Newsletter 75 May 2025

RECENT EVENTS

Conor Jameson ‘In Search of the Goshawk’.
Harling History and Archaeology Walk.

OTHER ITEMS OF INTEREST

Golden Pheasants in Breckland
The Great Air Race of 1924
Book Reviews

EVENTS

Monday May 9th
Tour of The Shadwell Estate.

Thursday June 12th
AGM at The Ancient House Museum, Thetford.

Sunday June 29th
Botanical Walk on Barnham Common

Friday August 29th
Visit to Houghton on the Hill Church

Tuesday October 7th
Visit to the site of the Battle of Fornham near Bury St. Edmunds

Further details of these events can be found on the Breckland Society website.

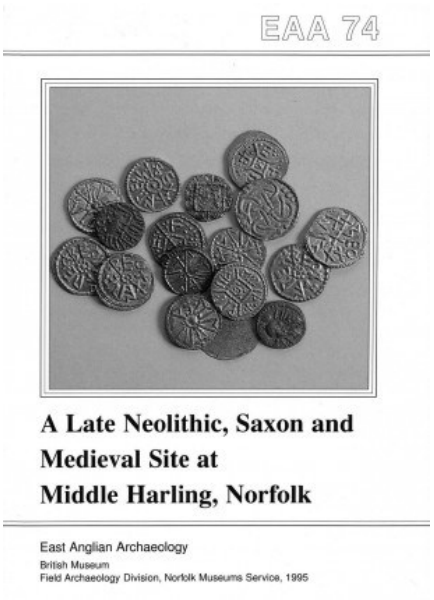
THE BRECKLAND SOCIETY AND THE BRECKS FEN EDGE AND RIVERS PARTNERSHIP (BFER)

The BFER landscape scheme has been extended until October 2025 and funding has been confirmed for the publication of a new volume of the Journal of Breckland Studies. This will include a selection of papers on various aspects of the Brecks heritage, including the designed landscape at Oxburgh Hall, the life of W G Clarke, heron hawking at Didlington and the value of oral history in recording stories from the past. Publication is expected in September.

LIVING AND BELIEVING IN THE BRECKS

An Historical and Archaeological Visit to Middle and West Harling

The visit to Middle and West Harling took us through two of the three deserted Harling villages, where features of many historical periods are still visible in the landscape, from the Neolithic to the 21st Century. It was, however, the Late Saxon Period that we focused on, and we were lucky to have Dr. Andrew Rogerson to tell us about the dig which took place in the early 1980s. This investigated the deserted medieval village of Middle Harling including the manorial church of St. Andrew.



Andrew was the Project Director at the time and he also wrote the site report. The report, entitled 'A Late Neolithic, Saxon and Medieval site at Middle Harling, Norfolk' is available online from East Anglian Archaeology EAA74. https://eaareports.org.uk/publication/report74/

His reminiscences about his time on the dig were fascinating, including an anecdote about the theft of the only Viking skull found on the site while he transported it on the London Underground to take for analysis, and his description of the crushing of bones in a grave in order to fit them in was shocking. Of course, he also told us about the find of the Beonna Hoard, which made the site famous. This was followed by a tour round the Saxon All Saints Church in West Harling. This is a delightful manorial church, set in splendid isolation, with good brasses and some evidence of wall painting. Rosemary Hensby gave us a very interesting talk about the church and the brasses in particular. Earthworks of the lost West Harling village (not a plague casualty), and those of two Iron Age roundhouses lie nearby. Finally, refreshments were served and there was an opportunity to look at historic photographs and a collection of artefacts found by metal detection. All this and wonderful weather made for a very enjoyable day. *Gill Gallagher*

Ed. The society extends its warmest thanks to Gill and Rosemary for arranging this event, and to Gill and Elizabeth for the delicious cakes and pizza.



Andrew Robertson speaking to members



The Interior of All Saints Church West Harling

Talk by Conor Jameson, author of 'In Search of the Goshawk. A quest in search of an elusive bird of prey' to members at Mundford.

Conor, author of 'In Search of the Goshawk' (2013) and 'Silent Spring Revisited' (2010) has previously worked for the RSPB and written many papers for their 'Birds' magazine and BBC 'Bird Life', amongst other publications. He spoke about his journey from an encounter with a stuffed Goshawk in a glass case, through travels into supposed Goshawk territories in Britain, to Berlin where he found the bird at ease in the city. He talked about the politics of birdwatching, the sport of falconry and the impact of persecution on the recent history of the bird in Britain. He revealed his inspiration from the writings of T.H. White, who told of his attempts to tame a Goshawk in his much-loved book The 'Goshawk'. Members enjoyed a fascinating and beautifully illustrated talk about this bird of prey which is becoming better established in the Breckland area. *Julia Grover*

The demise of Breckland's Golden Pheasants

When we think of iconic Breckland birds, Stone Curlew, Woodlark, Nightjar and Goshawk probably spring to mind. But Breckland was once the national stronghold of the Golden Pheasant (*Chrysolophus pictus*). This stunning pheasant, endemic to the highlands of central China, was imported into Britain in the 19th century as a fashionable decorative bird, either living freely in parks and pleasure grounds or in aviaries.

The first free-roaming Golden Pheasant in Britain was recorded in Norfolk in 1845. Escapes and deliberate releases gradually lead to the formation of wild populations in England and Scotland, although the majority of these did not become self-sustaining. During the early 20th century the rate of releases increased around the country and the existence of naturalised populations resulted in Golden Pheasant being added to the British List of Wild Birds in 1971. Their preferred habitat is under trees with deep understorey cover, as found in conifer plantations in the first 15–30 years after planting, and in woodlands dense with rhododendrons.



Male Golden Pheasant

The largest population was in Breckland, with many sites being occupied over the last century. These were in parts of Thetford Forest, King's Forest, and some smaller woods in the region such as Wayland Wood. At its peak in the mid-20th century the Breckland population grew to several hundred, with very large groups recorded at some locations. I first encountered Golden Pheasants in Brandon Country Park in the late 1970s, whilst carrying conservation as a student; 20 birds were recorded there on 5th December 1981.



Male Lady Amherst's Pheasant

Lady Amherst's Pheasant (*Chrysolophus amherstiae*) is closely related to the Golden Pheasant. Endemic to southwestern China and Northern Myanmar, it was another decorative 19th and early 20th century introduction. A small naturalised population became established in Bedfordshire close to the estate of Lady Amherst where the birds had first been introduced, but this population declined, and by 2005 the British List status of Lady Amherst's Pheasant was downgraded to 'former introduced breeder'. But there were probably escapes in other areas, because many of Britain's Golden Pheasants had plumage which showed signs of hybridisation with Lady Amherst's.

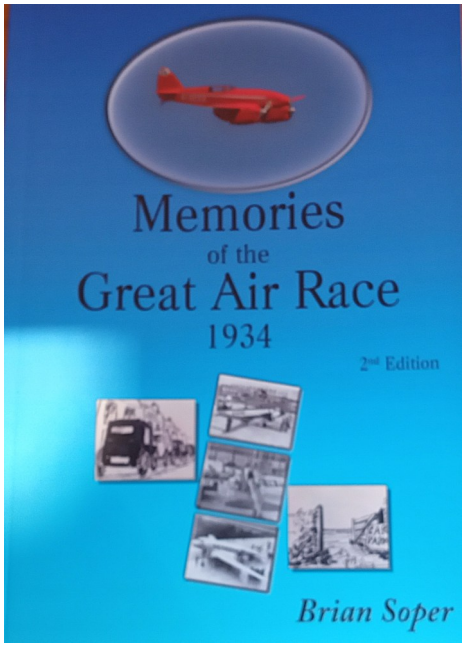
Releases were eventually made illegal by the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act, after which the numbers of Golden Pheasants declined in all areas, presumably because most populations had arisen from or were supplemented by new releases, whether deliberate or accidental. For example, a small well known population at Wolferton, North Norfolk, present from1967 to 2018, is thought to have originated from birds kept at Sculthorpe Moor. The latest County Bird Reports, from 2023, record no sightings in Suffolk, and just four in Norfolk, all of single birds presumed to be escapes, only one of which was in Breckland, in Wayland Wood. Whilst the Wolferton population is now extinct, a Golden Pheasant was reported on Bird Guides at the nearby Dersingham Bog as recently as March 2025!

Habitat changes may have accelerated Golden Pheasant decline. In Breckland the conifer plantations of Thetford and King's Forest are now mature, and programmes of rhododendron clearance in other woodlands have reduced the availability of the dense understorey cover that the birds require. In 2023, a BTO study concluded that just one (undisclosed) Breckland site was known to have a 'wild' population of only four to seven birds and that the occasional reports from various other locations were birds of captive origin. In May 2024 the British List status of Golden Pheasant was changed to 'former naturalised species' because it is either no-longer self-sustaining or extinct. *Pat Reynolds*

The MacRobertson International Air Race. Mildenhall Suffolk to Melbourne, Australia.

The MacRobertson International Air Race is the subject of a special exhibition at Mildenhall Museum. The display includes models of the 3 DeHavilland Comet aircraft that took part, a detailed map of the route followed by each of the competitors and original film of the event. A new edition of a book about this air race by Brian Soper is available to buy at the Museum.

October 20th 2024 marked the centenary of this great event. It was originally intended to have started from an airfield near London, possibly Hatfield where the DeHavilland company was based. However, it was considered too dangerous so near to this large urban area and so the decision was made to start from an airdrome in East Anglia, where many were being prepared for another war. The air strip at Mildenhall had been finished earlier that year and was chosen.



Before the start of the race King George V, Queen Mary and The Prince of Wales visited the airfield amongst the crowds of about 60,000 who had made their way along country roads choked with cars.

The event was held to celebrate the centenary of the founding of the city of Melbourne in Australia. The 11,300 mile race, organised by The Royal Aero Club of London offered a prize fund of £15,500 provided by the MacRobertson confectionary company of Melbourne. There were 63 entrants from all over the world including the USA, Australia, New Zealand, The Netherlands and Denmark as well as Britain, but only 20 planes eventually took off on the morning of October 20th 1924. 11 aircraft completed the journey. The fastest time by the winner was 71 hours, making only the 5 compulsory stops on the journey. The last to complete the journey took exactly 31 days.

The race was won by a DeHavilland Comet aircraft designed specifically for racing, which made its maiden flight only 6 weeks before the race. The red aeroplane, named Grosvenor House, was flown by CWA Scott and Tom Campbell-Black, both RAF pilots. Of the 2 other Comets in the race, that piloted by Amy Johnson and her husband retired in India, while the other came 4th after several mechanical failures, but earned its reputation by flying film of the event back to England in 13 days.

Other notable achievements were that of a KLM DC-2 Ulver, a much larger aircraft carrying 27,000 items of mail and 3 passengers which came 2nd overall and 1st in the handicap race. Another was a DH.80A Puss Moth piloted by a 21 year old Australian Jimmy Melrose, who flew the plane from Australia for the race and returned in 10 days, coming 7th overall. *Julia Grover*

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KLM DC-2 Ulver

Two Books of Interest to Members

‘A Hard and Grievous Battle’. The Siege of Haughley Castle and The Battle of Fornham in 1173 by Dr. Michael J Walker. Published 2023

This substantial book by Dr Walker, a resident of Haughley is a study drawing on multi-disciplinary evidence including accounts by the Angevin Chroniclers, archaeological remains and field study. A sword found in the golf course on the site of the battle is displayed in the clubhouse.
In the introduction he gives a detailed account of the political situation in England and France in the 11th and 12th centuries and consideration of the social background at a time when expanded rights for free men brought improvements in agriculture and more land taken into cultivation by the feudal system.
The increasing power of the English barons meant that the King, Henry II, needed to take more control over them by taxation, whilst still keeping them on his side. However, some of these barons were minded to support his son, Crown Prince Henry, in France at the time, and this led to an invasion of French troops on the Essex coast at Walton. Here they were joined by some English Lords. The king was not a man for outright warfare if it could be avoided, however figures such as Robert de Beaument, the Earl of Leicester and Hugh Bigod, Earl of Norfolk supported a revolt by Crown Prince Henry, which led to the siege of Haughley Castle and the Battle of Fornham, both of which lead to the defeat of the rebels.
Rik Hoggett writes ‘….. these events were of immense significance to the subsequent direction of English history and Dr. Walker is to be congratulated on producing a well-researched and evocative account, which emphasises the local, regional and national contexts of the bloody events which unfolded in Suffolk 850 years ago.’
Later this year, on October 7th, members will have the opportunity to meet Dr. Walker, where he will give a talk and guided visit to the site of the battle.

In Breckland Wilds by W.G.Clarke FGS. Published 1925.

Many members will be familiar with this book published 100 years ago. Its author, William George Clarke, was a journalist, self-taught archaeologist, local historian and naturalist who spent years living and studying in the Brecks. He had been president of The Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists’ Society and Honorary Secretary of The Prehistoric Society of East Anglia and had written several books and papers on the subjects of the Breckland landscape and the way it was being farmed, its plants and animals, the towns and their history, archaeology and geology, and even local dialect and ghost stories. This book, published in the year of his death, was the last of his many papers and publications which had preceded it in The Transactions of the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists’ Society and The Zoologist.
The most significant landscape change that has occurred since ‘In Breckland Wilds’ was written is the planting of Thetford Forest. When Clarke was writing, the vast majority of the Brecks was heathland and the birds, animals and plants he records as common, reflect the dominance of that habitat. This was a time when the recently formed Forestry Commission was only just starting to plant the great forest that we know today, and familiar species such as the Goshawk are not mentioned in the book whereas Wheatears, admired at Wretham Heath by Sydney Long, the founder of the Norfolk Naturalists’ Trust (now the Norfolk Wildlife Trust) 99 years ago are now gone from that reserve. The Stone Curlew referred to by Clarke as ‘extremely common’ are now in much reduced numbers. He refers to Rabbits as ‘exercising a great effect on vegetation…for here the rabbit is king. He flourishes, and the heathland looks in parts like a tropical desert, in others the heather and grass are short and the turf springy. He (the rabbit) is reduced to a remnant, and the bents and sand-sedge become masters of the situation.’
On July 5th this year, in the lead up to celebrating In Breckland Wilds’ 100th birthday, BFER are inviting people to take part in making their own record of the Brecks as they know it today. If you’re interested in being a part of this series of events, get in touch at bfer.admin@suffolk.gov.uk or keep an eye on the BFER Events page. Without Clarke’s writing, we would not be able to make such a clear comparison between the Brecks today and what it was like 100 years ago. This just goes to show how important it is to record our experience of the landscape and the plants, insects and animals we see here. If we keep our studies and our records as detailed as Clarke did, the people who live here in 100 years’ time will be able to learn from us as we can from WG Clarke.