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Watch on  
the Weald

FREE

Newsletter of the Weald of Kent Protection Society

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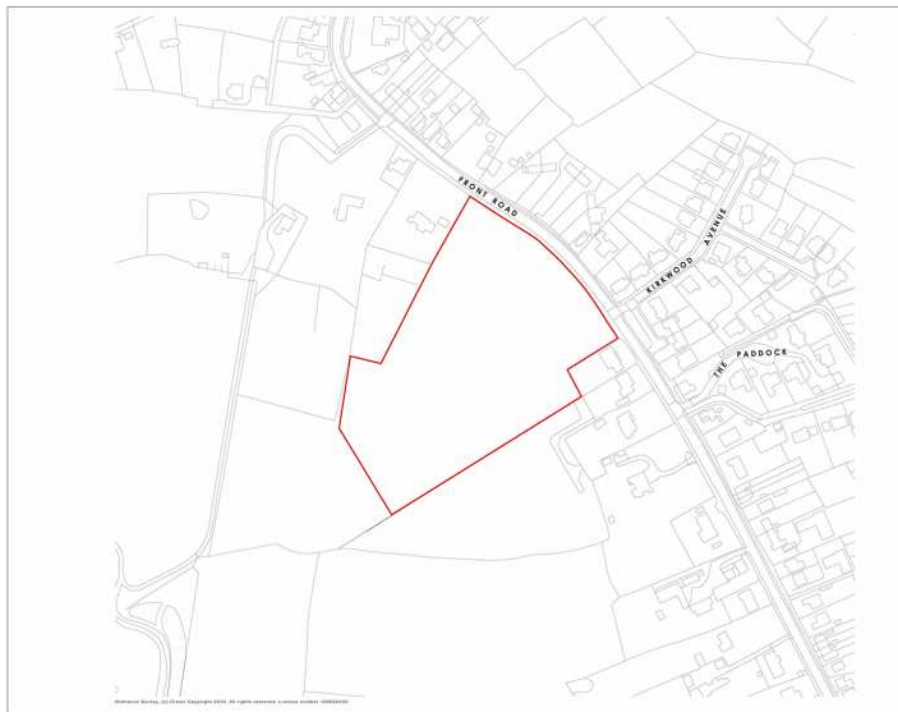
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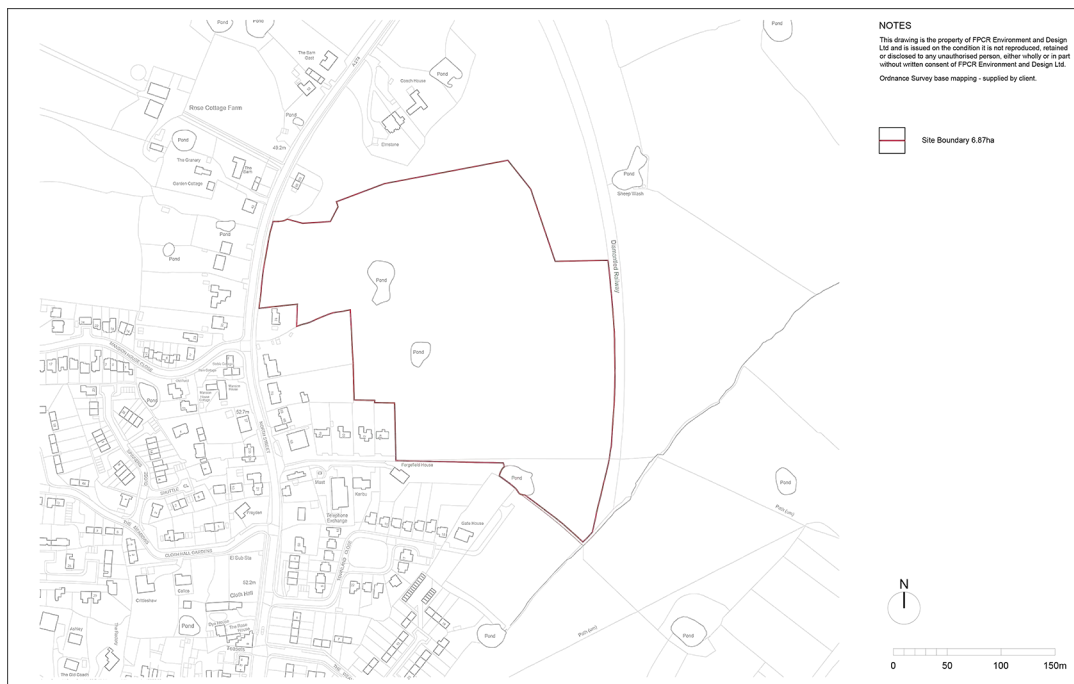
## Local Planning... What Local Planning?

The following two appeals arose because of the ABC's failure to determine the applications within the time allowed. Both appeals were made by Gladman, and both were granted by the appeal inspectors.

**21/01284/AS** (Appeal ref: 3289039 Decision 3 Nov 2022) Land off Front Road, Woodchurch - Outline for the erection of up to 40 dwellings (including affordable housing), structural planting and landscaping, informal public open space and children's play area, surface water flood mitigation, vehicular access point and associated ancillary works.



**21/01361/AS** (Appeal ref: 3302116 Decision 30 Nov 2022) Land North East of 74 North Street, Biddenden - Outline for up to 50 dwellings (including 40% affordable housing), community orchard and allotments, informal public open space, sustainable drainage system, vehicular access point and associated works.



Note that each appeal had different inspectors. However, their conclusions were almost identical.

**Woodchurch:** I have found that the proposal conflicts with the development plan, but that in this case the provisions of the Framework indicate that planning permission should be granted otherwise than in accordance with the development plan. Appeal allowed subject to conditions. (Note Rother catchment).

**Biddenden:** The proposal would conflict with the development plan when it is read as whole, but there are material considerations which indicate that planning permission should in this case be granted other than in accordance with the development plan. Appeal allowed (with conditions). (Note Beult/Medway catchment).

Both decisions refer to the lack of a 5-year supply of housing land, and to the ‘Stodmarsh Issue’ which has virtually frozen the development land pipeline in the Stour catchment – Ashford and Canterbury in particular. This now appears to have influenced the decisions on these appeals, lending no weight to the balance of the Local Plan and the thousands of hours invested in it, making an absolute nonsense of the planning process.

Contrast the following application which was refused by ABC and dismissed at appeal:

**21/00927** (Appeal ref: AP-81929 Decision 2 Dec 2022 i.e., after Woodchurch and Biddenden and a different inspector again) Land between Bourne House and Summerhill Cottages, Ashford Road, High Halden – Outline app (to consider access) for the erection of up to 28 dwellings together with all necessary infrastructure. (Note Beult/Medway catchment).

**Conclusion:** ABC cannot demonstrate a 5-year supply of deliverable housing land and the NPPF presumption in favour of sustainable development is engaged. Proposal would deliver 28 new dwellings on a windfall housing site, but this would amount to a disproportionate enlargement of High Halden given the scale of development previously approved in the village since the Local Plan was adopted in 2019. ‘I have found that the weight to be afforded to the identified conflict with policies in the Local Plan is such that harm arising from the location of

the proposed housing development and the effect that it would have on the character and appearance of the area would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits that it would deliver. In this instance, therefore, the benefits of the proposed development do not justify determining this appeal other than in accordance with the development plan.’

In this case the appeal inspector was not swayed by the Stodmarsh-therefore-inadequate-housing-supply argument by the developer and appears to have recognised the importance of the Wealden landscape and its villages.



The Ashford borough is significantly affected by the nutrient neutrality issue with regard to Stodmarsh Lakes. This prevents the issue of planning permissions for new housing development within the Stour Catchment unless it can be shown that the development would achieve nutrient neutrality. This problem arose in 2020, after the adoption of the Ashford Local Plan in 2019. As a result, ABC cannot demonstrate a 5-year supply of deliverable housing land. Of particular concern, there appears to be no solution at present as the water companies have no budget for addressing the issue of water/sewage treatment.

High Halden, Biddenden and Woodchurch are outside the Stour catchment and therefore development in these locations is not constrained by the nutrient neutrality issue.

Whilst the Woodchurch and Biddenden appeals were won by the appellant (same developer – Gladman), the High Halden appeal was lost by the appellant (different developer). All cases received many objections from their local communities and in the case of the two that ABC did not determine, its appeal statements represented the deemed reasons for refusal. For Woodchurch: ‘the proposal would be contrary to the adopted Local Plan [...] and would undermine the carefully considered and independently examined and accepted approach to the sustainable distribution of housing across the Borough to 2030.’ For Biddenden: ‘[...] There are no material considerations sufficient in this case to outweigh the conflict with the development plan (the Local Plan) and the harm that would be caused by the development. It is respectfully requested that the Inspector dismiss the appeal.’

The planning inspectorate has ridden roughshod over the examined and approved Local Plan for Ashford borough and ensured the loss of greenfield agricultural land to housing. Local planning has been consigned to the housing numbers game of targets and lack of 5-year supply.

**Peta Grant**  
**WKPS Planning Secretary**

# 'Wealding' an Opinion



*Low Weald dawn with oasthouse*

The last issue of the magazine sought people's opinions of the Weald, its value and landscape. So, for what it's worth, here's mine:

The Weald, north-west Kent's most intact medieval landscape, is just that – it is unique in that respect. Why did it take me, a lifelong resident, so many years to learn this fact? Perhaps because it's not seen as important enough to be widely valued? When referring to the Weald's matrix of 900 year old field patterns Jim Dixon wrote, in his enlightening article in the Times [1 Dec 2019] 'If it was made in stone, hewn and laid by unknown stonemasons, we would venerate its age and craftsmanship, much as we do the great cathedral at Canterbury.'



*Haze of spring anemones in ancient woodland*

My family, as well as my husband's, have farmed in the Low Weald for generations. So, this landscape, dominated by woodlands and the constraints of drainage, is normal to us. We are part of the River Beult catchment, surface water leaves our land and makes its sluggish way through the flat landscape, before draining into the Beult some 3 miles away. Winter flooding and waterlogged fields are as normal as baked-out cracked clay are in summer. Drainage experts from out of the area talk brightly about digging soakaways for buildings: we just smile and find a different expert. To dig a hole in the Weald in winter is to watch it turn into a pond.

Here in the Low Weald, irregular small fields surrounded by hedges make for a cosy, intimate landscape, but this is less respected than the High Weald, which is an AONB. We don't get the extensive views from above so beloved of people who decide which areas are AONBs. I would argue that some of the best views from the High Weald are looking out over the Low Weald. If the view is beautiful, surely the thing that makes up that view must also be beautiful? Our views, such as they are, are up to the hills, and large skies.

The reason we don't get these sweeping views here in the Low Weald is because of all those pesky things getting in the way: ancient oak woods and shaws,

ancient hedgerows punctuated by standard trees, usually next to ditches and streams – we have two rivers running through our parish of Marden. Marden used to be the biggest hop-producing parish in the Weald, and an important enough fruit producer for growers to start the successful Marden Fruit Show (now the National Fruit Show). All these orchards and hop-gardens needed shelter, so Marden and the wider Low Weald retained more hedges during the post-war drive to remove them. Looking at the Tithe Map for Marden, surveyed about 1820, it's remarkable that most of the hedgerows are still there in the 2020s on my family's farm. Recent drone footage of the farm showed what we already suspected – we're still living in the primeval forest, albeit with wide clearances in it.

We also retained pasture in the Low Weald, for the small mixed family farms that my generation grew up with. Indeed, Marden Meadows SSSI, is cited as being one of the best examples of unimproved neutral grassland remaining in Kent. Our lowest-lying land with impeded drainage is only really suitable for growing grass, not crops.

To me, it is a nonsense that the High Weald is an AONB, while the Low Weald isn't. They are two complementary pieces of a single landscape with close links between the two. Degradation of the Low Weald would harm the High Weald too. The Beult catchment represents a sizeable tranche of Kent countryside.



*Green-winged orchid with rushes*

Our organisation, Marden Wildlife, is recording species in the area and finding it remarkably biodiverse too. Red-listed farmland birds are doing well here where elsewhere they're struggling, this is merely part of a wider biodiversity story here. We cannot simply write this beautiful area off to mass development and offset this by replicating it elsewhere – it could not be. It is for us, who live and work in the area, to do what we can to protect it.

*Louise Carpenter*  
*All photos by Darren Nicholls*

## Water and Sewage Concerns

Water is clearly a key consideration in the way planning strategy needs to emerge in all planning authority areas. The Stodmarsh nutrients problem has highlighted the poor health of the country's rivers. The Kentish Stour runs through Ashford and Canterbury and is an important chalk river in its middle reaches. There is a strong lobby for the introduction of engineered wetlands in the Stour Valley targeting the removal of phosphate from sewage works effluent. Research on the subject seems to be thin and it is extraordinary that a process which has not been proven by the test of time is being mooted as a 'fix' for the River Stour – one of only around 200 chalk streams in the world, most of which are in England. The Stour is the most notable chalk stream in Kent.

It is heavily abstracted for water supply and other uses and suffers huge damage from permitted discharge from wastewater treatment works, which also tends to raise water temperature well beyond the level required to sustain the fragile chalk stream community. Current proposals for wetlands to remove nutrients might work, or they might be the final 'nail in the coffin' for the river. The water companies say they will upgrade by 2030, but this needs to happen much faster. The engineered wetlands proposed require commitments from landowners in the order of 80 years. It is a new concept, and its effectiveness and consequences must be researched meticulously before wetlands are chosen as a solution to this problem. Enhanced water treatment, on the other hand, is proven technology and just needs investment approval. It is very apparent from the front-page article that 'no brainers' do not have a place in the country's broken planning system!

# Progress in Improving the Natural Environment

Yes – there is an Office for Environmental Protection who have recently reviewed the Government’s progress in improving the environment, as required by statute. As we know, public concern about the environment remains high and a healthy environment is essential for human wellbeing. Monitoring environmental progress is difficult as years can pass before meaningful data is produced. That does not help policy making and there is an urgent need to simplify measures which can be reported promptly. And aligned to targets.

The current conclusion is that progress in protecting, restoring, and improving the environment falls far short of that required to meet Government ambitions. The only good news is that there has been some improvement in air quality in recent years and people’s engagement with nature is up markedly. However, we continue to witness a chronic decline in species abundance and habitat deterioration underlining the need for connectivity – habitats which are bigger, better, and more joined up.

Government has played its part on the international stage but has been slow to act at home, failing to set statutory targets in time, missing other deadlines and failing to publish its long-awaited Statement on Environmental Principles for all Government Departments.

The Government’s stated ambition is to be the first generation to leave the environment of England in a better state, articulated in 2011 and included in the Manifesto in 2017 followed in 2018 by the 25-year Environment Plan.

The OEP view is that the 25-year Plan has failed to bring about changes needed at the pace and scale required. 32 trends were assessed, 9 of which were improving, 11 were static and 8 were deteriorating. There are adverse trends across marine, freshwater, and terrestrial environments.

23 environmental targets were assessed and there were none where Government’s progress was demonstrably on track and against this background, climate change continues to exacerbate the challenge facing Government, with impacts likely to increase.

One reason for this catalogue of shortcomings is that the state of the environment was never comprehensively baselined and clear and ambitious targets were not set. Then, of course, strategy and policy responsibilities were repatriated to the UK, and, in fairness, pandemic, Ukraine War and the cost-of-living crisis all intervened. It is considered that an effective new Environmental Improvement Plan should contain eight attributes.

- Translate vision into effective policies, commitments and actions.
- Establish clear governance arrangements for which responsibility is clear enabling delivery on the ground.
- Unify the delivery plan with clarity for each goal.
- Set and pursue clear and ambitious interim targets in the areas needing most attention.
- Use robust current data that is aligned with all targets.
- Develop an evaluation framework which provides feedback and enables delivery to be improved.
- Diagnose the cause of adverse trends and respond.
- Develop assessment techniques that are able to anticipate trends and outcomes.

The OEP does not think the current pace and scale of action will deliver as the necessary tools are not being used in a committed and timely manner. Urgent action is required to deliver environmental improvement for future generations.

**Mike Bax**  
**WKPS Chairman**

# Check for Chequers!

Photographs of the Weald's beautiful landscape have one thing in common – there are usually oak trees somewhere in view. The Weald's history as the Roman forest of Anderida is written into the land; its traces live on in our ancient woods and hedgerows.

Hidden among the oaks, a rare tree thrives in the Weald as in few other locations in the UK. This is the Wild Service (*Sorbus torminalis*) but known to the Weald as Chequer. The local name roots it to its past connection with pubs, where a chequerboard was a symbol of a drinking house. Chequer fruits were used as an ingredient in early brewing, so would have been important to inns before the arrival of home-grown hops in the 16th century.



Chequer, being a *Sorbus*, is related to rowan although its fruits can look like tiny brown pears. Indeed, Hanbury and Marshall's 'Flora of Kent' 1899 classified it as a pear (*Pyrus*). *Sorbus* is a fascinating genus with many rare species, some of which only grow in a single location in the UK.

Being a long-gone brewing ingredient can't account alone for the tree's continuing survival in our Weald woods, which were strictly managed over many generations. Among several beliefs mentioned by Dr Patrick Roper in his book 'Chequer' (Sage Press) was that the presence of Chequer in oak woodland increased acorn

crops. Some of our Weald villages (e.g. Marden) were settlements created by herdsmen fattening pigs on acorns (pannage) so this might have encouraged the retention of Chequers. Or was it because of its reputation as a witch deterrent?



Less romantically, chequer produces very hard wood, which was used in applications where great wear happened – such as mill machinery and cart axles, even crossbows and harpsichord components. In continental Europe, wood from the tree is prized as a decorative joinery veneer, as well as a popular liqueur ingredient. Any tree producing



fruits late in the season would once have been a valuable source of food, as well as a cure for stomach upsets. Chequer's mystique still lingers. Daughter of a Weald farming family, I was brought up with the belief that chequers are special. Even modern woodsmen can go misty-eyed at mention of them.



Chequer is choosy about where it grows. While it's present over a wide area, populations are sparse away from heartlands such as the Weald. It flowers, fruits and seeds occasionally, but most new trees are simply suckers of older trees that have fallen. So, some individual trees may be survivors dating back hundreds of years in our ancient woods. Sometimes finding its 'goosefoot shaped' leaves on the woodland floor near a tree with fat pea-green buds in winter is the best way to identify it. Its autumn colour is fleeting but dramatic. It is a significant part of our shared heritage in the Weald, hidden away in the woods.

So, do you know where any of these hidden gems are growing? Please tell us!

**Lou Carpenter**  
**Photos by Darren Nicholls**  
**and Anne Tipples**

# Return of Polecats to the Weald



For one of our most resourceful and attractive native mammals, the polecat has had a consistently bad press. Its Latin name *Mustela putorius furo*, translating as 'stinky thief', is hardly fair when you consider that foxes, badgers and other members of the mustelid family all have distinctively strong odours (as, let's face it, we would without the aid of soap, deodorants and toothpaste!) – with the term 'thief' more to do with the creature's bandit-mask facial markings than any especially criminal habits. In fact, with a regular diet of small mammals, rats and rabbits, the polecat may well be less of a threat to nesting birds than its more celebrated cousin the pine marten – while as a nocturnal creature, any risk that it might pose to poultry has more to do with unsound hen-houses than daylight raids.

It was gamekeepers' perception of the polecat's threat to the birds their clients wished to kill that very nearly exterminated the species, with just a remnant population surviving in Wales and the Welsh borders by the beginning of the First World War – while, as for the similarly persecuted Scottish Wildcat, it was that war's demand for conscripts that saved it from extinction.

Is there a lesson here perhaps involving that more ruthlessly predatory mammal, *Homo putorius furo*? The stinky human thief?

From the nineteen-twenties onwards a steady expansion of the polecat's range, aided by its designation as a BAP Priority Species protected by the National Environment & Rural Communities Act, was thought to be mainly limited to South-West England. Until in recent years, that is, the work of the biodiversity and Tenterden Wildlife groups has established the existence of a healthy population in the Weald of Kent; distinguished by pelage markings, particularly of their face-masks, from feral polecat ferrets.

Considering the nocturnal habits of the species, of 17 dated and map-referenced sightings in the Weald of Kent, only 6 have been live (one of them with kits), with the remainder recorded as road-kill. All 10 of the specimens so far photographed have been confirmed by the Vincent Trust polecat authority in Herefordshire as genuinely indigenous.

With so much of our wildlife threatened by our own activities, the return of native polecats to South-East England is an ecological success story very much worth celebrating.

*Mustela putorius furo*, welcome home!

**Richard Masefield**  
**Tenterden Wildlife**



# Rainforests of the Weald

Substantial funding is being made available to the Wildlife Trusts to embark on an ambitious new project to restore British rainforests. It is part of a wider programme of nature-based projects funded by Aviva to remove carbon from the atmosphere and should improve biodiversity and climate resilience by restoring wild places including British rainforests. These have been destroyed over many hundreds of years for timber, farming, transport networks and development and are mainly recognised as covering less than one percent of Britain in areas such as Western Scotland, The Lake District and Western Wales.

You may ask what is the relevance of that to the Weald?

Well – the fact is that Wealden ghyll woodlands are associated with unique groups of plants that include nationally rare ferns, mosses and the like; several of which are only otherwise found in woodlands around the Atlantic coast.

Mosses are one of a group of plants known as bryophytes, which include liverworts and hornworts and the bryophyte communities of Wealden ghylls have been neglected in terms of scientific research.



Today, woodland is still the primary land cover within the Weald and much of this woodland occurs within stream valley systems known locally as ghyll woodlands and mainly found on the High Weald.

These ghyll woodlands occupy steep sided valleys and contain a stream that over thousands of years has cut through the underlying rock to create a “ravine”. These can be deep and in themselves a fairly remarkable geological feature in lowland England.

Because of their deep sides, they are generally inaccessible to livestock which has helped these features to remain relatively undisturbed and unmanaged. The enclosed nature of the ghylls is believed to create a warm and moist microclimate and similar conditions are absent from the rest of eastern and central Britain, being found only in the Atlantic forests on the west coast.

At the time of the Roman occupation of Britain, the majority of the Weald was still covered in woodland and clearance for agriculture and human occupation did not really change the landscape until the 12th and 13th Centuries.

It is a general rule that the older the woodland, the more species it will support, and the more species supported the more important the site will be for nature conservation. The Wealden ghyll woodlands support a rich flora of woodland bryophytes and are particularly important for many oceanic species which are restricted in the south east of England to the ghyll woodlands that are hundreds of kilometres from other British populations.

The ghyll valleys also provide a suitable habitat for regionally rare plant species including the Hay Scented Buckler fern, an oceanic fern found in over one hundred ghyll woodlands throughout the Weald and one of the highest densities of this species anywhere in Europe.

Because of their steep sides, the ghyll valleys have remained under continuous woodland cover. They therefore qualify as ancient woodland (woodlands since 1600AD) and fragments may indeed be remnants of the original “wild wood”.

Inevitably now, climate change and associated rising temperature levels may impact certain species in the ghyll woodlands and to prevent their high biodiversity value being lost through neglect, research is needed towards understanding more about the factors that underpin the biodiversity of the Wealden ghylls.

The majority of Wealden ghylls have never been field surveyed. It would be interesting to begin to identify those ghylls which contain biologically important species or communities and then consider the future management that might best protect them from the effect of climate change.

Projects such of this are of interest to WKPS and a contribution to funding could be made available. Spread the word please!

***Mike Bax***



# Nature Notes

We anticipate increasing interest from members in the widely unknown wild service tree, or chequer as it is known locally. In this edition of Watch on the Weald you will read Lou Carpenter's excellent article which focuses on the culture surrounding chequer trees and their enigmatic appeal.

WKPS is allocating funding to some local research into this tree with a view to increasing the awareness of Weald residents.

Please let us know if you know where some are, or if you find one. Confirmed locations will be passed on to the Kent Botanical recorders.

Chequer trees are an indicator species of ancient woodland, which is of course prevalent on the Weald. There will be a prize for the most productive chequer spotter, and we will organise a chequer tree walk in the autumn to get those antenna working!

A thoroughly worthwhile Wealden project for all!



# MEMBERS' DAY AT BOLDSHAVES GARDEN

What a fabulous afternoon we had Boldshaves. So much to report!

'I never tire of being in Ancient Woodland' – Frankie Woodgate

We started the afternoon in the beautiful barn, fire roaring, with a fantastic talk from Frankie from Wealden Woodscapes. A company dedicated to the goal of sustainable, low impact woodland management and the wise use of timber as a renewable resource.

She works in ancient woodlands using her beautiful Ardennes horses (the 'muscles from Brussels') to extract the wood. Her passion for Ancient Woodland, her love for her horses, her care for the environment shone through as she explained her work.

Among many other fascinating facts and stories, we learned how the soil biomass in these woods captures more carbon than the trees themselves, and that the woodlands can provide a truly sustainable source of timber. Ancient woodland is any area that has been wooded continuously since at least 1600 AD, but many date from much earlier (thousands of years old).



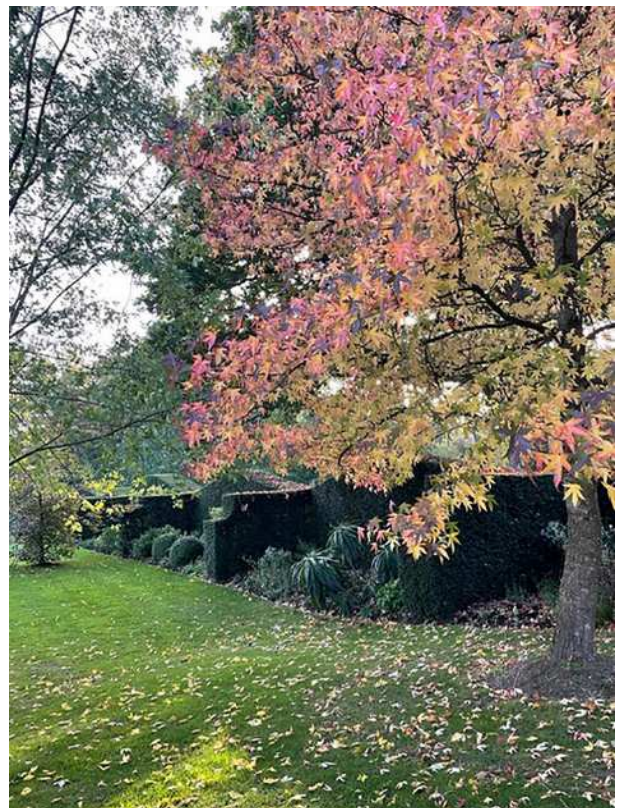
## MEMBERS' DAY AT BOLDSHAVES GARDEN continued...

After our fascinating talk, we were treated to a private tour of the beautiful gardens of Boldshaves by the owner.

What a garden it is, and the views... We started at the edge of the garden, where the woodland meets the garden and were reminded that the whole of the Weald was once covered by woodland.

We then meandered into the manicured formal Italian garden, then the main garden with quite the most stunning borders and manicured hedges. The views were breathtaking.

To be talked through how the space was designed was a total privilege. To hear how the walled garden was stumbled upon and uncovered. How each member of the family chooses a tree to be planted in their name, and how the 'pond' is deep enough to sink the tallest JCB without trace.



All I can say is how lucky are we as members to enjoy such an insider's guide. I will let pictures do the talking. And if you would like to become a member, please do contact us.

# Dates for the Diary 2023

## Nightingale Tour Shadoxhurst Wednesday 25th April



This will be a Donation only event for members and their friends. If you would like to make a donation to WKPS (as a donation we are able to claim gift aid!) we would recommend a minimum of £15 per person or £20 per couple, but this is purely voluntary.

Drinks & nibbles at 6.30pm at Shadoxhurst followed by a wander through ancient woodland to hear the nightingales sing



## Weald Woodscapes Logging Demo Saturday 13th May

**£20 per person**

11am meet at High Halden where Frankie Woodgate will explain all about Weald Woodscapes, a company dedicated to the goal of sustainable, low impact woodland management and the wise use of timber as a renewable resource. You will then get a chance to meet the horses before a live demonstration by Frankie and the horses extracting coppice in an ancient woodland. 1pm Sandwich lunch where Frankie will be on hand to answer any questions.

## WKPS Annual General Meeting

Tenterden Town Hall

Wednesday 14th June

*Free to all members and their guests*

# Dates for the Diary 2023

## Wealden Literary Festival Boldshaves Sat 24th & Sun 25th June



This Festival goes from strength to strength each year. Featuring an extensive programme for children, a commitment to the great outdoors, creativity and the local community, it is a must to visit. Talks and debates from an array of acclaimed authors and poets, with local artists and craftsmen displaying their skills.

Tickets are now on sale [www.wealdenliteraryfestival.co.uk](http://www.wealdenliteraryfestival.co.uk)



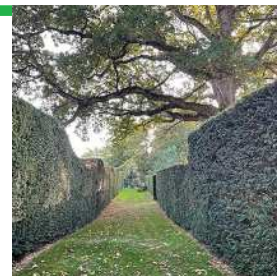
## Vineyard Tour & Wine Tasting Woodchurch Vineyard Friday 7th July

Woodchurch Wines will welcome you to the vineyard and give you an experience to remember. You'll learn all about the story behind the vineyard and the wine.

The tour lasts approx. 1 hour 15 mins and starts at 1pm. This is followed by cheese and charcuterie sharing boards.

**£25 per person**

## The President's Reception Boldshaves Friday 6th September



Taking place between 6 and 8pm, the reception is free to members who have introduced a new member to WKPS. Otherwise, a donation of £15 is requested.

If you have any suggestions for future events WKPS could organise please get in touch with [secretary@wkps.org.uk](mailto:secretary@wkps.org.uk) or call 01580 861246

## Charitable Donations and Bequests

In these difficult times and thanks to generous legacies from members, we continue to financially weather the storm. WKPS now has a link on the homepage of its website to make it easier to accept donations directly. We also hope that you consider a charitable bequest to WKPS when you plan your estate.

### Disclaimer

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# wkps

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