the coming years if we wish to ensure that the dark skies of rural England are protected for future generations.

Choice of lighting

Unshielded and poorly shielded light sources are visible over great distances at night. These forms of lighting need to be replaced, and the current trend towards shallow bowl lighting should be resisted. Full cut off lighting with a white light source is recommended for all outdoor lighting. However, this on its own will not solve the problem; we all need to use lights more intelligently, provide them only where necessary, and to switch them on only when required. All lighting choices need to

be made with consideration for neighbouring properties, local communities and the character of the countryside.

CPRE Norfolk offers the following recommendations, and encourages other counties to take a similar approach.

Recommendations

1. The Environmental Lighting Zones policy of Norfolk County Council to be adopted by all parish councils, district councils and all County Council departments.
2. All unlit villages to remain without street lighting.
3. Parishes with street lighting to continually review the relevance and usage of all lights.
4. Full cut off lighting with a white light source should be used for all outdoor lighting. All light should be directed and pointed below the horizontal and not to be visible beyond the area being lit.
5. The current presumption in favour of dusk to dawn lighting is to be questioned and movement sensors and time switches are to be used as alternatives.
6. All outdoor lighting, including security lighting and floodlighting, to be brought under planning control.
7. All district and town councils need Supplementary Planning Guidance to cover the issue of lighting in the countryside. All parish councils are to consider outdoor lighting on all planning applications that come before them.
8. Light pollution to be made a 'Statutory Nuisance' in line with noise pollution.
9. Central Government to implement effective planning controls to protect defined areas of dark landscape.
10. Every individual to think carefully about their use of outdoor lighting.

We can all make a difference.

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 edition, J M Bonning from Beachamwell asks whether there is too much unnecessary noise in our countryside, and focuses particularly on the impact of bird-scarers.

The visual beauty of the Brecks, the unique characteristics of landscape, flora and fauna, are of paramount importance, but how often can we contemplate this rich heritage in a peaceful environment? The idyll of Virgil's Golden Age has probably never truly existed, but the calm and peace of rural life was certainly changed by the advent of the internal combustion engine and consequent developments in agricultural methods. Machinery has replaced the horse teams, and processing plants supply the supermarket goods we now buy. The modernisation of farming has certainly ensured an essential supply of food and reduced much of the back-breaking toil of working the land, but it has also brought unwelcome intrusions.

The noise of farm machinery is a negative aspect of progress but, like the sounds of road traffic and aeroplanes, has become a fact of modern country life. However, some less acceptable noises - such as the hot-rod car and motorcycle, even the neighbour's garden and house improvements - can become irritants. One of the most intrusive sounds to country-dwellers is the auditory bird-scarer. These mechanical devices, which generally imitate the sound of gunfire, are often in use for many months of the year.

These deterrents blast out at irregular intervals, usually from dawn to dusk. NFU guidelines suggest that scarers should not fire more than four times in any one hour, but that "all the reports from a multiple chamber gun should count as one report if heard within thirty seconds". Therefore, perhaps sixteen individual reports an hour are possible. However, even assuming that these guidelines are observed, intrusion becomes even more excessive if more than one deterrent is audible and wind direction is exacerbating the nuisance. For example, instances of thirty reports within half an hour have been noted.

HELP FOR HEDGEROWS

We are at that time of year again when some landowners feel that the hedgerows on their land could do with a good haircut. After all, there's been all that growth through the summer and, with the harvest now in, it is time to go round tidying up. Out comes the flailer, and off comes this year's growth - and with it the wealth of berries and fruits that, if only left, would sustain many species of bird through the leaner days of late autumn and early winter.

England has lost more than half its hedgerows since 1947 - some 113,000 miles, enough to circuit the globe four and a half times! Whilst the tide has certainly turned in recent years, and many landowners and farmers are now actively replanting, the plight of our hedges is still cause for concern. Rather surprisingly, the first statutory protection for hedgerows came as late as 1997, with the introduction of the Hedgerow Regulations. However, these apply only to 'important' hedgerows on farmland.

For a hedge to be considered 'important', it needs to be over twenty metres long and at least thirty years old; it also needs to meet various criteria based on the number of species it supports, its historical significance (is it an original Enclosure hedge, for example?) and the presence of other associated features such as hedge banks, ditches or veteran trees.

A landowner wishing to remove a hedgerow must now notify the local planning authority. If the hedgerow is considered

Whether working or relaxing, indoors or outside, one can find the noise from these mechanical devices a distraction. The guidelines are often flouted - at weekends or bank holidays reports can often be heard throughout the day, for example. Perhaps more consideration should be given to alternative methods of protecting crops?

The pleasures of our countryside can be evinced not only through our eyes, but also our ears - against a quiet background the sounds of nature can be a delight. We may not wholly emulate Yeats's *Lake Isle of Innisfree* where "peace comes dropping slow", but in a world of distraction and intrusive sound, we must treasure the natural calm and tranquillity of our rural landscape.

The Chairman adds:

It is quite true that the countryside can be a noisy place! It is of course a working environment, and all of us who live in it must be mindful of the needs of the agricultural community when going about their business. However, one of the great assets of the Brecks is its sense of remoteness and tranquillity. Indeed, this quality came at the top of a recent poll of visitors to the area and is also high in residents' minds. It is sad, therefore, when unnecessary noise begins to have an adverse impact on the special character of the area. One of the peak times for bird-scarers will soon be upon us, with the sowing of winter cereals, so this is an appropriate moment to consider this subject.

Another example of intrusive noise is the continuous hum of air-conditioning plants in poultry plants, for instance; in a flat landscape like ours, this can travel some distance and be a considerable irritant.

We would welcome members' comments on the subject of noise pollution in rural areas, and particularly from those of you who have direct personal experience of either side of this debate.

'important', then the local authority should move to protect it, and they are also obliged to keep a register of all applications to grub out hedgerows. However, there are concerns over the limitations of these regulations; they do not, for example, pay adequate attention to the landscape value of hedgerows, and locally distinctive hedgerows do not necessarily meet the protection criteria at present. Both these loopholes are of particular relevance in the Brecks context.

One way to improve the situation is to formulate an approach based on 'landscape character assessments', a process by which those factors that make a particular place distinctive, and different from elsewhere, are identified as worthy of protection. This interesting area is one of several under discussion at a forthcoming CPRE conference to be held at the Houghton Centre on Friday 19 November, entitled 'Protecting Local Buildings & Landscapes', to which Breckland Society members are welcome. Further details are available from the CPRE Norfolk office on 01603 814200.

THE PEDDARS WAY

The Peddars Way, one of Britain's national long-distance trails, runs from Knettishall Heath in Suffolk to Holme next the Sea on the Norfolk coast. In other words, it runs through the Brecks Environmentally Sensitive Area to the open landscape of northwest Norfolk.

The current route deviates somewhat from the original route because some landowners would not agree to access across their land. The original Peddars Way took a near dead straight line across the western part of Norfolk. It ran along, or very close to, the route of a Roman Road laid down in about AD61, at the time of the Boudiccan revolt, in order, it is assumed, to enable troops to patrol the territory of the Iceni. There would thus have been forts placed at intervals along the way.

There is the site of a Roman fort at Threxton, and it is reasonable to assume that the Peddars Way would have passed through here, entering at the south gate and leaving at the north gate. It is likely, therefore, that the original route would have passed very close to Houghton Farm, South Pickenham, crossing the drives.

So it is fitting that *Peddars Way – A Songline for East Anglia*, a cycle of stories and songs based on the history of the Peddars Way and presented by Hugh Lupton and company on Wednesday 6 October, is to be performed at the Houghton Centre.

See *What's On*, right.

AN INVITATION FROM THE CPRE

The Breckland district group of the Campaign to Protect Rural England has kindly invited Breckland Society members to attend a meeting entitled *People & Planning: The New Regime*, scheduled for Tuesday 5th October at 7.30pm at the Houghton Centre, South Pickenham. Guest speakers will be Phil Daines and Andrea Bolton, respectively Development Control Manager and Environmental Planning Manager at Breckland DC. They have bravely undertaken to try and explain the forthcoming changes in the planning system, the probable set-up and likely implications. This is a hugely important subject for all those concerned about the future of the Brecks, and there will be an opportunity to ask questions. The event is free, and refreshments will be provided. Further details are available from Keith Wood on 01362 820804.

CHRISTMAS ENTERTAINMENT

Following her great success with last year's Mary Mann presentation, Patience Tomlinson will be returning to the Houghton Centre, this time with David Timson and Helen Crayford, on Saturday 18 December with *Comfort and Joy, Christmas Through The Ages*, a miscellany of poetry and songs from medieval wassail to Victorian crackers, followed by *Songs My Grandmother Sat On*, a collection of melodies and ditties from the Edwardian age.

This is definitely a treat not to be missed. See *What's On*, right.

NEWS FROM THE BRECKS COUNTRYSIDE PROJECT



Sunday 10th October

Cycle ride, Heathlands of the Western Brecks (10 miles) 6pm – 8pm.

Sunday 7th November

Peddars Way to Middle Harling Heath walk (6 miles) , 10 am – 1 pm.

For details of either of these events, please contact the Brecks Countryside Project on 01842-761569 or email brecks.project@et.suffolkcc.gov.uk

WHAT'S ON

Forthcoming Society events

Wednesday 6 October

Peddars Way – A Songline for East Anglia, a cycle of stories and songs based on the history of the Peddars Way and presented by Hugh Lupton and company, to be performed at the Houghton Centre, South Pickenham.

The Centre is located almost on the Peddars Way, one of the most ancient trackways through East Anglia, used by prehistoric man and adapted by the Romans. This promises to be a fascinating insight into one of the Brecks' most intriguing historical features. 7.30pm. £8 members, £10 non-members, to include glass of wine.

Tickets available from James Parry on 01366 328676.

Wednesday 24 November

Lecture by Dr Andrew Rogerson, from Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service, on 'Recent Archaeological Work in the Norfolk Brecks', to be held at Barnham Village Hall. The village is signposted off the A134 south of Thetford, the village hall is the first building on the right after the turn. 7.30pm start, admission £.3 members, £5 non-members (includes refreshments).

Saturday 18 December

A Christmas celebration with Patience Tomlinson and others, a joint event with the Houghton Centre. The Houghton Centre, South Pickenham, 7.30. £10 members, £12 non-members, to include a glass of wine and a mince pie. Phone James Parry on 01366 328676 for more details.

Saturday 19 February 2005

Lecture by Tom Williamson, on *The Great Estates of 19th-century Breckland*, Houghton Centre, South Pickenham, 7pm. This will be a joint event with the Norfolk Historic Buildings Group. Members free, non-members £2. Refreshments will be available.

Tuesday 1 March 2005

A joint meeting with the Thetford Society, to be held in Thetford (venue and timing to be confirmed). The Thetford Society is a thriving amenity and local history group with over 200 members. Further information in the December newsletter.

The Breckland Society

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