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Watch on
the Weald

FREE

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What a Wonderful Weald
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Barn Owl Nesting Boxes

Our Nature Recovery group started meeting during lockdown, when more of us had time on our hands than usual. The Zoom meetings focused on speakers with local knowledge of this beautiful, secretive part of the Weald and our aims were to enhance and improve this area for everyone living here and to support and encourage wildlife, essential for harmony in the countryside.

One of our first projects was a talk by Terry Hallahan from the Sussex Barn Owl Study Group, and with the help and support from the High Weald Nature and Community Fund, owl nesting boxes were erected in a wildlife corridor stretching from Cousley Wood to Ticehurst, Stonegate to Wadhurst in suitable locations identified by the Nature Recovery group and the Barn Owl Trust.

When Terry and his team arrived, the team looked over my back garden at the field beyond and pronounced it to be the perfect site. It is a large sloping field with a clump of trees over a dew pond. There is a stream at the edge of the field bordered by trees. Barn Owls need open countryside to enable them to hunt their prey. The field belonged to my neighbour's farm who gave permission for the nesting box to be erected on an oak tree over the dew pond. The area in which a Barn Owl lives is now called its 'home range' as the owls do not try to defend the area from others of their own species.

The first year there was no sign of any activity, though I walked past the box many times hoping for a sight of the owls. This year was different. When I walked past in the spring, I heard what I can only describe as a drumming vibration, and in the early summer twilight I saw a Barn Owl swooping over its prey. My neighbours who live above me could see the parent owls hunting as they hovered and swooped.

The team arrived in June and put up a ladder to access the box and to everyone's delight there were five owlets. They were covered in white feathers surrounding their heart shaped faces and looked bigger than they are. They were completely docile whilst being measured, weighed and ringed, seeming not to be the least disturbed by being handled by humans for the first time. Though there was no sign of the parents, we knew they were not far away, lurking in the trees and anxious for the fledgling owls.



The team were thrilled to find the five sturdy owlets as nests are sometimes found abandoned, with not more than one or two. Other owl boxes in the study had evidence of breeding, abandoned eggs and some owlets.

After this event, I hoped for more sightings and even to see the owlets take off on their first flight, but apart from seeing the parent owls a couple of times, there were no more sightings.

Providing owl nesting boxes is essential for the Barn Owls to breed. They used to nest in old trees, which have now rotted or been chopped down, then they found farm barns suitable for breeding, hence the name Barn Owl, but sadly many barns are now converted into living accommodation.

There are many hazards that a young owl has to navigate when leaving the nest and their lifespan can be very short. They can starve, their natural habitat of open fields and barns to nest in are a vanishing commodity. They can drown in water when washing themselves and get poisoned by bait put out by farmers for rats.

The Barn Owls have to work hard for their offspring. As the owlets grow and get hungry, they need up to four voles or mice a day each, and the parents have to feed themselves as well. They eat the entire prey items, but do not digest the fur or bone, which is regurgitated in the form of a pellet. This works out to nearly 4,000 items of prey for the owls to find to feed themselves and their offspring. Bad weather can hinder hunting for food, which can lead to starvation.

Sadly because of the disappearing habitats, Barn Owls are a diminishing species, and they need the nesting boxes to survive, and also the right terrain. After the successful hatching of the five owlets, I could see why the field was a perfect spot. It gave the owls a vista of a large expanse of tufted grass, which is sometimes grazed or left fallow, which allowed them to hunt, swoop and hover over their prey.

The owls start hunting when they are 8-14 weeks old and mostly rely on sound to locate their prey. Their perfect sculpted plumage feathers are not waterproof and bad weather will hinder their hunting. I feared for those adorable owlets during the relentless rain we have had this year. They are ready to leave the nest between 40 and 60 days after hatching and hang out of the nesting box for a while before taking their first fledgling flight.

The Barn Owl Trust website has all the information needed if you think you have a suitable site for a nesting box, and owl nesting boxes can be obtained from them and there are other websites showing how to make nesting boxes, as they are specific to the needs of the breeding pair of owls.

More wildlife corridors are needed to bulk up the numbers of breeding Barn Owls. Many of the schemes have been successful, and in some areas, the numbers of breeding pairs are on the rise, but more work needs to be done to help them, and other species survive in a world where indigenous wildlife is under threat from the relentless encroaching march of human industrialisation across the world.

However, I hope those five adorable owlets survived and now the nesting box has been inhabited, the owls return to use it again.

For more information www.barnowltrust.org.uk

Annette Balfour Lynn



Protecting Waxcaps

The autumn spectacle of multicoloured waxcaps is an important indicator of ancient grasslands that have been unploughed for decades, and which are rich in carbon and soil biodiversity.

Britain's waxcap grasslands are considered to be some of the best in Europe but finding them can be a rare occurrence as these special habitats are declining in the UK and with them the fungi. Nature-rich grasslands cover less than 1% of the UK. The 2023 State of Nature report on the UK's current biodiversity, revealed that over a quarter (28%) of fungi and lichens are now at risk of extinction.

Unfortunately, many of these irreplaceable grassland fungi sites continue to disappear under tree planting, new houses, intensive farming, transport infrastructure and more. It is certain that many more are also lost unseen, because of a series of interlinked issues that place the conservation of fungi far behind that of other taxa like mammals and birds:

The shortage of skilled field surveyors (mycologists) means we still have very little data describing the distribution of fungal species and when people don't know they exist, or aren't able to identify them, planning and development on seemingly 'uninteresting' but important, ancient grassland habitats may go ahead on land before we've been able to recognise them for what they are. Sites are lost without ever being recognised for their biodiversity.

But there are many things we can do to address this problem.

- We government, local authority planners, and developers, to recognise that current systems regularly fail to identify sites that are important for fungi, and make sure that the impacts on our internationally important ancient grasslands are better addressed.
- We need better legal protection for fungi. For example, there are presently only 27 species protected under



Section 7 of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016, compared to 51 birds and 188 invertebrates.

- We need more investment in surveying fungi before committing to land use change. That means training and employing more field mycologists, but also making more and better use of new techniques such as eDNA surveys. These surveys can identify fungi present in the soil and help to

reduce our dependence on surveys during the autumn fungal fruiting season.

- We need more data. We can all help with that, by recording fungi when we see them. Even if you aren't an expert, you can take part in Plantlife's Waxcap Watch, which only asks for the colours of grassland fungi you see. This helps to identify sites of potential value. When the value of a site is understood and recorded, it makes it easier to fight to defend that value.

You can discover various resources to support your waxcap forays, including a free online training course called Grassland Fungi Identification and Management by signing up at plantlife.org.uk/waxcapwatch



Plantlife has launched a Fungi appeal to highlight the importance of this captivating group of organisms. Plantlife's website has further information on how to help and why fungi like waxcaps need our help more than ever.

Katie Cameron
plantlife.org.uk



Keeping Biodiversity on the Right Track

I have been a member of the Kent & East Sussex Railway (KESR) for the past 50 years and joined a newly formed sustainability group at the Railway three years ago, taking the lead in developing a biodiversity strategy and in liaising with local nature-based bodies.

Preservation was the name of the game in the early 1970s, when those who mourned the end of steam trains wanted to save as many as they could and protect the lines cut by Dr Beeching. Now they are called heritage railways and there are over 200 of them covering 560 miles. They have morphed from enthusiasts' playthings into living museums and leisure destinations.

Today, we face a far more urgent preservation imperative: to restore nature and it seems to me that heritage railways can play a part. This is because they are green corridors - or potential green corridors, depending on how they are managed. Since the 1970s, when the railway preservation movement began, there has been a loss of 40 million farmland birds. We are one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, ranking 198th out of 218. Younger generations are unaware of the loss because of what is known as 'baseline regression syndrome', or as the poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, put it in *Binsey Poplars*: 'After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.'

Last year, we commissioned Kent Wildlife Trust Consultancy Services to undertake a breeding bird and bumblebee survey of the line. The results were remarkable, confirming that our scrub and tree-lined route running through remote Kent and Sussex countryside is rich in biodiversity. There are over 70 species of wildflowers

growing on embankments and in ditches; dense scrub supports around 38 of the 89 bird species which were identified (17 of which are red-listed and 22 amber-listed). In its 10.5 miles the line is supporting an extraordinary 60 yellowhammer territories - a red-listed bird in serious decline nationally. Even more importantly, high conservation status species such as nightingales and turtle doves are being supported by lineside vegetation. Fifteen different bumblebees were identified, including two rare ruderal species. The railway finds that it is effectively supporting a linear nature reserve!

We decided to commission the surveys (and there are more to come) for a number of reasons. There was already a nascent support for nature among many of the railway's groups. Station gardens were being tended with bee-friendly flowers; bird boxes and bee hotels had been



erected; more importantly, the gang responsible for managing lineside vegetation and maintaining a safe railway have designated themselves as 'Forestry and Conservation'. They had planted thousands of whips provided by Ashford Borough Council around the perimeters of stations and sidings.

Biodiversity surveys would put this on a scientific basis. As the Railway is an educational charity, it makes sense to inform and educate passengers about the natural wealth just outside the carriage window.

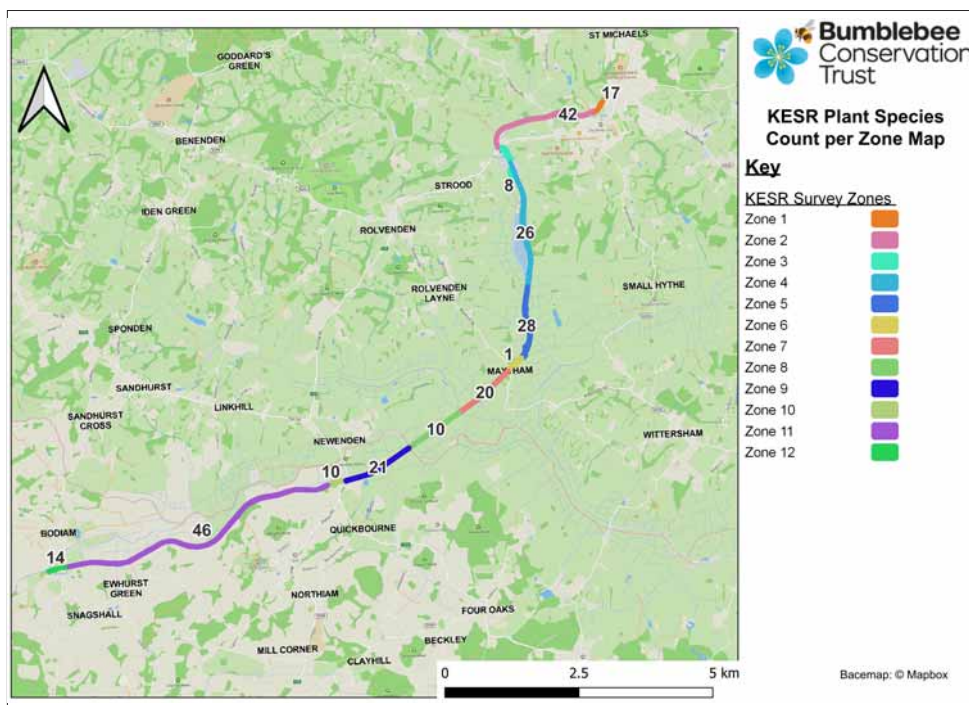
We are planning to develop a sort of I-Spy booklet for passengers. The PR jargon would be all about 'enhancing the visitor experience', but our motivation is not so utilitarian. We want to protect nature for its own sake. It is heartening to discover how many of the railway's members (most of whom are volunteers) are excited by the surveys' revelations. Recently, at their request, I gave a talk to all the ticket inspectors who are keen to be able to talk informatively to passengers.

I am not an ecologist, though I have read a wealth of books about biodiversity, rewilding, nature-based solutions and so forth. My amateur passion was focused when my youngest son studied for an MSc in Sustainability at Birkbeck a few years ago, but it is exciting to work with local experts and agencies.

I have joined the Romney-Rother Catchment Partnership (much of the line runs through the Rother Valley) set up by the South East Rivers Trust, and we have offered the group an exploratory trip along the line, which is like a remote country lane without the traffic. Approached by James Clow, Kent Tree Senior Strategy Officer, for Kent County Council, we have planted ten disease-resistant elm trees as part of a reintroduction strategy along the edge of a two-acre wildflower field the railway owns. One of the two species this can support is the white-letter hairstreak butterfly, which is very rare. Perhaps we can manage a reintroduction for that too.

It was through James that we were introduced to Emily Davies of the Kentish Stour Partnership who came to survey a large lineside pond with a view to restoring it to a state where it can support great crested newts. This is funded by Natural England.

From the outset I have regularly updated the Director of the High Weald National Landscape



(formerly AONB) about our discoveries and developments, but perhaps the most significant partnership has been with the Kent Medway Making Space for Nature project. Thanks to workshops and introductory meetings, it has been possible to establish the railway's identity as a green corridor with a tapestry of habitats that can contribute at a landscape level to nature recovery. Through their interactive mapping system, we are logging our findings and hope to play an active part in their strategies for the future.

In the next three years, working with the Rother Valley Railway, who are reinstating the last lost three and a half miles from the main line at Robertsbridge to Bodiam, the opportunity arises to see how the complete rebuilding of a railway line can improve biodiversity.

Keith Barron

Kent & East Sussex Railway

[First published by St John's College, Cambridge alumni magazine, May 2024]



PANNAGE

Before the arrival of William the Conqueror, the majority of the cultivated land in Kent appeared in separately owned blocks of land in the north of the county comprising arable land in the fertile lower ground with pasture and woodland on the Downs, and marshland around the coast suitable for grazing sheep and cattle.

To the south of these blocks and below the Downs and Greensand Ridge lay the vast Oak forests of the Weald producing huge quantities of acorns on which to fatten pigs in the autumn. The emphasis in the north of the county was on individual properties, which we might term Estates today, and many of these were attached to the Wealden commons some distance away. The various soil types were devoted to the most suitable system of farming so that it was often the case that woodland belonging an Estate was some distance away from the main holding.

That was particularly the case with the woodlands of the Weald which required a huge transmigration of livestock from North Kent to their fattening grounds. Pannage fell at a quiet time of the farming year when harvest had generally been gathered and the herdsmen would live in the inhospitable forest - compare the seasonal work of today with fruit pickers living away from home. The livestock benefitted from the production of the forest mainly in the form of acorns, chestnuts and the like.

The Kings of Kent owned much of the land and in most cases granted the Wealden dens to the North Kent Manors alongside the right to pasture a specified number of pigs in the Weald forest. A number of the names attached to these pannages are well known to us today - Boldsnoad Wood in Woodchurch, Shirkoak in Woodchurch, Tuesnoad in Bethersden, Ayleswade in Frittenden, Snoad Wood in Staplehurst and others. As time went by the Lords would have been just as, if not more concerned to retain rights to the Oaks, Ash and Beech, in other words the timber rights, as with preserving the pannage for the benefit of livestock from the upland tenants. The Oak and Beech therefore became less important for the provision of acorns and mast on which the pigs were fattened.

It is not clear what restrictions there may have been on the amount of brushwood that could be taken, or the number of pigs that could be pannaged, but in a conveyance of three pannages to the Bishop of Rochester in 747, the dens are said to be for the 'serving' of twelve herds of pigs.

Accordingly, the picture of the Wealden sixth to eighth centuries is of a forest deserted during the early part of

the year, with a few cattle utilising summer grazing, but all very crowded during two months of the autumn with pigs from every part of North Kent. There appears to have been no prohibition on cultivation, but the Wealden clay soil was recognised as generally unfriendly and the arable land of North Kent was able to carry the population to the extent that there was no incentive to pioneer cultivation of the Weald at that time.

By the 11th century, analysis of pannage dues payable to the manorial landlords by their tenants indicates that something like 60,000 pigs were being sent annually into the Weald forest.

Records suggest that around the time of the Domesday Book herding was becoming laborious and expensive and use of the forest for pannage was clearly reducing. That makes sense in the increasing value of the dens for firewood and timber and then as the Wealden forest became settled, the spread of cultivation to feed that new population had begun to reduce the size of the herds, and the extent of the forest. Compare the reduction in size of African forests in recent decades as land is settled for agriculture.

For centuries until that time the resources of the forest had not been utilised largely because ample fertile land existed in North Kent. Once that balance changed it became extravagant to leave land just for the fattening of pigs.

Wood rights were a very different matter. The demand for timber for building, and firewood for energy grew continually with the increase of population. Circumstances in the eastern Weald were favourable in that a large area, roughly within the arc from Hawkhurst through Cranbrook to Tenterden was within close reach of small havens on the Rother from which timber and firewood could be easily and cheaply shipped. There are regular records of timber supplies being sent to Northbourne, near Deal, from the Manor dens near Tenterden and there would almost certainly have been similar traffic into Sandwich.

As a result, circumstances changed rapidly so that in the 14th century a large number of parcels or dens saw the



sale of timber rights to tenants and there are records of no fewer than 29 of these transactions between Headcorn and Kenardington. As the importance of timber increased, less attention was paid to the interests of the upland tenants who used to send their pigs to pannage. Pannage would become of little consequence but nevertheless the rights to pannage remained. Accordingly, interference with the right to send pigs to the forest was not a trivial matter to the poorer tenants of the county and it is noteworthy to remember that the stinting of common rights was one of the chief grievances of the Kentish rebels in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

By the 16th century, the dens of Woodchurch, Tenterden, Benenden, Sandhurst, Oxney and Rolvenden had seen no pigs sent for pannage over many years. The 14th century onwards had witnessed a steady decline in the number of herds using the forest, thereby bringing



Typical bank in a Wealden Ancient Woodland. Almost certainly the boundary of a Pannage or wood-lot.

to an end the long chapter of Wealden history which had opened nine hundred years earlier. The resumption of ironworking in the High Weald and the growth of the weaving industry in the east hastened the process and a new Wealden landscape emerged - tracts of ancient woodland interspersed with village settlements, pasture and cultivation - the Weald we are trying to protect today!!

Mike Bax
WKPS Chairman

At the President's Reception in July, we welcomed Ben Moorhead, the Chair of CPRE Kent, who spoke about the work of The Countryside Charity

CPRE KENT is possibly the largest CPRE County Branch. It is a free-standing charity with one of the largest memberships and a substantial endowment which means with the income we can do things that many other branches cannot do. We have more scope.

We have five full time staff - a Director, a Manager, two Planners and a Marketing/Media Manager. We have several sub-committees and side committees. The Chairs of our Local Branches are our eyes and ears.

There is a National Office and a National Assembly and a Chairs Chat which I attend. In Chairs Chat we share our experiences and also seek to form policy as with National Assembly. National Office tends to direct Policy.

We respond on planning rules and guidelines and NPPF/and Policy changes. Labour says they will build on Greenbelt. We say build on Brownfield first. There is plenty. We work for Wildlife, but we are not a wildlife charity. We help to preserve landscapes, woodland and views. Wildlife comes with that.

Data

- Two million acres of British Grassland and Woods lost to urban development in 25 years. That is an area the size of Suffolk and Sussex combined. This includes playing fields lost to development.
- At the same time there was an increase of more than 830,000 acres in urban development - an area the size of Cornwall.
- A huge increase in fly tipping, littering in woods and water pollution.
- The biggest increase in urban sprawl was in Kent, which saw an increase of 33,600 acres of built land from 1990 -2015 followed by Essex and West Yorkshire.
- Farmland that could grow 250,000 tonnes of vegetables a year was lost to development (CPRE KENT). 300,000 houses have been built on prime farmland with an extra 1,400 hectares used for renewable energy projects despite more than enough previously developed brownfield land waiting for regeneration.

To find out more about the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) visit: cprekent.org.uk and/or cpre.org.uk



River Beult Sewage Works Discharge Threat



Fig.1

In our last issue we reported on the Chilmington Sewage Works application which was unanimously refused by Ashford Borough Council (ABC) Planning Committee on the 7 May. We reported that the refusal had been appealed and the ABC decision has since been overturned by the Planning Inspector. Quite extraordinary for the people who live along the river and those who farm in the Beult catchment and understand what a seasonal river is all about.

Another extraordinary feature of applications such as this is that permission for a sewage works can be granted before there is any certainty that the means and process of discharge from that infrastructure have been permitted. It is therefore now down to the Environment Agency (EA) to decide whether to grant a permit for the discharge and

readers will recall from the previous article that the Planning Committee clearly understood the point - that there is no flow in the Upper Beult in most years during late summer and autumn. In that issue there was a photograph of a trickle of water in the river channel in the summer and a dry riverbed in one of the tributaries. This situation of minimal flow applies downstream well beyond Bethersden and even from the start of the SSSI at Hadman Bridge downstream of Smarden.

The reason for this is that the Beult is a rain fed river and the situation described above can be contrasted with the massive flows we see during wet weather in winter months.

It strikes us that this case highlights the conclusions that can be reached when statutory consultees have not provided clear information to the planning authority and when decisions are made by parties with no knowledge of local conditions and circumstances. Consider the following conclusions reached by the Planning Inspector:

- Natural England (NE) and the EA both confirmed that they have no objection in principle to the developer's Nutrient Neutrality assessment and mitigation strategy.
 - That pretty well left the Upper Beult for dead before we passed 'Go'.
- Whilst an upgrade of the sewage works at Bybrook is planned, with possible reconnection of Chilmington to that system, the Inspector recognises that the upgrade would not necessarily deliver Nutrient Neutrality. He has therefore determined this appeal on the 'assumption' that the Chilmington Green Sewage Works will be a permanent feature beyond 2030.
 - Why is an apparently remote Government Department entitled to make 'assumptions' in relation to matters that are likely to have serious consequences for the environment?
- The new sewage works has been designed to have capacity up to 2,700 dwellings but must be limited to a discharge rate of 3 litres per second in order to ensure no adverse impact on the local water quality or the River Beult SSSI.
 - Incomprehensible and impossible.

Fig.1 The discharge ditch approximately a quarter mile below the sewage works
21st April 2024

Fig.2 Minimal flow in the Upper Beult in summer
29th June 2024

Fig.3 Minimal flow in the Upper Beult in summer
19th July 2024

Fig.4 Minimal flow in the Upper Beult in summer
13th August 2024



Fig.2

- Having considered indicative criteria, the Inspector was satisfied that the scale and nature of the proposal would not be likely to result in significant environmental effects, alone or cumulatively with other development.
- However, it should be noted from above that neither NE or the EA offered any assistance in providing context to the application and nor did ABC seek specialist advice.
- The Inspector stated that one of the main issues for the appeal was whether the proposal would cause river and groundwater pollution and so have an adverse environmental effect on the River Beult and the River Beult SSSI.
- Clearly with a minimal summer flow in the river channel, there would be river pollution. Groundwater pollution was never likely to be an issue with the Upper Beult running through the Low Weald with its notoriously impermeable clay soils. Indication of complete lack of understanding of the ecological circumstances which once again should have been flagged up by NE and the EA.
- The Inspector recognised that he could not pre-judge whether or not the EA will grant a licence, but he noted that the EA, as a statutory consultee, did not indicate that a licence was likely to be repelled, or that planning permission should not be granted.
- Extraordinary that the EA and NE apparently sought no assistance from local knowledge of the minimal flow levels in the river during late summer or autumn, nor appear to have investigated flow rates.
- The Inspector recognised that planning guidance suggests that wherever possible in planning there should be parallel processing of other requirements in order to resolve issues as early as possible, but that is not mandatory.
- Accordingly, we now have the consent for the sewage works, but no discharge licence. Bearing in mind the scale of the Chilmington development and Government pressure on housing delivery, the EA will find themselves under horrendous pressure to grant the licence. The local community is not familiar with how to communicate concerns in extreme situations

such as this, particularly when the EA is apparently committed to being faceless and incapable of interrogating local knowledge.

- The Inspector has taken account of the hydrological statement that, providing flows did not exceed 3 litres per second in 'low flow' conditions, then the discharge from the plant would contribute approx 12.6% of the overall flow at the top of the River Beult SSSI. The Inspector appears to accept that the flow rate is acceptable.
- However, no one has listened to the representations of farmers and landowners which clarified that there is no discernible late summer flow down to Bethersden, and minimal flow into the SSSI.
- Accordingly, the Inspector decides there is no basis for concluding that the development would not be properly regulated through the permitting regime, or that its operation would lead to a deterioration in water quality in the River Beult and the notified features of the SSSI. He refers to the context of 'recent' low flow levels as though this feature has only recently become apparent.
- That is, of course, incorrect.
- The Inspector concluded by stating that he was satisfied that, subject to the development being carried out with the necessary environmental permit for a discharge licence there will be no harm on local ecology, including the integrity of the SSSI.

Unbelievably, we hear that the Inspector awarded costs against ABC because of their original planning decision. The fact is that the river is unsuitable as a route for the discharge of treated effluent. Why would responsible authorities recognise nutrient issues on the River Stour, and transfer those to the River Beult with the rich biodiversity of its riparian corridor? It is the River Beult which is the only riverine SSSI in Kent - not the River Stour, which does also deserve exceptional care.

Make no mistake - the country's ill-conceived regulatory systems are about to walk all over us!

Mike Bax
WKPS Chairman



Effective Neighbourhood Development Plans Need Courage and Teeth

When we were in the infancy of pulling together the Benenden Neighbourhood Development Plan (BNDP/NDP) some six years ago, and the Benenden Healthcare Society put forward the redundant hospital sites at East End for redevelopment as part of the Tunbridge Wells Borough Council draft Local Plan, it seemed to us to be a no-brainer that these sites should be included in our own site allocations for housing.

Being brownfield sites, and just outside the (then) HWAONB, it was an ideal opportunity to develop what had become an unsightly and neglected area of our parish, while also fulfilling a contribution toward our affordable housing needs.

Understandably there were concerns from local residents on the effect the development would have on the surrounding area, but with a lot of hard work by our NDP group, the site specific policies in our NDP were formulated to address these concerns so that we could achieve the best possible outcome for these sites. Our NDP was 'made' in February 2022.

Two years ago Esquire Developments acquired an option to develop the sites, and after a faltering start due to a lack of communication with the parish council (not entirely Esquire's fault, but that is another story), we worked closely alongside Esquire and the TWBC planning officers to achieve the best possible layout and design for the sites, with particular attention given to ecological enhancements required as well as details on the replacement of the historic Garland wing with a crescent-shaped terrace, with the challenging topography of the site allowing parking to be hidden away underground, and a raised

public walkway to the front so that all residents can benefit from the views southwards towards the HWNL.

The permission granted in July this year allows for demolition of all the old hospital buildings and the creation of 81 new houses across the north and south side of Goddards Green Road, including 26 affordable homes. The attention given to bio-diverse landscaping has been extensive, to include a wildflower meadow, community orchard, a large pond with native marginal planting, species rich grassland, retention of the Local Wildlife Site and woodland, as well as the retention of an avenue of mature trees that run through the southern site.

All this alongside the provision of a new community space repurposed from the disused cricket pavilion, a café and shop provided in the new hospital building, new open green spaces and play areas for residents to enjoy will, we believe, make this a development that our community can be proud of.

It is early days yet, with the pre-commencement conditions attached to the decision currently being discharged, but I am quietly confident that this development will be a shining example of how effective the allocation of sites in an NDP can be to achieve a thoroughly positive outcome for the parish, with the parish council able to maintain control over the number, style and location of houses within their own community. Surely the single most important part of any NDP?

Incredibly hard work for the parish council and those residents involved in our NDP, but worth every drop of blood, sweat and tears!

Nicola Thomas
Benenden Parish Council Chair





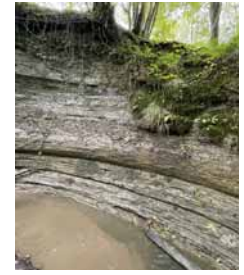
Benenden Ghyll Woodlands Safari

Our large group met at the Pullington stables in early October on a wonderful dry sunny day, the perfect conditions to explore the ghyll woodlands around Benenden. Our destination for the morning was the block of woodland to the north-east of Benenden which sits on Wadhurst Clay and is named on the OS map as Nine Acre Wood. Crossing the field,



we entered the wood and immediately descended the steep slope to the stream at the base of the ghyll, thankful there had been no rain to make the conditions slippery. Different species of fern were growing along the banks of the stream including shield-ferns, buckler ferns and male ferns. The stream had a bed of hard stone peppered with loose stones and rocks, some of which showed the fossilised prints of shells. We walked along the stream to a bend where a very high cliff face was admired. This cliff was mentioned in the 1966 geological memoir for the area where it's described as composed of siltstones, sandstones and shales, as good a demonstration there can be that Wadhurst Clay is not always composed of clay. Different species of bryophytes (mosses and liverworts) were growing on the cliff and these all

seemed to be ones that prefer base rich conditions, including a *Didymodon* moss which had tufa (calcium carbonate) forming on its tiny leaves. We walked back to the stables through the more recently planted open woodland where we found Bristle Club-rush growing along a damp path, a small member of the sedge family just a few inches high.



The afternoon's walk was in a different ghyll further south at Dingledden which sits on the Tunbridge Wells Sand geology. The soils in this ghyll favoured species such as Beech, Yew and Hard Fern that are better suited to cope with the more acidic well drained soils. We ended by visiting the remains of a defunct 20th century concrete dam across the stream which we got to by walking along a more ancient artificial earth bank.

Stephen Lemon

Nature Notes

North American Mink were brought to Britain in the 1920s to be farmed for their fur. Some escaped and others were released by animal rights activists. They have no natural predators in the UK and previous attempts to eradicate them have had limited success.

The Waterlife Recovery Trust, with the help of farmers, landowners and financial donations have developed a trapping system that has been highly effective in East Anglia where the counties of Norfolk and Suffolk have seen no evidence of Mink reproduction during the last two years.

The new target areas now include Kent alongside other south eastern counties and the eradication of Mink from the whole of Britain becomes a realistic dream.

Predation by Mink has caused catastrophic reduction in the population of Water Voles countrywide, and Kingfishers, Moorhens, and ducklings are regularly targeted. Mink are not fussy eaters!

So far, this is a conservation success story. In the Weald, the Upper Beult Farming Cluster has already had considerable success in a pilot project and the scheme will be progressing from there. We are keen to have information in relation to any sightings of which readers may be aware. Please forward details.

Mike Bax
WKPS Chairman



Fig.1



Fig.2

The Devil is in the Detail

Outline planning consent is approval in principle to a development of a site. It may be granted on the basis of 'access only with all other matters reserved' and might include a potential layout of the site to accommodate a certain number of houses. Outline approvals when granted will contain a large number of reserved matters to the permission granted requiring details of these to be submitted and approved. This is the detailed part that, for a FULL application, would have been submitted as part of the original application.

Example: A greenfield site of 0.33ha (0.81acre) located on a single-track rural lane in a hamlet comprising no retail and only one public house. It slopes up from the lane in an east to west orientation.

The Local Planning Authority (LPA) granted outline consent for 5 houses (see Fig.1) and approved the sketch site layout plan relating to access and scale of the development.

An amendment to the scale of Plots 3, 4 & 5 followed, increasing Plots 3 & 4 from 1.5 to 2 storey and Plot 5 from a 1 bed, single storey to a 2 bed, 1.5 storey. The amendment was granted despite valid objections from local residents.

Having achieved the amendment to the approved outline plans for scale and size, a FULL application followed to alter the layout of the site, which was approved by the LPA (see Fig.2).

From outline consent to - the modification of scale and size to - the discharge of the conditions of that consent

to - a FULL consent altering the layout, demonstrates how outline applications evolve and morph into a design from which the developer can viably build out a site.

Currently under construction and therefore devoid of the finishing details of landscaping, it is hard to imagine the final appearance and how it will blend into the landscape and environment.

Of concern will be the two mature oak trees at the lane frontage, whose canopies are very close to jutting-out windows framing the stairwells of Plots 1 & 2. The new occupants may well be inclined to prune such branches back and I think that protection measures will need to be taken ...

Then there'll be the worry of naming the development, will it be a reminder of what was there, I wonder: __ Pastures, __ Meadow, __ View, __ Field, Owl Roost, or maybe worse still, the name of the former owner of the field. It doesn't bear thinking about, but we'll see!

I can't speak for those residents who formerly lived opposite or behind a green field, but I do hope that it has less of an impact than they anticipate.

From experience, I can say that, when this size of build is completed, it is not as visually bad as one first envisaged, what it does bring though, is the noise of people carrying out their lives that wasn't there before.

Peta Grant
 WKPS Planning Secretary

Feed the Birds ...



that garden birds rely on supplementary food at certain times of year more than others. In August, for example, activity on the feeders plummeted; with a bounty of natural food available, the birds simply didn't need to visit. Yet it was a completely different story throughout an incredibly wet September, as many birds would have desperately struggled without our help.

As we now enter winter, shorter days and bitter nighttime temperatures mean the birds not only need more energy to survive, but they have less time to forage for food. Their dependence on bird food is no doubt greatest at this time of year, so it's imperative to keep your feeders well topped up, and a

Feeding garden birds has become one of the most popular hobbies in the UK. As a nation, we spend an estimated £200-300 million every year on bird feeding supplies. Research from the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) shows that our love for this pastime has not only increased the diversity of bird species which visit gardens, but also boosted populations of certain species. One such beneficiary is the Goldfinch. In the UK, their population grew by a whopping 151% between 1995 and 2022. These colourful songbirds were first attracted to gardens by nyjer seed, and now sunflower hearts are a firm favourite.



Contrary to popular belief, both the RSPB and BTO recommend feeding garden birds all year round, including the spring and summer, as natural food can become difficult to find in inclement weather. Using our own feeders outside the shop as a guide, it's evident

fresh supply of clean water for drinking and bathing. Make sure to keep all your feeders clean, too, as this will help prevent the spread of diseases such as Trichomonosis, which is the leading factor in the decline of Greenfinches.

With the growing popularity of feeding garden birds, there is now a massive variety of foods and feeders available. Long gone are the days of stringing monkey nuts together to hang in the garden. Seeds, peanuts and suet remain the three 'staple' foods. To attract the widest variety of birds to your garden, sunflower hearts are the most popular seeds, peanuts may well encourage visits from Great Spotted Woodpeckers, and suet appeals to a wide variety, including the ever popular Long-tailed Tits.

Joe Rawles, Feathers Wild Bird Care
www.featherswildbirdcare.co.uk



Dates for the Diary 2025

Tuesday 29th April | Nightingale Evening, Shadoxhurst

Come and hear the nightingales sing and learn all about these songbirds.

Saturday 17th May | Wild Meadow Safari, Marden Farm

Walk round a private farm to see spring woodland flowers, orchids, and some of the more unusual flowers like Adder's Tongue Fern.

Thursday 5th June | President's Reception/AGM, Boldshaves, Woodchurch

WKPS AGM to dispense with business, followed by a guest speaker and a drinks reception with nibbles in the beautiful old barn.

Saturday 21st and Sunday 22nd June | Wealden Literary Festival, Boldshaves, Woodchurch

Two days of this cultural event with its emphasis on the natural world, commitment to children, community and a vision of getting people outdoors and hands-on to nature, as well as reading and talking about it.

Friday 4th July | WKPS Summer Drinks Party 6-8pm, Cranbrook

We have been invited to a beautiful garden in Cranbrook. This will purely be a social event to come and meet the WKPS team, introduce new members and meet up with old friends.

Saturday 6th September | Ghyll Safari, Dinglefen

Following on from our successful Ghyll Safari this year, we will be visiting a different Ghyll and will explore the delights we find within. Stephen Lemon will be our expert guide.

Mid to late September | Weald of Kent Ploughing Match

WKPS will have a stand at this great event.

Saturday 25th October | Chequer Tree Safari, Shadoxhurst

Learn all about these amazing trees, also known as Wild Service Trees (*Sorbus torminalis*).

They are an ancient woodland indicator, a rare and special habitat. WKPS and Marden Wildlife have been successful in propagating seed from three farms in the Weald and growing these lovely trees.

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

what a wonderful weald

help us keep it that way



wkps

Weald of Kent Protection Society

The aim of our dedicated team of volunteers is to protect our beautiful Wealden towns, villages and countryside from the effects of damaging and unsuitable development, preserving its charm and character for future generations to enjoy. We welcome active members to help us with a range of activities, from scrutinising planning applications to organising events. If, like us, you care about the Weald, please get in touch and get involved.

**find out more: www.wkps.org.uk
secretary@wkps.org.uk 07919 871543**

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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