



FRIENDS OF MARKSTAKES COMMON

NEWSLETTER NO 9 – AUTUMN 2013

From the Chairman - Rupert Hall

Since I last wrote, the efforts on the Common have been focused on the maintenance of the areas that have been cleared, and with the increased areas under clearance this has become more of a challenge. One area was originally named the Birch glade due to the dense thicket of young birch found there. We have since renamed it the heather glade, originally to recognize its potential to become an area of Heather dominated heathland.

The Monday group has been very persistent in eradicating birch seedlings from the heather glade allowing grasses, flowering plants and importantly, the Heather to reestablish themselves. We had noted that the Heather was spreading but rarely reaching a mature height and speculated that grazing, most probably by rabbits was inhibiting its development. As previously reported, wire cages were installed to exclude the grazers and the Heather responded very positively, growing to such an extent that the cages were started to impinge on its further growth. The current cages have been moved on to allow further patches to develop and additional cages have been introduced to other areas. The heather is now flowering profusely and I believe that we can look forward to a continued development of the heathland habitat we were looking to restore. I would like to thank the Monday volunteers for their

extraordinary persistence in dealing with the birch seedlings that arise each year.

It is interesting to contrast to the hand weeding efforts of the volunteers with work done by contractors on the area cleared in the northern bracken field. The two wheeled tractor used by the contractors has been very effective and can cover a lot of ground in a relatively short period of time. Despite the speed it still allows scope for a sensitive approach, preserving patches of interesting vegetation and maintaining a mosaic pattern of cover alternating with open spaces that is favoured by reptiles. The use of such machinery may prove to be essential in maintaining the increased areas of open ground effectively.

The winter sees further clearance work planned. We are extending some of the glades further and there are plans for the strip of invasive birch that connects with the path to Town Littleworth to be coppiced. This could create enough timber for a charcoal Kiln to operate temporarily, possibly marking the return of one of the historical land uses on the common.

The survey work discussed by Jacqui Hutson reminds us that the plant diversity continues to increase in response to the creation of open areas. It has, however, not all been positive. The dormouse surveys have shown no evidence of Dormice this year.

This reflects a widespread trend of reduced populations caused in large part by the weather patterns being adverse. Set against that the bat boxes gave a result this year with Brown Long Eared Bats being recorded and after a slow start there were good results on the butterfly survey.

Membership Matters

Thank you to all those who have continued to support us in our work on the common. You will read of the various tasks activities which have been undertaken and you may join us on Monday mornings if you wish to contribute to these. Just turn up at the gate in the flint wall in Markstakes Lane at 9.30.a.m. and join in. Tools and gloves provided.

Our number of Friends has not increased but we do thank you for your continued support. Thank you also to the valuable support and guidance from our Rangers Dan Ross and Thyone Outram.

William Coleman

SURVEYS AND SURVEYING

Plant news

Three new flowering plants have been added to our species list for Markstakes Common this year. In late spring several patches of the bright pink flowers of Lousewort (*Pedicularis sylvatica*) appeared in the area we call the Mire.

When we first started clearing this old clay pit 5 years ago we battled our way through dense, almost impenetrable birch, bramble and willow. The result of our clearance and subsequent maintenance has been the

restoration of an open flower-rich sward alive with bees, butterflies, grasshoppers, bush-crickets, other insects and lizards.



Lousewort

The Lousewort's appearance was a pleasant surprise – it had been recorded in the past but not since 1991. This member of the figwort family is semi-parasitic on grasses. People have tried to grow it from seed but the only success has been when sown with bent grasses. Presumably the seeds had been sitting in the seed bank in the soil all these years and were able to germinate now that the bent grasses are well established. Louseworts are said to be hosts for lice and fluke-worms of liver-rot, which they were liable to impart to sheep grazing on land poor enough for the plant to prosper. It was also once used as a styptic wound herb.

Another appearance (or should we say re-appearance because it was last recorded here in 1997) was the Sneezewort (*Achillea ptarmica*), five young plants of which we found when hand-weeding the Mire in September.

We look forward to it flowering, perhaps next year. The dried powdered leaves used to be used as sneezing powder to ‘clear the head’, also to alleviate toothache and to



Young plant of Sneezewort

promote the flow of saliva. The rhizome can be chewed to help with flatulence and sluggish digestion but we won't be digging them up to test this.

While these two species, which were known to have been present in the past but had disappeared because the open places they need had been invaded by shrubs and trees and now have been able to re-establish themselves because of appropriate management, another species has been introduced by us in the margins of the pond on the west side of the common. This pond, in the bottom of another old clay working, has been deepened and dammed so that it holds water most of the year now and some trees have been cleared to allow in more light.

As a result some light-loving, aquatic plants have started to reappear. We have just planted five small plants of Marsh Cinquefoil (*Potentilla palustris*).

They were grown from stem cuttings of plants that were damaged inadvertently during a survey of the Scrase Nature Reserve in Lindfield. While there is no previous record of the species on Markstakes Common, the conditions are suitable around the pond – it likes moderately acid soil, a reasonable amount of light and wet soil.



Marsh cinquefoil

The plant is rare in Sussex, being recorded at only a few sites and this introduction was agreed with the Sussex Botanical Recording Society (SBRS); details have been supplied to that society so that the records can be kept for the future.

All our records for Markstakes Common have been sent to the SBRS and will be included in the New Sussex Flora, which is nearing completion.

A very surprising find (again when hand-weeding, this time in the Heather Glade) was a small clump of a moss that hadn't been recorded in Sussex for 30 years. *Polytrichum strictum*, the Strict Haircap, is more typical of very wet heathland and blanket bogs, which the Heather Glade is not.

However, the identity of this specimen has been verified by the Bryophyte Recorder of Sussex and has been entered into the national database of mosses and liverworts.



A clump of the Strict Haircap

This record was actually the second this year in Sussex, the first being on the Ashdown Forest in a *Sphagnum* bog north of the Visitor's Centre – I was there as part of a bryophyte survey when this find was made, which made me aware of the species and helped me recognise it on Markstakes Common.

What a special place Markstakes Common is.

Jacqui Hutson

Notes from our Ranger

Summer and Autumn has brought the annual round of cutting and pulling at Markstakes Common.

Contractor's machine cut and baled the areas that are being restored to grassland and heathland with the Friends and other volunteer groups working by hand through the summer to keep bracken, bramble and birch seedlings.



Following the success of the current clearance in the northern area at encouraging diversity of plants and insects, this autumn we have cleared small patches of the most northerly area of bracken. We have tried to keep this area less accessible from the main paths to discourage dogs from running through and disturbing basking reptiles. The aim is not to eradicate the bracken, but we are succeeding in keeping it under control and allowing plants like heath bedstraw to thrive. We have not done a survey of the insect life now in the northern grassland area in the summer, but anyone who walked through it before it had the autumn cut, will have been aware of the large quantities of grasshoppers and crickets as well as some butterflies, moths and other insects that were not present before the management started.

The annual clearance of branched bur reed and some silt from the High Pond was carried out this year by Brighton



Conservation Volunteers. We left the vegetation and silt on the side of the pond for any pond creatures to find their way back into the pond. Some days later I was helped by Perry, a work experience student from Plumpton College who calculated that he moved at least

half a ton of silt from the pond edge to hibernation piles a little further from the pond.

Contractors have also been doing more tree works at the shallow pond to let in light to encourage more pond plants and pond life. Because of the Friends work damming the pond; it is now holding water for most of the year.

The Lewes District Council Ranger Dan Ross has had a baby and a new job in the space of 2 months. Dan is now the Assistant Parks Manager at the council so he is responsible for Parks, Cemeteries, Sports pitches and other green spaces as well as the Nature Reserves. This means that although he is still involved with areas like Markstakes Common, he will not be able to visit or get involved with the running of them so often.

Thyone Outram



New and old cages October 2013



New Ride (right) linking the Heather Glade (left) to the Mire

DATE FOR YOUR DIARY

WORKING PARTIES

We regularly hold working parties on Monday mornings and occasionally on a Sunday

On Monday mornings we meet at the gate in the flint wall in Markstakes Lane at 9.30.a.m. and work until around 12.30.

If you are interested, do come along and help us – tools and gloves provided and bring a snack for a break.