



wkps

Watch on the Weald

FREE

Newsletter of the Weald of Kent Protection Society

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What a wonderful Weald

Help us keep it that way

65 years of protecting the countryside

WKPS was founded in 1960 by nine very forward-thinking people with a love of the Kent countryside and a rage at what was taking place in Wealden Kent, and in England at large. They sought to protect 240 square miles of Wealden villages and small towns of the, what was then, five rural district councils arbitrarily classed as the Weald of Kent.

The aim then was to protect the rural character of the Kentish Weald and to safeguard the countryside.

WKPS achievements are wide-reaching and cover a multitude of subjects from advertising signs, retention of historic buildings, barn conversions, saving woodlands, the donation of trees to villages, agriculture and the designation of the Low Weald as a Special Landscape Area, to name but a few.

In some cases, the results of our activities are imperceptible because, it's what you can't see, such as: the burial of overhead wires and cables; or, in 1967, the plan to cover 50 square miles of land around Ashford with 300,000 dwellings as a London overspill - the plan was turned down in 1968.

65 years on, these watchwords embrace our philosophy **Connect - Protect - Respect.**

We continue our founders' mission and legacy and invite you to join and help us. Please do visit our newly launched website wkps.org.uk



Wonderful wildflowers to spot in the UK this spring



Some of Plantlife's favourite native and naturalised wildflowers to watch out for on your spring adventures. The days are getting longer; spring is in the air ...

PRIMROSE

The pretty yellow primrose, *Primula vulgaris*, is a favourite, and common sight all over the UK. Its name comes from the Latin, *prima rosa*, which means 'first rose' of the year. While Primroses are not part of the rose family, the name is still apt, as they are early bloomers.

You can see these pale yellow, green-veined flowers from December until May, the flowers are 3cm across, on single stalks. Keep a look out for these wildflowers in woodland clearings, hedge banks, waysides, railway banks and open grasslands.

LESSER CELANDINE

Lesser celandine, *Ficaria verna*, is easily identified with its bright yellow, star-shaped flower that can often blanket the ground.

They can be spotted between February and May. In fact, February is so synonymous with the wildflower



that the 21 February has been known as Celandine Day since 1795. It's said that this was the day when the renowned naturalist Gilbert White noted that the first

celandines usually appeared in his Hampshire village of Selborne. Look out for these bright blooms in woodlands, hedge banks, damp meadows and stream-sides.

STINKING HELLEBORE

The native wildflower stinking hellebore, *Helleborus foetidus*, is one to look out for in the colder months. It has unique drooping cup-shaped pale green or yellowish flowers that stand out against dark green leaves. The name stinking hellebore suggests that it's one you might smell before you spot, but the scent is actually only released if the leaves are crushed.



Keep an eye out for stinking hellebore between February and April. It can be found in woodlands, on walls and roadside verges and is particularly fond of limestone-based soils.

While this plant is a beautiful one to watch out for, it is also one to be cautious around as every part of the plant is poisonous.

DAISY

Daisies, *Bellis perennis*, are a common sight in short grasslands and meadows, blooming between March and September. With spring officially starting on 20 March, you can start to spot the first daisies just as winter ends.

These pretty white and yellow flowers are not just one flower. They're composite flowers, so each bloom is made up of over 100 flowers! Each petal is actually a flower, and the yellow centre is hundreds of tiny little flowers too.

Katie Cameron
plantlife.org.uk



0.1% - Can the Weald do better than this?

In January this year, the draft Kent and Medway Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) was put out for public consultation. Its adoption is planned to recover nature at scale, including in the less obvious areas.

The Strategy aims to restore and increase the area of Species-rich Lowland Meadow, from the shockingly low 27.7ha quoted in the Kent Habitat Survey of 2012, which is less than 0.1% of the county's grasslands. Given the Weald's mostly pH-neutral soils, it's the obvious place for determined action. In addition, our Low Weald grasslands can help reduce the risk of flooding, holding onto flood water safely, with reduced risk of erosion and polluted silts in the rivers.



Wind-borne: Green-winged Orchids in May 2024

Marden Meadow SSSI is our local inspiration. This group of small, wet meadows escaped the post-war agricultural revolution. It's famous for its thousands of Green-winged Orchids. It was seeds from these blowing across from the SSSI and establishing in our fields that started our grassland journey, on fields too small and wet for arable production.

When these first orchids flowered in May 2013, the land was in permanent setaside, under the old EU regime. There was no grass, simply a jumble of fleabane, willow seedlings and docks, given an annual mow to qualify for payment.

Since then, our fields have slowly become species-rich grasslands without the need for bags of seed. We have unrolled seed-rich bales of Marden Meadow hay, we have battled to curb docks and tree seedlings. Above all, we have managed them as species-rich grassland, seasonally grazing them, but mostly curating the natural processes that have magically happened. About two years after the first orchids, the meadows came alive with thousands of pollinating insects as plant species numbers increased. With insects came birds, bats, reptiles and amphibians.



Wind-borne: Adder's Tongue Fern - Lowland Meadow indicator plant.

Our fields are now officially Species-rich Lowland Meadow Priority Habitat, like the SSSI.

We can't hope to replicate the complexity of the SSSI in so short a time, as that's been hay meadow for generations. But these new grasslands are improving over time and can perhaps inspire new ones elsewhere. What's encouraging is that the LNRS promotes this model of natural colonisation, topped up by hay-spreading from good sites, rather than reaching for a grassland seed mixture that's unlikely to be appropriate for the Weald.

Can the Weald do better than 0.1%? Yes - in fact we have already done it. Plenty of room for more though!

Lou Carpenter
Marden Wildlife

Dyer's Greenweed, scarce meadow species. Its heavier seed arrived with hay-spreading.





The abundant diversity of a rich green corridor

Imagine. Just imagine. A rural byway winds and unfolds between banks of flowers and the successive blossoms of blackthorn, hawthorn, elder and dog rose. Traffic is sparse. In winter it is almost deserted and even in mid-summer passing traffic rarely exceeds a dozen a day. Passers-by are even rarer. Almost undisturbed, birds perch, call, rest between nesting or feeding. Clusters of blooming flowers attract swarms of damsel flies and butterflies. Can you picture it?

Since the publication of my article about Biodiversity on the Kent & East Sussex Railway in the November edition of Watch on the Weald, we have received the final report from Adonis Blue, the KWT Consultancy Services. Their Biodiversity Enhancement Plan focuses on advice for managing the variety of habitats along the line, consolidates on 2023's breeding bird and bumblebee surveys and adds the results of the 2024 reptile and butterfly surveys.

In the previous article I reported on the numbers for red- and amber-listed bird species. The new report tells us that the route supports eight birds on the Kent Local Strategy Priority Species list: Corn Bunting, Lapwing, Linnet, Marsh Tit, Nightingale, Turtle Dove, Yellow Wagtail and Yellowhammer. The last, with its 60 territories, is clearly in abundance compared with national decline.

The Bumblebee Conservation Trust's report recorded a final tally of 103 plants (flowers, shrubs and trees) and offered specific advice on managing sections of the line for key species and clear planting advice for enhancing biodiversity and supporting bumblebees at stations. In April, we ran a special train so that the BBCT could help us identify sites for special protection.

2024 was a poor year for butterflies and we only surveyed the line once. Nevertheless, at least 15 species were identified including Priority Species small heath. I know from having walked the line many times with our bird surveyor in 2023 just how much more abundant butterflies can be. That year red admirals were prolific. Our surveyor also noted damselflies and dragonflies: large red damselfly and common blue damselfly; emperor dragonfly, brown hawker, four-spotted chaser, banded demoiselle and ruddy darter. Given the number of lineside ditches and water crossings we know these are abundant. Hence, too, the presence of hobbies.

Reptile surveys produced extremely fertile results. This involved laying mats at all the stations and returning between June and September to count individuals. The predominant species was the slow worm, 34 of which were identified on 28 June - rated as Exceptional. The greatest profusion of slow worms, male, female and

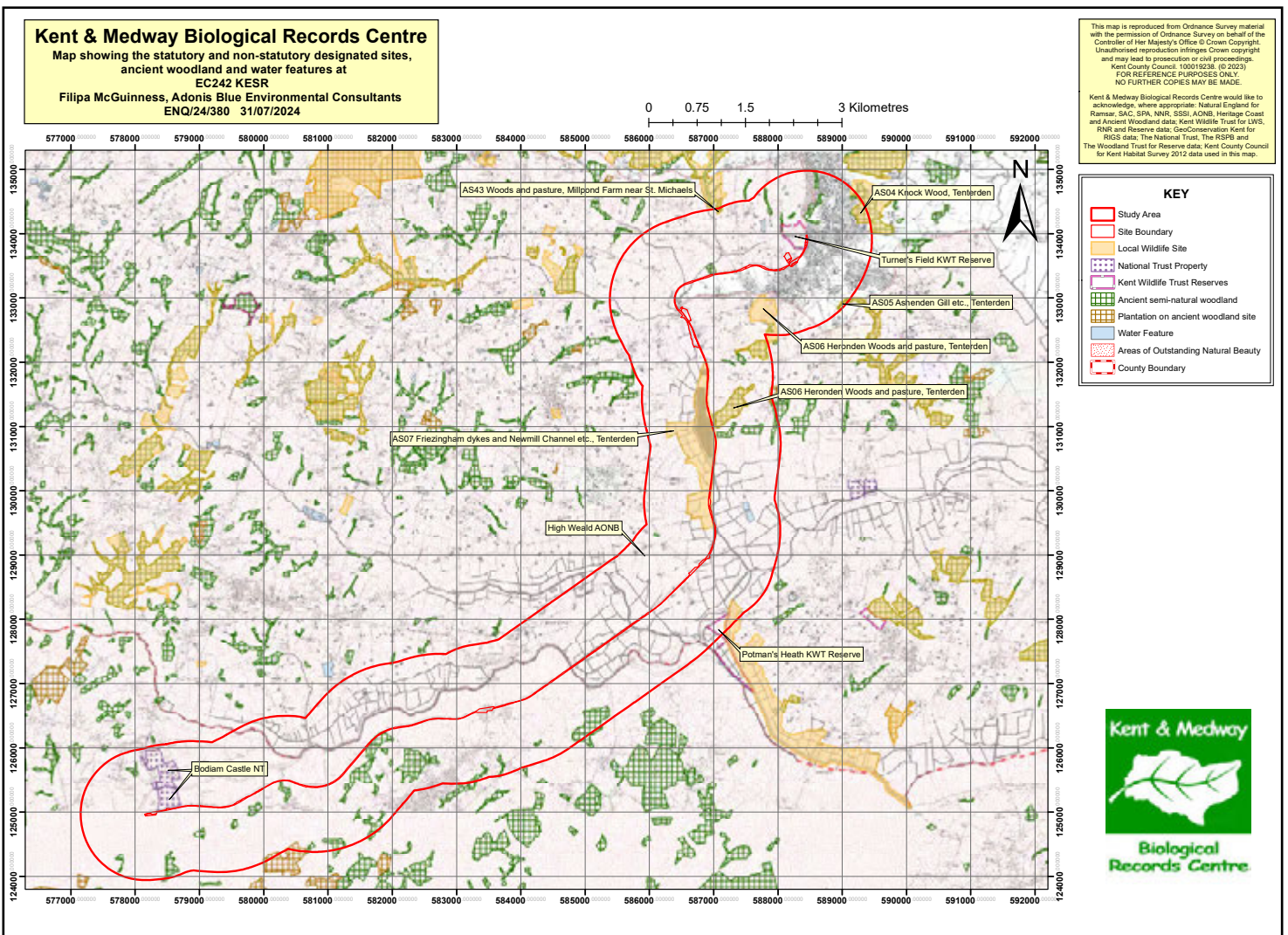


juvenile were found at Rolvenden due to the dense scrub and marginal grassland there. The second most prolific was on the margins of the scrub behind the lesser used up-platform at Northiam. A very small number of grass snakes and lizards were also found.

Independently, one of our supporters, John Sinclair, has begun bat surveys at Tenterden, Wittersham Road and Northiam stations. Common and soprano pipistrelles have been identified at all stations; brown long-eared at Tenterden and Wittersham Road; and noctule bats at Wittersham Road and Northiam. This lends weight to the advice that in addition to bird boxes, many of which are already sited at stations, we should install bat boxes. John has yet to survey Bodiam station, but given the sizeable roosts in the Castle, we should not be disappointed.

In appendices to our report, there are lists of species known to be within 1km of the line including bats and birds and maps which show Priority Habitats within 1km of the line. These help to confirm how the 10.5 miles of railway provides a vital biodiversity corridor.

Keith Barron
Kent & East Sussex Railway





The art of wood craft

Back as far as the Stone Age and beyond, man has used sticks for support. The Victorians favoured walking canes, some adapted as sword sticks and even firearms. Moving to modern times sticks are carried during country pursuits.

I have had Flatcoated Retrievers for over 35 years and usually have a stick of some sort with me when we go for a walk. I retired and closed my business five years ago and having spent my professional life working with my hands, I wanted something to do in the shed. Sticks, I thought, and that was the start of 'Dick's Sticks', as my daughter-in-law christened me.

There are a multitude of materials that can be used. For the stick or shank, I use hazel, chestnut or holly, these need cutting when the sap is down, ideally in December, January and February. One of the challenges is to find a stick that has had honeysuckle growing around it to make a lovely 'Twisty'. Cut shanks need to season for around 12 months, they can then be steamed and any bends straightened out and any knots removed to leave a smooth surface.

The carving of the handle can be the

simplest plain thumb stick to an ornate buffalo or rams horn, or birds and mammals carved in sycamore or lime. The carved tops are finished with either acrylic paint or a spirit stain. Further detailing is carried out using fine v gouges or a pyrography burning pen. I use glass eyes in most of my carvings.

Certain materials are getting hard to source; buffalo horn is no longer imported, and abattoirs can no longer release rams and cow horn. Deer antler has become popular as dog chews.

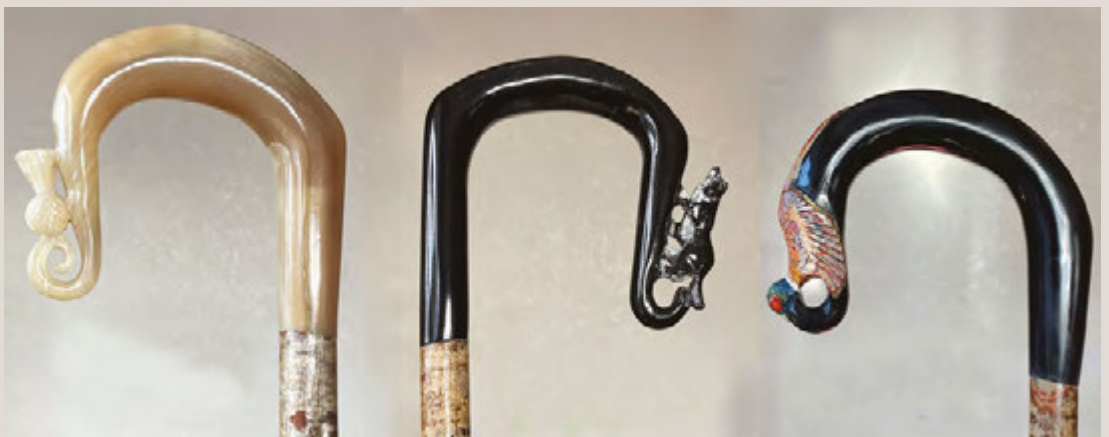
Buffalo and rams horn are the hardest to work, needing a lot of heat and effort to achieve the required shape. The horns are boiled for an hour to get some heat inside; buffalo is solid and takes a lot more heat than rams horn. The horn is fitted in a clamp, heated with a hot air gun on the inside curve until the horn is flexible, then clamps and bolts are used to bend the horn into shape. The bent horn must then be left overnight to cool before the clamps are removed otherwise it will crack if released too early. With the horn in a rough shape, the work now begins to hone and finish.

This hobby is so rewarding and interesting - from walking the woods to find suitable shanks, carving birds or dogs and working buffalo or rams horn. I will never have time to do all of the things I have in my head; I just wish I had started earlier.


Enjoy the countryside, with or without a stick.

Richard Pettett, Dick's Sticks
shotguncartridgecrafts.co.uk

Ornate rams horn, left, and buffalo horn handles



Is it time to change our approach?



In the light of recent government announcements regarding building homes and the likely rate at which developments will be approved in the future, it is time to change our approach and engage with a planning application and/or the developers at an early stage to mitigate the damage to countryside and country life.

We all need to be engaged with the process of an application at an early stage as the likelihood is approval of a development. Perhaps the angle of attack should be on the basis that the development will happen, rather than attempting to have the application refused? Each case on its own merits of course but the fact is that many schemes will be approved because of a Local Planning Authority's (LPA) housing target, and probably its lack of a 5-year housing land supply. WKPS believes that the stance should now be directed towards protection and mitigation with an early input to guide the landscaping, layout, design and wildlife requirements which is something we know a great deal about in the Weald. In other words, if we can't prevent it, we can improve the outcome.

We need to have input into the design and appearance of the houses; the positioning of the homes in relation to existing homes and other buildings; the landscaping; hedge and tree planting and screening; light pollution; the provision of amenity land and habitat provision for wildlife which is found in the locality.

That is not to say we do not still have the perfect right to object strongly to wrong houses in the wrong places and other forms of development such as solar farms and the

like in the High Weald National Landscape but, as we will be faced with developments adjacent to villages in ever increasing numbers we will have little success, I suggest, in objections however valid. Would it not in fact be better to lead on the protection of the Weald through appropriate design, sympathetic landscaping and wildlife protection at the point when an application is submitted, and comments are invited?

Recent housing developments that have had a chance to bed in, shows us that if we engage early enough with landscaping and infrastructure suggestions such as pavement level or 1m high bollard lighting rather than 5m high lighting columns; amenity land; walking and cycle paths where appropriate: an impact - a difference can be made.

The Gladman development of 50 houses in Smarden, which attracted many objections to the principle of building on a greenfield site, after five years, demonstrates the care taken in the attention to detail by Smarden Parish Council in the landscaping, has paid dividends. The repositioning of some of the perimeter houses to ensure they do not overshadow the village hall or existing surrounding houses can improve the impact significantly.

The way forward in the current climate of 'homes will be built here' is to insist on the best possible outcome to protect and enhance the environment of existing settlements.

Sarah Ellison
WKPS Member



Rivers of the Weald: The River Beult

Fig.1

The River Beult drains the Low Weald of Kent, being formed by a number of headwater tributaries located to the east of Ashford which gradually merge via the High Halden and Bethersden Streams to become the main stem of the river at Smarden. From Hadman's Bridge, downstream of Smarden to the river's confluence with the River Medway in Yalding, the river flows gently for about 25km through an agricultural landscape.

This section of the river is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), being one of the best and most valuable lowland river ecosystems of its type in the UK, and the only riverine SSSI in Kent. It is protected because it still supports various habitats, plants and species typical of this kind of river, but modifications over the years spoil its potential, including pollution, impoundment of water by manmade barriers, loss of habitat and increased propensity to flood. Also of major concern is the poor ecological condition of the river with low dissolved oxygen levels and phosphate pollution. The members of the Medway Flood Partnership are committed to the improvement of water management in the catchment.

There are still sections of the river regularly used by the angling community. Many rare insects still persist along with a plant diversity typical of clay rivers. Kingfishers still thrive and the riparian landscape is most attractive with a number of historic features along its course.

The downside is that the channel has been widened and deepened, creating greater flood risk. Boards, weirs

and sluices obstruct the movement of fish, sediment and water and impounded water with low oxygen content harms biodiversity. Weed and algal growth increase with higher pollution levels and the riparian corridor is badly managed.

Obstructions must be removed to alleviate water flow and habitat improvements are required including bankside planting to provide shade. In a number of areas, the channel has been straightened and meanders need to be reinstated to slow the flow alongside regraded banks, natural vegetation and flowing water.

The Environment Agency (EA) produced an improvement plan in 2018 to identify how improvements might be achieved, targeting natural flood management, a healthy fishery, a secure, clean water supply and an attractive resilient landscape.

Natural Flood Management pilots have been in process since 2019 under the guidance of the South East Rivers Trust. Slowing the flow is a fundamental part of the natural processes required to reduce the risk of flooding, alongside which habitats and water quality can be improved to help make the river more resilient to the impacts of climate change.

Then there are the Ecosystem Services which are the benefits people gain from the natural environment. Use of wetlands, leaky woody dams and woodlands will slow the passage of water and therefore provide a benefit to people, i.e. an ecosystem service.

Flood risk has always been a high priority, but ecology and natural processes were also identified for prioritisation.

Current pressures on ecosystem services in the River Beult include lack of trees, lack of bank slope diversity, degraded riparian vegetation, degraded channel vegetation and bank erosion. Also lack of sediment diversity due to dredging work, deepening and widening the channel and the introduction of obstructions to impound water because of the naturally low channel gradient. Uniform flow is the result leading to sediment buildup, vegetation choking the channel and oxygen depletion during low



Fig.2

- Fig.1 Hadman's Bridge
- Fig.2 No summer flow at Romden
- Fig.3 Barely a trickle in the Upper Beult, summer 2024
- Fig.4 Tideline shows winter flow against April

summer flows. All of this could be improved by the introduction of gravel riffles, berms to create channel meanders and barrier removal.

The Medway Flood Partnership Plan, led by the EA produced detailed proposals for seven segments of the river:

- Segment 1 Hadman's Bridge, Smarden to New Bridge at Headcorn
- Segment 2 New Bridge to Stephen's Bridge off Moat Road
- Segment 3 Stephen's Bridge to Hawkenbury Bridge
- Segment 4 Hawkenbury Bridge to Hertsfield Bridge at Cross-at-Hand
- Segment 5 Hertsfield Bridge to Stile Bridge
- Segment 6 Stile Bridge to Cheveney
- Segment 7 Cheveney to the Medway confluence at Yalding

The range of features proposed in the individual segments is impressive with numerous berms, riffles, backwaters, regraded banks and pools all along the course of the river. Clearly a massive project, but one with great potential for the Nature Markets which will hopefully prove attractive for corporate investment.

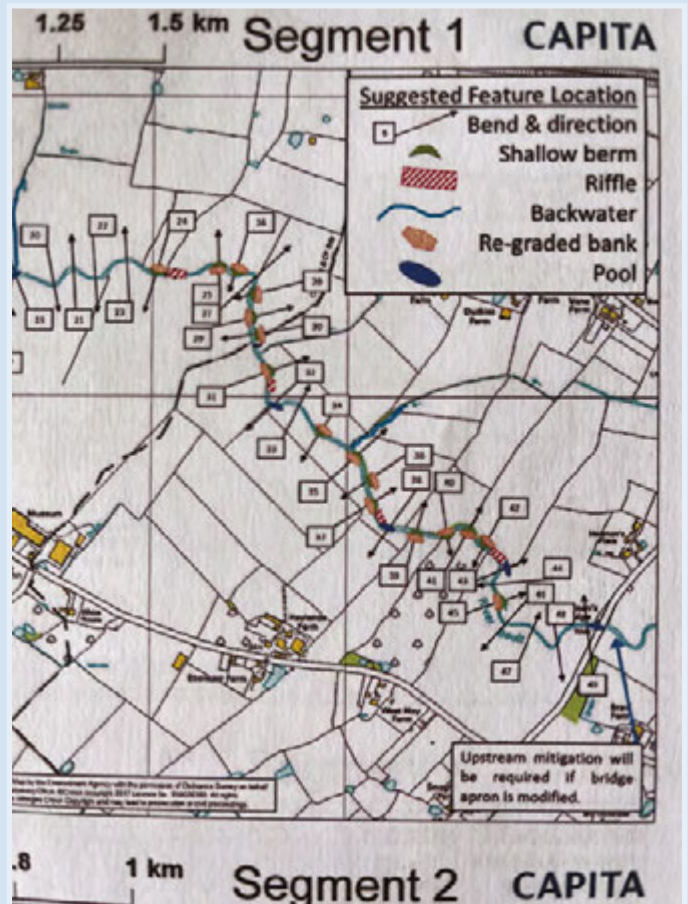
At present, however, this excellent initiative, led by the EA appears to lack momentum.

The pollution of the river

The river now faces an existential threat from pollution by treated sewage farm effluent.

Previous articles have highlighted problems on the River Stour and particularly at Stodmarsh where phosphate levels in the SSSI are now harmful to the Stodmarsh ecosystem. Upgrading of wastewater treatment works infrastructure is promised, but unlikely to come onstream before 2030. As a result of this, there is no capacity for existing wastewater treatment works in Ashford to handle more foul water originally destined for the River Stour.

Accordingly, the proposed massive expansion on the western side of Ashford around Chilmington now has the River Beult in its sights to receive the treated effluent from a new facility at Chilmington Green, effectively sacrificing the River Beult SSSI to save the River Stour's Stodmarsh SSSI.



Permission for the new Chilmington Green Sewage Works was granted on appeal in 2024 and the EA are now tasked with the job of determining the developer's application for a discharge permit to the River Beult.

The EA is now faced with the extraordinary task of deciding if this severe ecological threat should be implemented. A threat, incidentally, recognised unanimously by the Ashford Borough Council Planning Committee in May 2024 resulting in their refusal of the original Chilmington Green Sewage Works application.

The river is formed by its upstream tributaries to the west of Ashford coming together to create the main stem at Smarden where the SSSI designation comes into force. These upstream tributaries are all seasonal streams, i.e. watercourses which regularly dry out in hot summers and climate change is set to deliver more of those. Small changes in water quality can have cascading effects on biodiversity and existing effluent discharges downstream of Smarden are already undermining the very features which led to the River Beult's SSSI designation.

The Chilmington Green Sewage Works is designed to discharge into the top of the High Halden stream close to Chilmington which is itself seasonal - regularly exhibiting sections of dry riverbed and sections of impounded water without flow. These features apply to the entire section of the High Halden stream beyond Bethersden and into negligible flow upstream of Smarden, and yet the application for the discharge permit categorically stated that the watercourse enjoyed continuous flow. Once again, →



→it needs to be stressed that the River Beult is a rain fed river. Yes – flows can be impressive during wet winter weather. In a dry spring flows are minimal, as is already the case at the time of writing on 9th March 2025. By mid-summer those low or no-flow conditions prevail through to autumn.

The developer’s proposal is to discharge around 1,000 cubic metres of treated sewage effluent daily into the High Halden stream!

Protecting Stodmarsh was the right decision, but diverting the decision to the River Beult raises the fundamental question. If such discharges are too damaging for one SSSI, why are they considered acceptable for another?

The EA has a statutory duty under Section 28 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 to take reasonable steps to conserve and enhance the features of SSSI’s.

The proposed treatment system is described as compact and energy efficient. It combines treatment and sludge settlement in one basin with advanced controls to improve performance. But in sensitive environments, its operation is risky and leaves no margin for error. Any failure in automation or precision operation could lead to disastrous untreated or partially treated discharges.

The River Beult, a low-flow river is especially at risk of becoming a stagnant pool of pollutants after floods. Untreated sewage spills introduce harmful pathogens which can cause sickness in livestock and pollution of soil and crops.

The double standard in this case cannot be allowed. The decision to block discharges into the River Stour, in order to protect Stodmarsh SSSI, recognised the serious risk to sensitive ecosystems. Yet, the same logic must be applied for the River Beult. Both are SSSI’s and both are critical ecosystems. Both are at risk from nutrient pollution and effluent discharge.

Approval of the discharge permit would set a dangerous precedent. It would signal that SSSI status offers no meaningful protection against development pressure and at a local level it risks permanent harm to the River Beult which would undo decades of conservation effort and public investment in protecting natural heritage.

Approval of the permit would breach the EA’s legal duties and further weaken public trust in the Government’s commitment to environmental standards. The EA has the power to prioritise long-term ecological health. In this case, will the EA fulfil its mission to protect and improve the environment?

But has the Environment Agency lost its way?

Existing and former EA staff are quoted as saying that over the years they’ve spent less time proactively looking for pollution and more time and effort avoiding attending incidents than actually going to them. By the time water samples were tested at a centralised lab, it was often too late to find out why a river was suffering. Water quality is deteriorating, and they don’t really know by how much, because they have stopped looking. Between 2007 and 2021, the number of prosecutions brought by EA fell from 800 to just 17.

These dynamics accelerated from 2010 with reduced funding despite representations from EA staff to the Government that ‘you get the environment you pay for’. Freedom of information requests show that over 5,000 pollution incidents were attended in 2018 but by 2023 that number had fallen by 36%. In 2023 English water companies discharged untreated sewage nearly half a million times. Vast areas of natural habitat have been degraded or destroyed (in the Weald we all know about the Hoad’s Wood debacle), leaving the UK with some of the lowest measures of biodiversity in Europe.

It is clear that the EA’s technical expertise and calibre of its staff are held in high regard, but there is general agreement that the Agency has been significantly weakened during the past 14 years of Government.

Here in the Weald of Kent, we await with bated breath to see if things will improve under a Labour Government. The Labour Party announced their plan to restore and protect at least 30% of Britain’s natural environment by 2030, alongside the introduction of a Land Use framework, but none of that will be easy with budgetary constraints and burgeoning development ambition. Cleaning up rivers was an electoral issue which commanded near-universal support. The River Beult has acquired a high profile for all the wrong reasons.

Mike Bax
WKPS Chairman



Fig.4

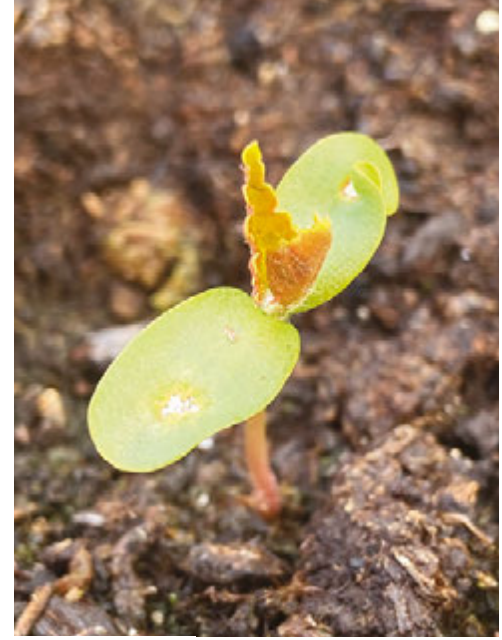


Chequer update: bespoke green shoots of nature recovery

We're growing trees from seeds of this revered local tree, collected from locations across the Weald. Let's remind ourselves why. Chequers (Wild Service, *Sorbus torminalis*) can be bought from tree nurseries everywhere. Most of these will have been raised by large-scale cuttings programmes, where genetically identical trees are raised, many of them sourced from abroad. Growing trees from local seed ensures the maximum chance of genetic diversity of the right type for our area, meaning they should be more resilient to climate change in the future. Westonbirt National Arboretum are doing the same.

When collecting seeds, we have to be careful that the parent trees we select must have a known history - they weren't just bought in from the trade a few years earlier. We are as fussy about provenance as any art dealer looking for a lost Picasso.

The next hurdle is germination. Chequer seed is programmed to germinate after a cold winter, so won't germinate until they've experienced several weeks in low temperatures. Martin Anthony from Woodchurch demonstrated his germination method at the WKPS Chequer Safari in autumn 2023. Martin germinates seeds on dampened paper towels in ziplock bags in the



fridge. This worked well. Seedlings started emerging in March, as predicted by Martin, although there were still seeds germinating as late as November 2024. These latest-germinating seedlings have gone through the winter keeping their tiny leaves.

Earlier-emerging trees grew on well. Anne

Tipples produced some monster specimens from March-germinated plants. By last September's Ploughing Match, she was able to exhibit trees that were over a metre tall. She'd dosed their compost with fungal-rich woodland soil, which we believe explained their prolific growth. Many future trees owe their lives to a spell in Judy Taylor's fridge.

We're now moving to the next phase. Most trees are currently (February 2025) sitting in small pots. They're showing fat green terminal buds, so are poised for action. We are planning a new facility to accommodate their adolescence at a secure Marden location, where we hope to grow the trees on so that we are able to send them out into the wider world next winter. We hope to introduce Marden trees to Shadoxhurst and plant Shadoxhurst trees here, and elsewhere. KCC's Plan Tree are providing compost to help feed our babies. We hope they will live to be a credit to their parents - and their foster parents.

Lou Carpenter
Marden Wildlife



Teachings from the very distant past (868AD)

A human being is made only of non-human elements. To protect humans, we have to protect the non-human elements - the air, the water, the forest, the river, the mountains, and the animals.

The 'Diamond Sutra', the world's oldest dated printed scroll, is the most ancient text about how to respect all forms of life on earth, the animals, vegetation, and also minerals.

We have to remove the notion of human as something that can survive by itself alone. Humans can survive only with the survival of other species. This is exactly the teaching of the Buddha, and also the teaching of deep ecology.

Extract from 'the heart of the buddha's teaching' by Thich Nhat Hanh

Nature notes

We are just going into the wild garlic season. Wild garlic is also known as ramsons and at the time of writing (early March) the leaves of this plant are just beginning to appear on the woodland floor.

An interesting feature of the Weald of Kent is that wild garlic is prolific in the High Weald where soils are generally better drained and less acidic. On the heavy cold clay of the Low Weald wild garlic is quite unusual but the woodland floors of both High and Low Weald can be smothered in white flowering plants during late March and early April. In the High Weald it is the wild garlic flowers with their slender pointed white petals. In the Low Weald it is wood anemone with the delightful feature of the flowerheads following the sun during the passage of a day.



Both plants are ancient woodland indicators and don't forget that a woodland will be designated as 'ancient' if it has persisted in a place since 1600. You will of course find ancient woodland indicators in areas where the woodland has been lost, but the ground flora is hanging on by its fingernails.

Wild garlic is widely foraged, but do so gently. Wild garlic pesto is a real treat. It is high in vitamins A and C as well as iron and calcium, and so the plant deserves real respect.

Mike Bax
WKPS Chairman



Spring feathers

As we enter March, there are more than a few signs of the changing seasons, as we leave behind us the cold, dark, wet weather and welcome a brighter, drier and warmer spring (hopefully!). There are many harbingers of spring, but for me it's the birdsong; after months of quiet, the sound of a dawn chorus ignites within me a feeling of joy and hope. Here in the UK, we have many beautiful 'songsters', and often it's the plainer birds who have the sweetest songs. Skylarks, Dunnocks and Wrens are prime examples of typical 'little brown jobs' who more than make up for their lack of colour with their stunning song, but in my opinion it's the Blackbird who takes the crown. They usually start singing in February, often perched high up somewhere in an exposed location from where their voice will travel furthest. You may



from their location, giving the Jay an opportunity to work out where potential nests are to predate.

The best-known mimic in the UK is perhaps the Starling. In captivity, these incredibly intelligent birds have even been taught to talk. Here in Salehurst, I have heard the local Starlings mimicking Ducks, Swallows and Buzzards, but they will echo almost anything they hear around them. It is believed the more variation in a male Starling's repertoire, the more attractive they are to a potential mate.

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

think all Blackbirds sound the same, but individuals have an incredibly varied repertoire. In fact, Blackbirds are excellent mimics, sometimes infusing their songs with copies of other sounds in the area. Last year, one male Blackbird confused members of Thames Valley Police at their station in Bicester as he regularly mimicked the sound of a siren, leading them to believe perhaps their cars were faulty.

Blackbirds aren't the only British bird known to mimic other sounds; most members of the Corvid family are also excellent mimics. I have myself been caught out by a Jay; believing there was a Buzzard somewhere close by, I stood outside with my camera at the ready, only to witness a Jay flying low overhead performing an almost perfect copy of a Buzzard's 'mewing' call. Springwatch also once featured a recording of a Jay mimicking a Tawny Owl, which had even been confusing their experts. One theory for this behaviour is that by mimicking a predator, small birds may be scared



Watch on the Weald magazine advertising rates

For the first time, the Weald of Kent Protection Society is offering advertising space within our membership magazine. This new opportunity allows local businesses and organisations to promote your business and connect directly with our dedicated membership, all while supporting the vital work we undertake.

The WKPS Watch on the Weald magazine is included in part of the Wealden Advertiser's distribution which covers a wide area including retail, commercial premises and households. The magazine reaches over 8,000 households in the Weald of Kent including all WKPS members.

Our magazine is distributed three times a year in spring, summer and autumn, and reaches a passionate readership of members who care deeply about the Weald's unique landscape and wildlife. By advertising with us, you will gain access to a highly engaged demographic who are invested in the future of the Weald of Kent.

This initiative not only provides a platform to publicise your business but also contributes directly to the ongoing work of the society to connect people to the local environment, protect the unique character of the Weald and respect, honour and celebrate our rich local heritage, ancient past, present and future.

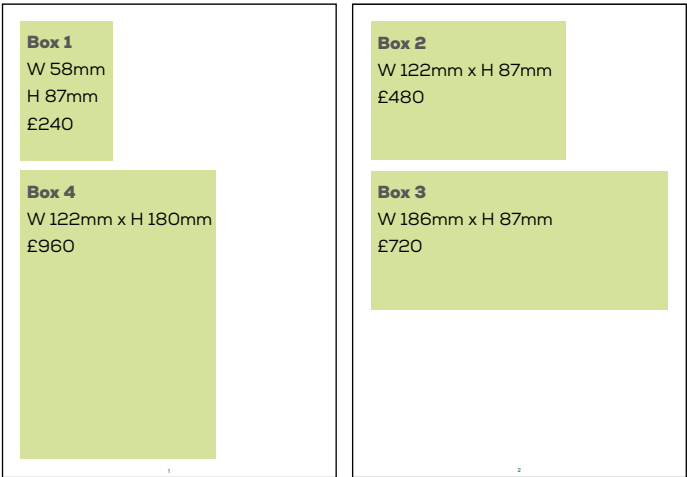
Watch on the Weald is an A4 full colour magazine. We are offering a range of advertising options to suit different needs and budgets. For further details on advertising rates and specifications, please contact:

Naomi Scott-Mackie
advertising@wkps.org.uk

OUR RATES as at March 2025

Prices are shown below - one set of rates covers three issues.

- Box 1** £240 W 58mm x H 87mm
- Box 2** £480 W 122mm x H 87mm
- Box 3** £720 W 186mm x H 87mm
- Box 4** £960 W 122mm x H 180mm



Dates for the diary 2025

Tuesday 29th April | Nightingale Evening, Shadoxhurst

Come at 6pm for drinks and nibbles on the patio with an introductory talk about Nightingales. Followed by a few hours walking through ancient woodland, a natural habitat for these songbirds, and listening to them sing. Suitable footwear is necessary.

Saturday 17th May | Wild Meadow Safari, Marden Farm

Gather at 2pm to walk round a private farm to see spring woodland flowers, orchids, and some of the more unusual flowers like Adder's Tongue Fern. Ending with refreshments and a chance to question the experts. See article on page 3.

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

Commencing at 7pm for the WKPS AGM, followed by a guest speaker and then a drinks reception with nibbles in the beautiful old barn to celebrate the 65th anniversary of WKPS.

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. For tickets and further information www.wealdenliteraryfestival.co.uk

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

We have been invited to beautiful gardens in Cranbrook. This will purely be a social event to celebrate 65 years of WKPS activity. Come and meet the WKPS team, introduce new members and meet up with old friends.

Saturday 6th September | Ghyll Safari, Dingledean

Saturday 13th September | Weald of Kent Ploughing Match

Saturday 25th October | Chequer Tree Safari, Shadoxhurst

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

The views expressed in the articles reflect the author(s) opinions and are not necessarily the views of WKPS. The published articles and all other content is published in good faith. Watch on the Weald cannot guarantee and accepts no liability for loss or damage of any kind caused by any content. Content may not be, either partially or in whole, reprinted or reproduced without written consent.



wkps

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