

# Friends of Markstakes Common

## NEWSLETTER SPRING 2016

### From the Chairman

Welcome to our Spring Newsletter.

The main theme during this winter has been maintenance. While it is satisfying to clear new areas the long-term wild life benefits comes from maintaining the habitats through maintenance.

The decision not to mow parts of the Northern area while providing a more varied habitat has allowed birch seedlings to grow. This year the volunteers have spent several weeks pulling up birch seedlings, a task that finds out muscles that we didn't know about. It was tough work but the increased number of volunteers and the soft ground has enabled us to make excellent progress.

Similar work has been done on the Mire where the ground was very wet. Again hard work but good progress has been made which is important on one of the most valuable habitats on the Common. We were able to extend the corner glade to a large Oak tree with spreading branches. The presence of spreading oaks would indicate that this part of the Common was once more of a wood pasture habitat. Perhaps in the long run we can restore some of this priority habitat. In the mean time we have cleared away the large amount of bramble, which had started to colonise the new area. The hope is that grass, wildflowers and heather

will reestablish themselves. Taking down a few birch trees gave us an abundant supply of brash, which we used to make repairs to the dead hedge surrounding the high pond. This is there to discourage dogs from churning up the water. What remained was burned off in a rather satisfying end of winter bonfire.



(Happy band of volunteers)  
(Picture – Jacqui Hutson)

The aim of the group is to manage the site in a sensitive manner while keeping the invasive plants under control. This is labour intensive and I am very grateful for the patience and persistence that the volunteers have shown over the last few months.

Rupert Hall

**NOTICE OF SEVENTH ANNUAL  
GENERAL MEETING**

THE 'FRIENDS OF MARKSTAKES  
COMMON' WILL HOLD THEIR  
**SEVENTH ANNUAL  
GENERAL MEETING**

**TUESDAY APRIL 19<sup>TH</sup> 2016**

At HORNS LODGE PUB SOUTH CHAILEY  
AT 7.30.P.M  
ALL ARE WELCOME

**ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING  
TUESDAY 19th APRIL 2016 7.30.p.m.**

**AGENDA**

- 1. APOLOGIES**
- 2. MINUTES of 21th APRIL 2015**
- 3. CHAIRMAN'S REPORT AND ADOPTION**
- 4. TREASURER'S REPORT AND ADOPTION**
- 5. ELECTION OF OFFICERS**
- 6. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**
- 7. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

**Followed by Talks and light  
refreshments**

## **Membership Matters**

We approach our Annual General Meeting in April again, and this is an opportunity for Friends to come along to the Horns Lodge pub and meet together and hear about the work going on at the common and also plans for the future. Payment of 2016 subscriptions can be made.

We welcome our new 'Friends' who have joined us recently and who have been coming out on the common to join the working party on Monday mornings

Thank you all for your support of our continuing work at this beautiful and valuable site.

## **Winter Work**

The winter period has been quite a challenge for us, as we have had a lot of rain and this produces the low weald mud which we all find if we try to walk in the countryside. Markstakes is no exception but we have carried on with our tasks.



The High Pond has had the 'dead hedge' refurbished and this has meant dragging the brush from the Corner Glade area and making stakes to support the infill material.

The result has been both pleasing and effective as our pictures show.



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Other areas to receive attention have been the Northern Bracken Fields. As a trial, the herbage was cut in strip lines to create a mosaic of areas.

Within the untrimmed areas the young Birch seedlings have been growing strongly and, over several weeks, there has been detailed weeding by hand to extract these by the roots to prevent further growth



This is hard work but has the desired effect of clearing them properly.

Our pictures show this progress on a sunny winter's morning.

This close up picture below shows the 'Lazy Dog' digging tool which we use which works on a leverage principle when pushed under the plant.



(Pictures – William Coleman)

## Surveys and Surveying

### Mosses and liverworts - findings in Markstakes

Recording of mosses and liverworts (collectively known as bryophytes) can be time-consuming - one can easily spend 15 minutes examining a single tree or a stretch of a woodland bank. Even then, however thorough one tries to be, some species are bound to be missed, especially if they are small or mixed in with other species. The smallest species on the common have leaves less than 1 mm long and are hard to see without the aid of a x10 lens. Many need to be taken home to be examined under a microscope before one can be certain of their identification - needing cells to be measured and other features to be compared with the identification books.

Until 2013 I had been recording bryophytes on Markstakes Common only occasionally and had a little list, some members of which I wasn't at all sure I had identified correctly. On 7 January of that year, while the Friends of Markstakes volunteers were 'weeding' Friends' Glade, Tom Ottley, the Bryophyte Recorder of Sussex, appeared and stopped to chat. He said he would be happy to look at my records if I would send them to him. So I sent them off and received a rapid response putting me right on a few things and inviting me to join him on future bryophyte expeditions in Sussex. That was a great incentive for me to carry on recording, not only on Markstakes but in many other sites.

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Tom's list in that January amounted to 26 species - but he didn't visit the whole of the Common. Since then, little by little, I have added to that total and now we know that Markstakes has at least 59 species of bryophytes, with probably more to be discovered. The highlight was in July 2013 when I discovered a moss *Polytrichum strictum* in Heather Glade. It is rare in Sussex and was only the second record for 30 years - (described in the Autumn 2013 newsletter).

Markstakes offers a variety of microhabitats for bryophytes: tree bases, trunks and branches are home to a number of typical woodland species and the variety of trees we have offer different opportunities for colonisation - depending on the varied chemistry and texture of their bark. Rotting logs have their own distinctive group of species as do ditches and banks. The old clay pit in the south of the Common, part of which floods in winter, has areas of bog vegetation and grassland, with another set of species and the cleared glades have been colonised by species characteristic of heathland and acid grassland.

All except one moss are native species. The exception is *Campylopus introflexus*. This southern hemisphere species was first recorded in Britain in 1941, at Heath Common in Sussex and has spread rapidly since then throughout the British Isles. It forms extensive carpets on wet and dry heathland, on tree stumps, and on acid ground in woodland and grassland. It tolerates desiccation and benefits from disturbance such as tree felling. Experiments have shown that it depresses the number of germinating heather seedlings, probably because the seeds sink deep into the moss carpet and are deprived of the light they need. However, the seedlings that do germinate develop into taller seedlings, which eventually produce more flowers.

Some of our cleared areas have been invaded by this species. It spreads vegetatively by deciduous leaves and shoot fragments as well

as by spores. It must be suppressing other bryophytes that would naturally occur in such places. Eradication is not feasible but as the heather and other associated plants grow taller the shade does reduce the vigour of the moss and so we shall just have to leave it to nature.

Jacqui Hutson

## From our Ranger

### Reptiles and Pheasants

You may remember that in 2011/2012 we surveyed the Common for reptiles and found a good population of adders and lizards and very high numbers of slow worms and grass snakes for such a small site. The survey started because of anecdotal sightings of adders especially, basking in sunshine at this time of year – early spring.

Since the survey, the anecdotal sightings have reduced and this year we are repeating the survey to find out if this is reflected in the numbers of reptiles observed under survey conditions.

Adders are beautiful creatures but sadly their numbers are dropping nationally and they are extinct in some counties in England now.

I have regularly seen a pheasant very close to both the hibernation sites that we know of, where the Markstakes adders spend the winter. In spring the adders emerge and the females especially, stay close to their hibernation place while they bask in the warm sunshine.

Pheasants prey on reptiles and there is a real worry that they, together with more people, activity and disturbance on the Common have been having an effect on the adder numbers here.

Grass snakes and slow worms seem more shy than adders so it is very difficult to tell whether or where they are living or breeding on the

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Common. Hopefully the survey will give us some clues.

If you see any survey equipment please do not touch or disturb it. The less the reptiles are disturbed, the better chance they have to thrive.

### Winter tree walk

Around 25 people came to the Winter Tree identification walk in February including some Tree Wardens from Seaford and a contingent of naturalists from Newhaven. All were very impressed by the beautiful area.



Thyone Outram

## Hibernation News

### Puss moth pupa record

While working in the mire on Monday 21 March, Rupert found a curious looking case on an old stump.



*(Pictures – Steven Teale)*

Steve Teale took this photo on the day of the Butchers Broom flowering in the woods and some of the Markstakes group smiled and posed identifying a twig!

It was loose and came away very easily to reveal a large pupa.



He thought it was probably that of a moth.

I photographed it and sent the photos to Steven Teale who confirmed that it was indeed a moth pupa and, more specifically, that of a Puss Moth *Cerura vinula*.



(pictures – Jacqui Hutson)

Adults are on the wing between May and July and eggs are laid singly on the uppersides of the leaves.

The larva feeds on willows and poplars, particularly low re-growth or suckers of Aspen and Goat Willow in sunny places, so it seems that the mire is offering a great place for it to live, those species being abundant there.

The larva can strip entire stems of leaves and pupates in a very hard cocoon on a tree-trunk or post, incorporating wood macerated by the larva.

Steven has sent the record in to the Sussex Biodiversity Records Centre.

Jacqui Hutson

## Dates for the Diary

### Monday Weekly (most Mondays)

This is our regular volunteer group time to meet.

We gather at the gate in the stone wall by Markstakes Lane at 9.30.a.m. and usually work until around 12.30. Tools are provided and suitable clothes are recommended according to the weather. We have a break so bring along light refreshments to keep you going.

If you have not been already, do come along and help us with this worthwhile and sensitive conservation work which is very rewarding and keeps you fit.

No phoning required, just come along and join us – we shall be pleased to see you.



Email – [markstakes@chaileycommons.org.uk](mailto:markstakes@chaileycommons.org.uk)

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