



FRIENDS OF MARKSTAKES COMMON

NEWSLETTER NO 5 – AUTUMN 2011

From the Chairman - Rupert Hall

✍ At the time of the last newsletter the Friends of Markstakes Common had found themselves at rather a crossroads and habitat restoration work had been largely suspended pending preparation of a revised habitat management plan. The spring and summer have been occupied with survey work (of which more later) and the maintenance of the Glades and Mire entailing rather a lot of time on our hands and knees! Contractors have continued to mow a large area of bracken to the north of the Common. Grasses, sedges and rushes are continuing to gain ground and additional flower species have started to appear.

One particular concern was the High Pond where plant life had responded so vigorously to the increased light that it seemed in danger of becoming smothered. An ad hoc task group was recruited by Thyone Outram, the Community Ranger, and in early October, a portion of the pond was cleared of encroaching rush and some of the silt was dug out. (Probably the muddiest day of my life) While that portion of the pond looks a little raw at present, experience suggests that the spring will see a rapid recolonisation.

During the summer a group of outside experts, including officers from the Sussex Wildlife Trust and Natural England, were invited to visit the site one evening in June to discuss the future management of the site. It was an instructive evening and the consensus that emerged was while needs of particular species should be noted, the management should aim to enhance the wildlife interest of the site in the broadest sense. In particular it was felt that the creation of open areas within the site should

continue so as to create a mosaic of different habitats.

Since then an early draft of the Habitat Management Plan has been presented to the committee and although it is a long way from being finished, we are happy with the overall direction that is being proposed.

Membership Matters

As you will read from the reports, it has been a very busy and productive year from the Friends.

We welcomed Jon Wood and Gordon Parke as new Friends this year and thank you to all those of you who kindly renewed your subscription.

We gratefully acknowledge all the help, both practically and financially, which we have received from the Lewes District Council, If you know of someone who would be interested in our work and would like to join as a 'Friend' please let us know at markstakes@chaileycommons.org.uk.

SURVEYS and SURVEYING

A record number of plants

We recorded 185 plant species on the Common this year – a total far exceeding that found in the past. Some of the increase is due to a much more detailed survey effort than has been carried out before. We divided the Common into thirty-six 100 x 100-metre squares and then visited each of the squares in spring and summer, making a note of all the species we found in each. Our closer

examination of the whole Common revealed species that were probably overlooked in the past, including the rare violet helleborine, an orchid that requires deep shade and flowers in late summer – and, with its subdued hues, is also quite difficult to see in the gloom.

Another reason for the increase is a result of the conservation and restoration work we have been doing over the past 3 years. In the areas where we have cleared invasive birch, bracken and bramble we have been rewarded with colonization of species whose seeds must have been lying dormant in the soil for years, waiting for the opportunity to germinate that has been given by soil disturbance and an increase in light. Some of the glades now have quite a dense cover of young heather in places, mixed with grasses and sedges and other flowers such as heath speedwell, creeping St-John's-wort and lesser skullcap.

There have been surprises too. In the old clay pit, an area we now call the mire because it supports a small patch of purple moor grass and Sphagnum mosses, appeared Buck's-horn plantain. This plant is much more common on the coast but also occurs more rarely on commons inland.

Our findings also support the designation, last December, of the Common as ancient woodland. * We recorded 38 of the 100 plant species that are believed to be indicators of ancient woodland in the south-east. A wood usually has to have at least 20 of these to be regarded as ancient. The earlier list of ancient woodlands in Sussex excluded Markstakes Common on the grounds that it was formerly wood pasture but now there is growing recognition that wood pasture commons do qualify because they have always had some woodland cover and have never been ploughed.

The Common is remarkably free of introduced species. The only non-native trees, apart from the occasional domestic apple, are the rum cherry and three old specimens of Sitka spruce. We are trying to clear the rum cherry because it is very invasive; it is causing problems in heathlands in continental Europe. The only other exotics are Indian balsam, which appeared along one of the temporary streams and is easily pulled

up, and garden escapes in the north-west and north-east of the Common.

*(Lewes District Council Ancient Woodland Survey Revision:

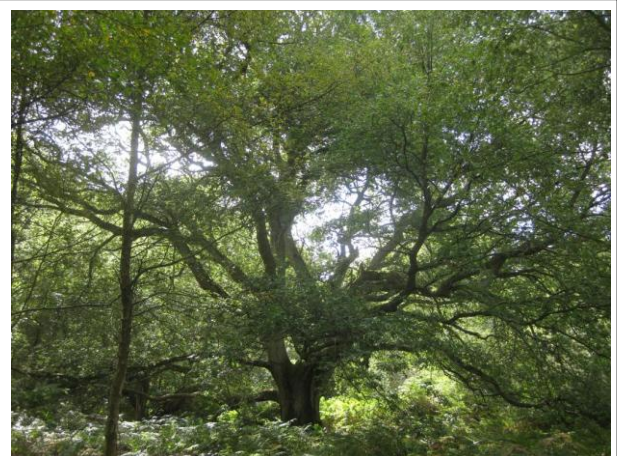
http://www.lewes.gov.uk/planning/background_reps.asp).

Notes from our Ranger – Thyone Outram

Good News and Bad

There is always plenty of good news at Markstakes Common – a very active local group, wildlife rare and common, beauty, peace and pleasure. We also have some new grant funding. Some money has become available as part of a successful Higher Level Stewardship grant application put together by Dan Ross for many of the Lewes District Council managed nature reserves. It provides some money over the next 10 years for habitat management (though by no means everything that will be needed to look after Markstakes Common).

As part of the recent management you may have noticed some tree felling. Previous felling has been for glade creation or restoration but the recent felling is to benefit some of the open-grown trees on the Common through 'haloing' the trees. Markstakes Common used to be very much



Oak which has now been partially haloed

more open that it is now – much of it was wood pasture. We are hoping to retain some of the wildlife benefits of a more open common while retaining the wildlife benefits of the 'wilder' Markstakes Common we know today. There are a number of large trees on the Common which have a spreading shape that suggests they must have grown on open land rather than in woodland.

Trees, especially oaks like this can grow very large and reach many hundreds of years old. As they get older parts of them die and

decay. The wood decay in veteran trees growing in the open with sunlight and warmth reaching the trunk and branches is a rare habitat. It provides a valuable habitat for particular species of lichens and fungi as well as holes and cracks for bats, insects and birds.

The trees that have been felled recently were all interfering with the sunlight reaching the canopy of either veteran trees, such as the two wonderful oaks in the North of the common, or feature trees that could form the next generation of veteran or ancient trees if allowed enough light to develop. Large spreading old trees are, of course, also wonderful for us humans to look at.



And the bad news is that there was a fly tip at the Northern gate in June. The culprits crashed straight through the gate and dumped at the entrance of the Common. We got the rubbish cleared and the gate repaired straight away but it is depressing that there

are ignorant people around that show such little respect for our lovely common.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Tuesday April 17th 2012 - 7.30.p.m.

The AGM at the Horns Lodge Pub,

South Chailey

Followed by a Talk and informal gathering

Regular Working party

Monday mornings start 9.30.a.m.

3rd Sunday monthly - practical work morning - start 9.30.a.m.

20st November

**2012
15th January
19th February
18th March**

Why not join us on one of our volunteer mornings? We have a varied programme of tasks depending on the time of year and season.

Contact details below.

**All meet at the gate in the Flint wall
Markstakes Lane South Chailey**

**Contact Rupert Hall
email – markstakescommon@live.co.uk
Or 01825 722863**