



# 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

## Neighbourhood development plan policies and planning obligations set aside in favour of developer profit

It was over a year ago now that I last wrote an article in this magazine, extolling the virtues of an 'Effective Neighbourhood Development Plan' which requires 'courage and teeth'.

Well, just about a year later, we had those teeth shockingly and painfully extracted from our Benenden Neighbourhood Development Plan (BNDP) when a decision was issued by The Planning Inspectorate to allow an appeal by the landowners and developers (Hestia Homes Ltd) to build 22 new homes on a site close to the centre of our village, located in the High Weald National Landscape (HWNL).

At first glance, this would appear to comply with the government cries of 'build, baby, build', with the usual NIMBYs objecting to houses being built in an attractive and beautiful location where no one else should be allowed to live except the current residents.

How wrong this assumption would be. This was an allocated site for housing development in our NDP, we wanted these houses built. Volunteers in our village worked tirelessly alongside the parish council to compile our NDP, allocating sites which we believed would achieve a positive outcome for the parish - but the central ethos of our NDP was based on our ability to put policies in place that would ensure that any new housing development would also have to provide the requisite number of affordable homes, allowing young and old the opportunity to stay in the community. This site has now come forward with NO AFFORDABLE HOUSING provision.

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Our NDP was centred around the allocation of four sites in the village, providing around 125 new homes, to include approximately 45 affordable homes. No nimbysism involved here, with the plan supported by 81% of residents at the NDP referendum.

Out of these four sites, three have come forward and are currently being built out, complying with the policies in our NDP and providing the affordable housing required. This fourth site for 22 new homes has proved more controversial. The developers initially put forward a scheme which incorporated nine affordable homes in a block of flats designed in the vernacular style - so far so good. However, the Housing Officer at the Council highlighted at a very early stage that flats would not be desirable to Registered Providers, and that having a smaller number of units as terraced or semi-detached homes would be better suited to this rural setting. The parish council also agreed with this advice, but it was ignored by the developer, and some months later a viability assessment was produced by the developer which 'proved' that the site was unviable, and the affordable home element of the scheme would have to be ditched.

The review of the viability assessment by the Council's consultants initially refuted the evidence for unviability stating, 'we consider that an alternative affordable housing outcome than that submitted by the application (nil AH) needs to be considered here ... the scheme appears to have potential to support a fully policy compliant level of AH'. Crucially this advice was ignored not only by the developer, but also the planning officers at the Council, who made no request to the developer to redesign the scheme taking into account the consultants and Housing Officers comments. The parish council repeatedly made forceful requests for compliance with our NDP policy for the provision of on-site affordable housing, but these were also continually ignored.

Finally, without any prior consultation with the parish council, the planning officer put the application forward to the Planning Committee with a recommendation for approval, for a scheme that a) provided no on-site affordable housing; b) did not comply with BNDP policies; c) did not comply with TWBC's strategic development policy for Benenden. However, despite the officer's recommendation, and buoyed by a strong case put forward by the parish council, the committee members unanimously agreed to refuse the application, with some members advising the applicant to 'go away and redesign the scheme'.

The landowner and developer then appealed this decision. The Inspector for the case called an informal hearing in order that he could ascertain what he concluded was the main issue being '... whether the proposal would provide an appropriate mix of housing, with particular regard to affordable housing provision' stating that the borough has a high need for affordable housing; and that it is an important local issue and a key priority of the BNDP.

In short, the proposal did not do this; nevertheless, the Inspector was convinced by the developer's argument that the site was too expensive to develop with any affordable homes included. There was no push back for an alternative, viable proposal.

So, there it is, our NDP policies have been pushed aside, Tunbridge Wells officers have ignored their own planning policies, and now 22 new homes will be built in a prime location in our village with no affordable housing provision in one of the most affluent areas in the country, paradoxically exactly where affordable housing is needed most.

The landowner and developer must be laughing all the way to the bank ... whilst the parish receives almost no benefit from a housing development.

**Nicola Thomas**  
**Benenden Parish Council Chair**



# Red Alert

In October 2025, the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland published a new Vascular Plant Red List, the first for 20 years. This is a worrying report, there are bleak messages about the Weald's special plants. Although some are doing fine, others are suddenly threatened.

Why are so many wildflowers on the brink? The reason is usually reduction in habitat range. We farmers are in the front line of this: balancing the competing needs of food production and the environment, as well as staying in business. Bank managers take a dim view if the overdraft is not repaid - 'but look at my Dyer's Greenweed!' And in an uncertain world needing national food security, there's not much meat on a Green-winged Orchid.

The Weald is still a landscape of niche habitats. In our woods, meadows and wet lands, there are still plant species in these hidden areas which may have been lost elsewhere. Because they've been lost elsewhere, it's now vital to protect and try to extend their range.

Take, for example, our own wet woodland. Once an impenetrable willow and thorn tangle, with little apparent life, sensitive restoration has meant that red-listed plants have sprung back into life within the first year of thinning. We now have eight of these species. Seven of these were deemed 'Least Concern' in 2005. How many other Weald sites in our pond-spangled landscape could do the same? Where plant diversity is thriving, so are invertebrates and birds.

Our Weald Meadows maintain some of these suddenly-threatened plants too. Twenty years ago, the Red List deemed both Dyer's Greenweed and Pepper Saxifrage to be of 'Least Concern'. Now these two have jumped straight to 'Endangered', leapfrogging over lesser categories of 'Near Threatened' and 'Vulnerable'. There are only two further stops beyond 'Endangered' - 'Critically Endangered' and 'Extinct'. Our Green-winged orchids remain in the 'Near Threatened' category they were placed in 20 years before. No improvement, but their rate of decline has slowed.

Our habitat niches can't yield an economic wheat crop, but our grasslands help produce lamb, beef, flood mitigation and carbon sequestration. There are unfarmable areas on all our Weald farms meaning they could tackle the biodiversity and the climate crisis, provided there's recognition that to do this effectively, there's a cost involved with providing this public benefit, which shouldn't be entirely shouldered by farmers.

**Lou Carpenter**  
**Marden Wildlife**



Still Near Threatened - Green-winged Orchid



From Least Concern to Vulnerable - Trifid Bur-Marigold



From Least Concern to Endangered - Dyer's Greenweed



Still Vulnerable to Extinction - Water Violet

# Is the Weald losing its cheese?

No, that's not a misprint, and it refers to what some of Kent's oldest folk will recognise as part of the song of the Yeldring. It may also ring a bell with those who grew up with their nose in Enid Blyton books as it was she who popularised the almost universally known 'Little-bit-of-bread-and-no-cheese' song of the Yellowhammer.

But yes, they have suffered a steep decline in Kent over the last 50 years, along with the rest of the country. This once common farmland bird has been one of the species hardest hit by the introduction of intensive agriculture. As hedgerows were systematically removed to create bigger, machinery-friendly fields they were deprived of nest sites. Next followed the change to autumn-sown cereals that meant no stubble fields were left with spilt seeds to sustain them through the winter. Further loss of seeds and insects from chemical sprays followed to hammer them (pun intended) reducing their little-bit-of-bread too. The rate of the hitherto 70% population decline, and disappearance from 23% of the country has only slowed, not stopped, but we now know enough to begin reversing it.

Many small fields of the Low Weald have retained the yellowhammers' basic requirement of low hedges and insect-rich vegetation associated with the damp ditches in the flat, flood-prone landscape. Sensitive hedgerow management for nesting is a first step and farmers are now paid to leave a broad field margin that will provide the insect and plant life to feed the young of all species.

However, even Blyton's Famous Five would soon spot that if only half of all yellowhammers survive each winter (mainly due to starvation) the mystery of the disappearing Yeldrings can be solved by providing over-winter food for them in the form of a seed-rich

crop left in the ground, eked out with additional seed put down nearby as the crop becomes exhausted. And a not-so Secret Seven landowners around Marden have shown that this solution works.

On frosty, sunny days, fields sown with winter bird seed sometimes display a blizzard of bright yellow birds (plus flocks of 'little brown jobs') just as over-winter stubble fields would have had in the past. The additional lifeline of seed strewn alongside fields during the January to March 'hungry gap' enabled us to trap and add colour rings to yellowhammers to track them by sight (captured on cameras) around the area. Not only did we find the birds were moving from farm to farm, hoovering up the food to keep them alive, but now in its seventh year, the study is regularly recording birds known to have survived well beyond the three years thought to be the norm.

For a bird dubbed scribble lark by poet John Clare - after the pattern of scribbled lines on its eggs - it's good that carefully scribed evidence suggests things are beginning to look up for birds in the Weald.

**Ray Morris**  
**Marden Wildlife**

Yellowhammer photograph: Darren Nicholls





# Chilmington Green appeal decision - explained

Chilmington Green is a major housing site on the south west edge of Ashford, stretching from the busy A28 into the surrounding countryside of the eastern Weald. Rather than being a standard housing estate, it is planned as a whole new settlement, with thousands of homes alongside schools, community facilities, parks, and new roads.

When outline planning permission was granted in 2017 for up to 5,750 homes, it came with a Section 106 agreement, dated 27 February 2017. This is essentially a legally binding deal between the developer and the councils, designed to make sure that the new community would be properly supported. It sets out obligations such as road improvements, schools, affordable housing, green spaces, community facilities, and guarantees to ensure essential infrastructure is delivered. In short, it is the framework that allows the housing to be built sustainably.

In 2023, the developer applied to vary 122 of these obligations. They contended that rising construction costs, inflation, and higher interest rates had made some commitments difficult to meet. Both Ashford Borough Council and Kent County Council opposed most of the proposed changes, stressing that these obligations were still essential to protect the community, ensure roads are upgraded, and safeguard public funds.

On 15 January 2026, the Planning Inspectorate issued its decision. The Inspector's role was to consider whether each obligation continued to serve a useful planning purpose and whether it remained necessary to make the development acceptable in planning terms. After reviewing all 122 requests, the Inspector concluded that the key infrastructure obligations must remain. This includes completing the A28 road improvements, providing the financial guarantees to secure that work, and ensuring land and funding for schools, including a primary school, are delivered. Requirements for affordable housing and the long-term management of the new community also continue to apply.

In short, the decision keeps the core framework of roads, schools, affordable housing, and community management largely intact. While a few peripheral rules have been relaxed, the foundations for the Chilmington Green development remain secure. The Appeal decision highlights the important role of Ashford Borough Council and Kent County Council. Their careful scrutiny of the developer's proposals helped ensure that essential infrastructure and community safeguards continue to be delivered for local residents. Maintaining these obligations supports consistency in major development decisions.

**John Crawford**  
**WKPS**

## An invitation from One Weald - fancy a walk on the wild side?

Shakespeare tells us: 'Summer's lease hath all too short a date ...' Make the most of it this year. Join some of our Weald meadow days, exploring these lovely grasslands. Learn how rare and full of life they are, and how they function to increase local biodiversity and mitigate against climate change. They're a fundamental part of the Weald's landscape. See the different flowers, bees, butterflies, and how they vary across the season. Although the plants in Weald grasslands are similar, every meadow is different. It's these similarities and differences which are so fascinating. You can visit all the sites below this summer.

When planning this series of events, we thought of having a single designated day for meadow owners to open their gates across the Weald but decided instead to stretch this across several weeks. Each meadow selected has different highlights at different points in the summer. It gives meadow owners the opportunity to see each other's sites too, and to learn what works for them. There's nothing as useful to us farmers as walking round good sites to see if you can up your game. Even if it makes us (grass) green with envy!

We start in April, which is early - we hope for early orchids, so fingers crossed the weather warms up.

- 25 April**     **Marden**
- 9 May**       **Lake House, Frittenden**
- 13 June**     **Shadoxhurst, 10.30-1pm**
- 19-20 June** **National Meadows Conference, Kew Wakehurst Place**
- 4 July**       **National Meadows Awareness Day**

Further dates and details will be released as this initiative unfolds. Please keep an eye on social media posts from WKPS and Marden Wildlife and WKPS website for details and bookings. These are donation only events on the day, and bookings are purely so that we can keep you informed of details as to where and when.



spreads through bird tables, feeders and baths. Other species such as Blue Tits, Great Tits and Great Spotted Woodpeckers have benefited from the ability to access a ready source of food all year round - surely a positive story? However, these increases in populations, they said, could be to the detriment of other species like Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers and Willow Tits, which rarely utilise bird feeders, and might find themselves bullied out of potential nest sites by the other more dominant species. They then stated these are far from the only issues facing bird populations in the UK - the biggest driver of biodiversity loss in the UK is intensive agriculture and forestry,

A subject that has been hitting the news again recently is whether feeding garden birds is doing more harm than good. It was discussed on BBC Winterwatch (series 14: episode 3) this year - a very honest, open discussion between Chris Packham and Jack Baddams. Unfortunately, as is often the case with the media, the story has spiralled, with headlines such as 'Chris Packham warns UK might need to stop feeding birds'. This however isn't an accurate reflection of what was a very insightful piece. So, what was discussed, and what is the right thing to do? The two greatest concerns with feeding birds are the spread of disease, and the species imbalance that feeding birds causes. For example, Greenfinch numbers have plummeted by over 60% in the last 20 years, with little doubt that feeding birds has contributed greatly to this decline, as the species is susceptible to a parasite called trichomoniasis which



while domestic cats kill an estimated 55 million birds a year. We also heard them acknowledge the positives of feeding birds: how it connects people with nature and can even provide a boost to people's mental health. Their conclusions? Chris Packham is continuing to feed his birds, ensuring his feeders are cleaned often, and removed for a couple of months if any sick birds are visiting. Jack Baddams has stopped putting out 'artificial' food but continues to provide for his birds through wildlife-friendly gardening. I strongly believe that a combination of these two methods - putting food out for the birds (so long as it is done the right way), as well as wildlife-friendly gardening - is beneficial to both the birds and to us humans who enjoy watching them.



**Joe Rawles, Feathers Wild Bird Care**  
[www.featherswildbirdcare.co.uk](http://www.featherswildbirdcare.co.uk)

# Kent and Medway Local Government reorganisation: then and now

Kent has not experienced restructuring on this scale since 1 April 1974, when central government reorganised county and district councils under the Local Government Act 1972. That reform created the two-tier system of county and borough councils and reshaped how services were delivered and communities represented.

Central government now proposes replacing Kent County Council, Medway Council, and twelve borough councils, including Ashford Borough Council, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, and Maidstone Borough Council, with a smaller number of large unitary authorities.

Each unitary authority would take responsibility for all services currently delivered by county councils and borough councils, including planning, housing, social care, highways, and waste. The government suggests that unitary authorities could simplify governance, reduce duplication, and manage budgets more efficiently.

Options include a single unitary authority for Kent and Medway or several unitary authorities covering defined areas. In both models, decision making would shift from multiple local councils to fewer, larger bodies, altering the way communities engage with local government. For residents of the Weald, which spans several council areas, these proposals could sharply reduce local democracy, as decisions on planning, services, and community priorities would be made by more distant authorities.

Larger unitary authorities are likely to focus on urban centres, making parish councils, local members, and area-based committees key in representing rural communities. Parish councils would continue to play a role in planning and service delivery, contributing to the expression of local priorities across the Weald's shared landscape, environment, and heritage under the new unitary authority structure.

*John Crawford*  
**WKPS**

## The critical importance of our Wealden woodland

'The application was refused because of environmental impacts on designated ancient woodland and landscape.'

'The court agreed that the planning inspector had failed properly to assess the likely effect that the development would have on the ancient woodland.'

This is a familiar soundbite for those of us at the heart of WKPS' unceasing efforts to protect the Weald from unsympathetic and destructive development. Yet, all too often, out-of-area planning inspectors with Government housing targets ringing in their ears and no engagement with the Weald fail to attach sufficient importance to the unique ancient woodland habitat that is and has always been the Weald's core feature. The clue is of course in the name (Wald = forest). In mediaeval times the name was Andredes weald, or 'Andred's forest', Anderida being the Roman name for Pevensey.

So, one way or another, the historical importance of this stretch of ancient wooded landscape is undeniable. There is nothing quite like it anywhere else in the country. Woodland covers 23% of today's Weald, an area of about 500 square miles, 85 miles from east to west and about 30 miles from north to south. It is historically a patchwork of largely coppiced woodland harbouring farmsteads and homesteads in relatively small discrete communities in the Wealden towns and villages. Over the centuries this rural

landscape has proved capable of gradually assimilating more human habitation, but in the current frenzy to build more houses the imposition of large new conurbations, not unusually of upwards of 250 houses at a stroke, is wholly out of scale and devastating environmentally. It is also irresponsible in terms of adequacy of resources, as the recent debacle over water supplies across Kent and Sussex has amply demonstrated. Planning inspectors do not take their instructions from WKPS or its members, but we should, when the need arises, take every opportunity to let them know how much we value this ancient and unique habitat that is at the heart of the Weald's ecosystem, and that, once destroyed, it is gone for ever. Nor is it an adequate response to assert, as developers do, that an ancient woodland destroyed here can be satisfactorily replaced by planting a new wood of similar size elsewhere: that is not how ecosystems work, nor how our most ancient ones should be valued!

It remains WKPS' position that it is against the interests of the Weald for the Low Weald to have a lesser designation of protection from development than the High Weald; and that, consistent with our position on this in other contexts, the Weald is indivisible, should be given the highest protective designation throughout, and should be valued in planning terms as One Weald.

*Peregrine Massey*  
**WKPS President**

# Looking after the poor relation

National Landscapes play a custodial role which is important and should involve local communities and land managers/farmers. The custodial approach must respect that the Weald as a whole is a living, working landscape and that nature, structural and cultural aspects need to reflect both historic and current situations. Activities of land managers and farmers in delivering landscape are valued across the Weald as a whole and ambitions in the National Landscape must not undermine the vitality of One Weald beyond the designated area.

The ambition of the National Landscape must be matched by a willingness to work with land managers and farmers outside the national landscape to deliver outcomes that are worthy of One Weald as a whole. Greater focus on National Parks and National Landscapes in meeting Government targets encourages them to seek to increase their influence beyond existing governance boundaries. That may help in preventing the sacrifice of landscapes outside designated areas. There are some exceptional extensively managed grasslands outside the designated area which have been ignored for too long. The species rich grasslands of One Weald need to be celebrated in the round. Legal protection for such sites is not a solution. A collaborative approach to identify appropriate management and the potential costs involved would be far more constructive. Engagement with land managers and farmers must respect the time and cost which has to be incurred and acknowledge that many of the required measures rely on their involvement.

Wherever we are, protection is not the best basis for conservation. We need action led by evidence. For example, the legal protection of the water vole over many years did not improve its conservation status - it is the recent efforts of the Waterlife Recovery Trust, which have done that, well supported by the National Landscape financially, in controlling water voles' main predator, the American mink, alongside habitat provision. The irony is that the financial support in the National Landscape is not available over the Weald as a whole and the mink strongholds are in the watercourses outside the designated area.

We hear of 'Champion Species' for National Landscapes. All well and good, but such species will have no regard for lines of definition on maps. Note the recent research of Marden Wildlife in relation to Turtle Doves using one area to breed and/or roost, and other areas to feed. Turtle Doves thrive in One Weald wherever habitat is suitable - not in a specific landscape area. There will also be a trade-off between access, ambition and nature recovery. Nature generally does not enjoy disturbance.

One Weald is the product of thousands of years of interaction between people and nature. If focus on conservation of the quality and character of the landscape is too great, the clock gets stopped and limits the ongoing active and adaptive interaction of people, nature and landscape. The landscape cannot be taken at a point in time without recognising that it is a living entity which must naturally evolve.

It is right to respect and maintain historic heritage which reflects the working nature and evolution of the landscape. Measures need to be in the form of guidance rather than prescription and involve collaboration with land managers/farmers. There is a need for better recording of local history, identifying oral histories and documentation of local traditions, to recognise the contribution of the land management sector that will apply across One Weald as a whole.

Good access for the community to One Weald relies on farmers and land managers being the rural host. Marginalising these groups in decision making is one thing but the same concerns apply in marginalising the Low Weald from the High Weald. A top-down approach to traditional landownership and generational farmers is dangerous. Efforts to influence legitimate and evidenced land management practices need to understand the far-reaching impact such changes may have in pursuit of nature recovery and today's objectives. Once the traditional practices and way of life have gone, they are gone for good.

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





## Wild Service Tree (Chequer) update



Mike Bax is a Vice Patron of the Future Trees Trust - a charity which has been working for more than three decades to change the way we think about our woodlands. The mission brings together research and decades of practical forestry experience and the goal is simple, yet vital - to create healthier, more resilient trees - and make those improved trees available for woodland creation projects and the timber industry. This work is essential to reducing reliance on imported hardwoods and supporting a thriving sustainable forestry sector here in the UK. Strong thriving woodlands are the backbone of a sustainable future as improved trees capture more carbon, support biodiversity and provide high quality timber that strengthens local supply chains.

So far as the Kentish Weald is concerned, Chequer enthusiasts in the area will be in regular dialogue to protect the provenance of the local Chequers which have flourished in the Wealden Forest for thousands of years. Wild Service is an ancient woodland indicator species which produces fruit that is excellent food for native wildlife, and although it is rare at the moment, interest in the species from UK forestry is increasing. Nursery production of Wild Service increased by 56% in 2025 compared to 2024, and it is becoming a popular species for woodland diversification planting.

The Future Trees project, which is funded by the Forestry Commission, involves selecting excellent Wild Service trees in the wild from across its native range in the UK which are known as 'plus trees'. These trees exhibit excellent form and growth, indicating quality genetics which we would like to replicate. These plus trees are then climbed, and some of the extension growth, known as scions, are collected for clonal propagation. Future Trees Trust researcher Ollie Stock visited Moat Farm, Shadoxhurst this January with a tree climbing team, kicking off the work on the project to improve the seed supply of Wild Service tree to UK markets.

The trees climbed at Moat Farm will be part of a grafting pilot, where the effectiveness of grafting is tested as a key method of propagation. Grafting has varying levels of effectiveness with different broadleaf species, but good rates of success are expected with Wild Service. Propagation using cuttings is also trialled, which has advantages over grafting, but generally has lower success rates. Using grafting or cuttings allows us to grow a genetically identical tree to the selected plus tree, which would not be possible if we collected seeds.

Both of these methods mean that clones of our mature plus trees can be grown together in a seed orchard, which is the ultimate goal of this project. It is hoped that this seed orchard, which will be located in Oxfordshire, will go on to produce high quality, resilient, and genetically diverse seed for the future forests of the UK.

**James Macintyre**  
**Future Trees Trust**

# Searching for some firebacks

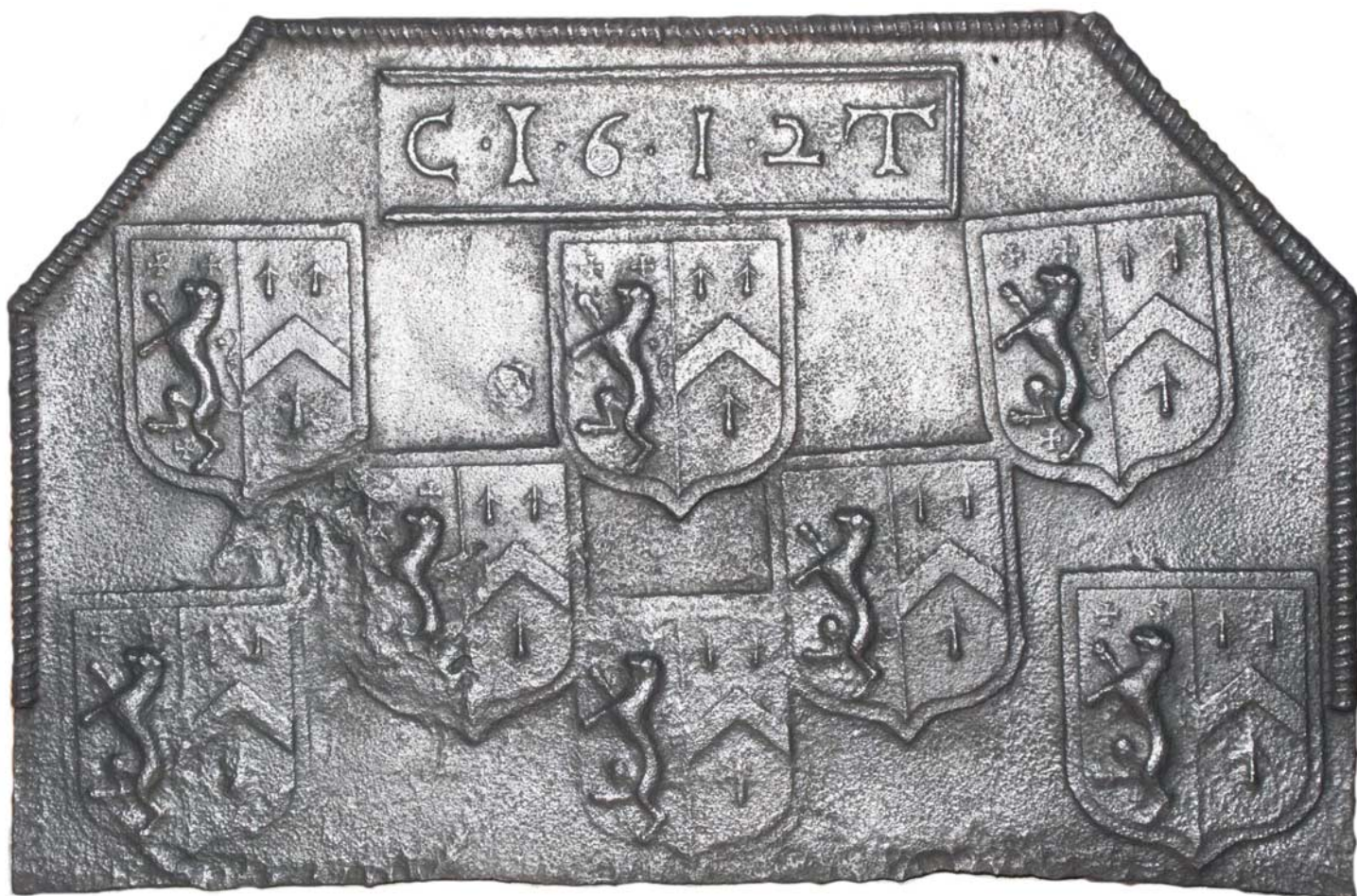
A few years ago, in a previous issue of *Watch on the Weald*, I wrote a short piece about iron firebacks, a subject which has been a passion of mine for more than 20 years. In the article I briefly mentioned a group of backs decorated with the shields of an Elizabethan judge, William Aylofffe, and his wife Jane, who probably passed the shield to a Kent iron founder to decorate a fireback for their house at Hornchurch in Essex. Aylofffe died in 1584, and nearly 20 years later the shield with his arms began to be reused to cast a series of backs, the earliest dated example of which is from 1601. A typical example of one of these firebacks is this one of 1612, in my possession and illustrated below, which I am told was formerly from a house in Smarden. In 1911 Henry Cowper wrote about them in *'Archæologia Cantiana'*, the journal of the Kent Archaeological Society, and listed several he had seen in the Weald of Kent dating to as late as 1633. Many are undated, but most of the dated examples, like mine, also carry the initials CT, which were probably those of the founder who cast them. In 2018 I wrote an article in *'Archæologia Cantiana'* putting forward evidence that CT was Charles Tyler, an iron founder who lived and worked in Goudhurst, Cranbrook, Biddenden and Hawkhurst during the period when these firebacks were being made. However, a few of the Aylofffe backs that Cowper listed had the initials RS instead, and

although I have personally recorded several CT backs I have yet to find one made by RS.

I have recorded dated Aylofffe backs at Rolvenden, Cowden, Wye (in Wye College), and recently near Tenterden, as well as a couple in Sussex. In addition, I have seen examples in Scotney Castle (almost 6ft wide and with 17 shields), Great Dixter at Northiam, and Provender at Norton. Cowper mentions several which I have not seen, so I am keen to track down others which I can add to the catalogue of British firebacks I am compiling, and which already includes over 900 other firebacks from all over the country.

As this series of firebacks seems peculiar to the Weald of Kent and surrounding area, I suspect that there several more dated backs, and perhaps some with RS on them, in houses known to or belonging to readers of *Watch on the Weald*. I would be very interested to hear of them with the prospect of visiting to photograph and record their details, and I am happy to assure owners that their locations will be kept confidential.

**Jeremy Hodgkinson**  
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# Take part in the No Mow Movement starting 1 May - let it grow for nature



Plantlife's No Mow May is back. No Mow May is one of the easiest ways to help the environment - letting wildflowers like dandelions, clover and daisies grow and supporting bees and butterflies.

In data analysed on sign-ups to No Mow May from 2025:

- The top wildest postcodes in the UK were those in East Sussex (with a TN postcode), such as Bexhill-on-Sea, Ninfield and Lunsford's Cross. This was closely followed by East and West Sussex (a BN postcode).
- A third (32%) of households in 2025 were first-time participants, showing the movement continues to attract new audiences.
- A third (29%) said they wouldn't just manage their gardens for nature during May, but limit mowing for the whole summer.

Sarah Shuttleworth, Specialist Botanical Advisor at Plantlife, said: "We can see the blossoming support for No Mow May continues to grow - with people across the UK leaving even a few wild patches to grow in May and beyond. So, whether in a city, town or the countryside, even the smallest garden can be a buzzing lifeline for wildlife."

## Lawn guidance for the summer months:

- Getting the best results from No Mow May: If you want to give biodiversity the biggest boost, there's a simple trick - variety! Keeping two to three different grass lengths throughout the summer helps maximise flower variety and the nectar they produce.
- Reducing mowing: Keep paths and recreation areas mown short but frame these functional areas with a flowering lawn mown once every four to eight weeks. This allows common, low-growing wildflowers to regrow and reflower throughout the summer.
- Mow mindfully: Check your lawn for wildlife - and never mow around the edges towards the centre. Instead, progress gradually towards sanctuary areas such as uncut grass strips at boundaries. Begin with a high blade, then mow strips only half as wide as the

mower. You can then re-pass with blades set lower to finish the job.

- Collect cuttings: Rake or collect clippings after mowing to prevent nutrient build-up, which helps wildflowers thrive year after year.

## Why May?

May is when most of our wild plants are getting going for the season and so giving them time during this period to grow, gives them a good head start. Sometimes it is easier for people to start small, before committing to a bigger shift in their gardening journey. The goal is to mow less for longer all year round.

## No garden?

Encourage wildlife with a pot or window box or see if your local church, mosque or other place of worship has a green space they can pledge for nature. You could chat to your council about a park or road verge - or see if your local school will take part.

- Sign up at [plantlife.org.uk/nomowmay](https://plantlife.org.uk/nomowmay) and let it grow for nature!
- Tag us with images and videos of your wild spaces #NoMowMay #LetItGrow



## About Plantlife

Plantlife is the global charity working to enhance, protect, restore and celebrate the wild plants and fungi that are essential to all life on earth. With two in five plant species at risk of extinction, biodiversity loss is now the fastest it's ever been and Plantlife's work has never been more vital. Plantlife champions and accelerates conservation action, working at the heart of a global network of individuals and organisations, to influence and inspire landowners and land managers, public and private bodies, governments and local communities. As time begins to run out, Plantlife's position as the global voice for wild plants and fungi will help to bring lasting and positive change to our natural world - for everyone's sake.

**Jules Walkey**  
[plantlife.org.uk](https://plantlife.org.uk)

# Housing around railway stations in the Low Weald

Recent national planning proposals suggest a stronger presumption in favour of housing development around railway stations. The reasoning appears to be straightforward. Rail access can support commuting, reduce reliance on long distance car travel and contribute to more sustainable patterns of growth.

On paper, that approach looks sensible. But what does that mean in practice for the Low Weald?

The West Kent and Parish Strategy area is divided by the Ashford to Charing Cross line, with stations at Pluckley, Headcorn, Staplehurst, Marden and Paddock Wood. With the exception of Pluckley, these villages have already seen significant housing growth over the past decade.



Rail access has not removed local pressures. Rural roads are busy, particularly at peak times, and many minor streets and junctions were never built for heavy traffic. School places are limited, health services stretched, and wastewater infrastructure has little spare capacity. Most daily trips remain local, to schools, shops, workplaces, libraries, leisure and care facilities, so additional housing still adds vehicles to already constrained country roads. Community services are also under pressure, often forcing residents to travel further afield.

Character also matters. Historic villages, listed buildings and distinctive landscapes define the Low Weald. Even small developments, repeated over time, can erode separation, identity and amenity, leaving permanent changes that are difficult to reverse.

A railway on a map does not automatically create capacity. Sustainable planning must account for infrastructure, settlement character and cumulative change. Relying on a national presumption for development risks weakening the plan-led system. Local Plans and Neighbourhood Plans exist to manage growth carefully, sequence infrastructure, protect landscape and character, and ensure that communities have a real say. Ignoring local context treats the Low Weald as an open opportunity rather than planning for genuinely sustainable growth.

Alongside these local pressures sits a far more fragile constraint: the River Beult. Kent's only riverine Site of Special Scientific Interest, the Beult is a rare lowland clay river shaped by heavy, impermeable Wealden soils. Unlike chalk streams fed by steady underground springs, it rises quickly after winter rain but in summer becomes slow moving, with very little natural flow. This gives the river extremely limited capacity to dilute pollution. The Beult is already formally assessed as being in unfavourable condition and remains under sustained ecological stress. Additional housing development within its catchment, particularly near the river, would add treated wastewater and rainwater carrying nutrients and pollutants. Because summer flows are so low, this pollution cannot be dispersed, increasing algal growth, harming water quality, and placing unacceptable pressure on an already fragile ecosystem.

Housing growth in the Low Weald must be carefully planned, based on solid evidence, and sensitive to local needs and the environment. Residents, councils and local decision-makers need the authority and time to examine each proposal in detail, rather than being forced to follow national rules that may not fit our villages.

**John Crawford**  
**WKPS**



# Biodiversity and habitat development at Rolvenden

The Kent & East Sussex Railway's commitment to protecting and enhancing biodiversity along its Green Corridor was first reported in Watch on the Weald No.175. In the last six months there have been further major developments at the 2-acre field which is just south of Rolvenden station. Its partnership with Kentish Stour Partnership came to fruition in November 2025 when a new 400m<sup>2</sup> pond was created on the site of a much smaller scrape which had silted over, filled with reeds and become clogged with goat willow. Funded under Natural England's scheme called District Level Licencing to create or improve pond habitats for great-crested newts, it will be maintained by them for 25 years.

Its proximity to trees, hedgerows and scrub make it ideal for attracting amphibians, especially as four ponds have been identified lying within 1,000m of the site. At present, it looks like the Somme, but Emily Davies of Kentish Stour who oversaw the project, assures us it will in due course 'colonise naturally'. She adds: "The bare substrates that dominate restored ponds act as a very special wildlife habitat and may be the only time that very rare stoneworts are able to thrive. Freshwater animals and plants will find their own way". Early in January 2026, K&ESR supporter and member of Tenterden Wildlife, John Sinclair, whose article about bat-sighting at K&ESR stations appeared in edition No.176, spotted over 30 goldfinches drinking at the pond. In due course, it will become a mecca for invertebrates and a source of food for bats and birds. Watch this space.

Having already worked closely with Kent County Council's 'Plan Tree' initiative and planted ten disease-resistant elm trees at Rolvenden in 2024, the Railway was approached again with a request to plant more elms as part of the Elm Heritage Kent project as well as varied species of over 1,000 whips. Katherine Meade, KCC Plan Tree Strategy Officer, said she was "delighted to continue working with K&ESR and support their commitment to biodiversity and to expanding canopy cover". Once agreed in principle and once suitable sites had been found, Kent Plan Tree applied to the Tree Council for an Outside Woodland Grant funded

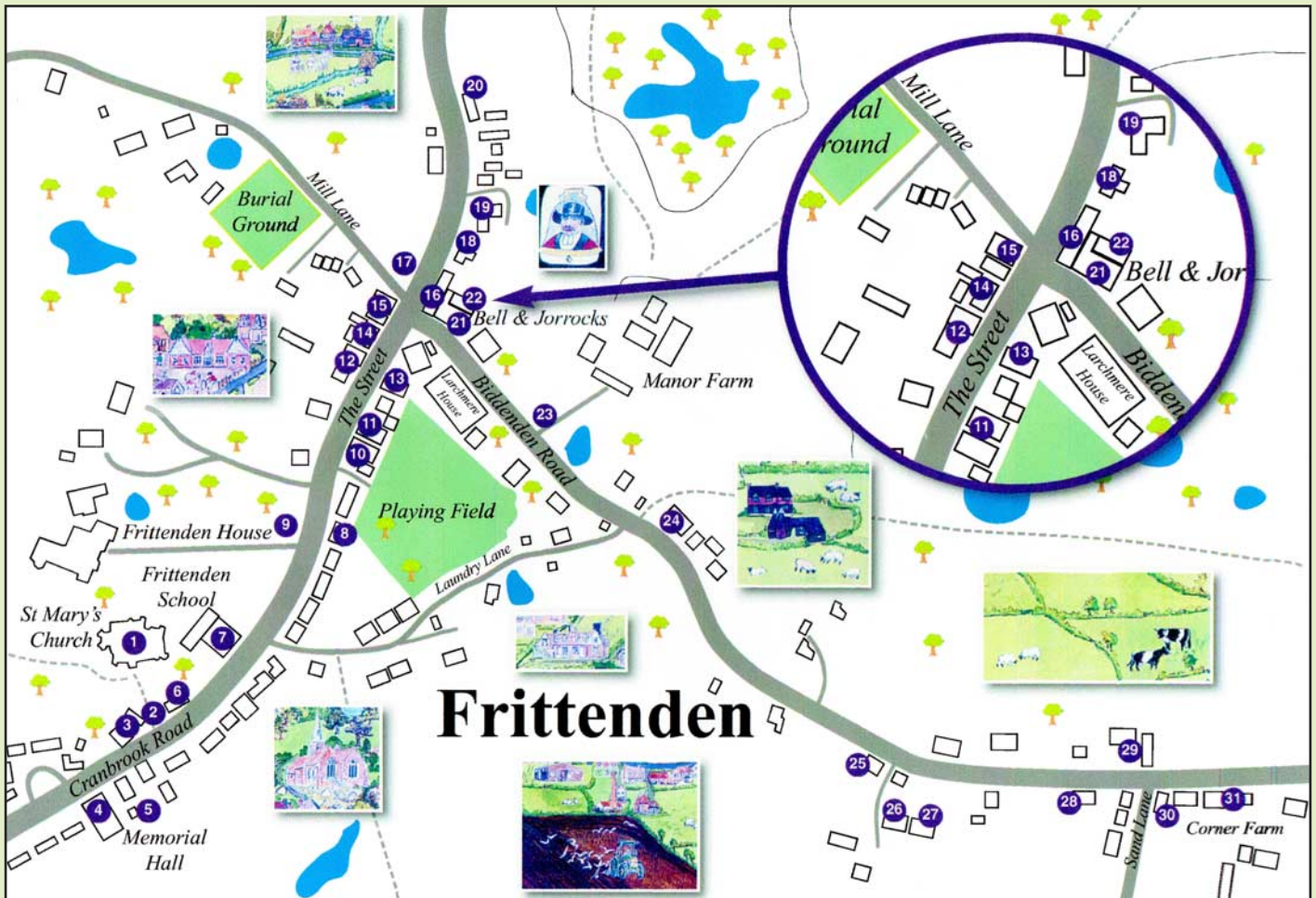
by Defra. The bulk of the whips, consisting of field maple, oak, hawthorn, blackthorn, hazel, dog rose and dogwood, are to be planted trackside west of the Cranbrook Road level-crossing to form a hedge which will not only be visible from the train but from the road crossing. The elms have been planted on part of the land cleared when the pond was created, formerly dominated by a monoculture of nettles. The planting is not impinging on the northern half of the field which is rich in over 25 species of wildflowers. The elms are a mix of four additional species. As Katherine said: "This should further enhance landscape resilience and create greater opportunities for elm-dependent species such as the white-letter hairstreak to establish and thrive".

The Railway's Forestry & Conservation team planted the 2024 elms under atrociously wet weather conditions and similarly heroic efforts have been undertaken this time too. This dedicated team of volunteers typifies the commitment of the hundreds of volunteers who keep this heritage railway working. They bring skill, hard work and arboricultural expertise to maintaining and enhancing the Railway's habitats.

For more information and understanding of the Railway's dedication to its natural environment, a short film entitled Environment and Conservation may be found on YouTube K&ESR. Part of it was filmed against the background of the wildflower field at Rolvenden.

**Keith Barron**  
**Kent & East Sussex Railway**





# Follow the purple plaques ... an easy way to explore the village of Frittenden

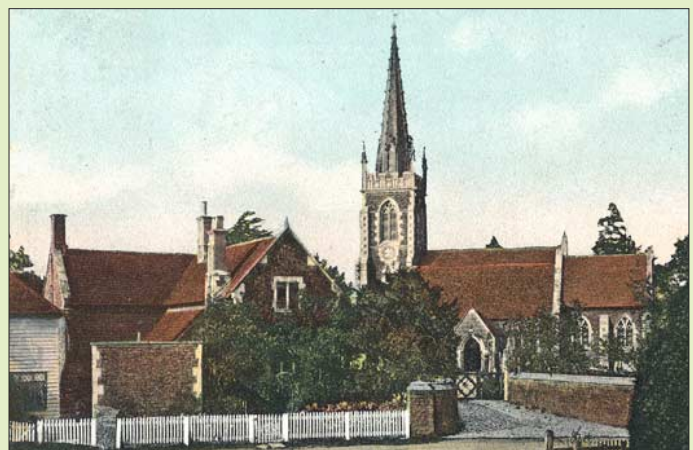
The remote rural village of Frittenden has Anglo Saxon heritage and indeed there are indications of a Roman presence in the vicinity. The village does not appear in the Domesday Book. It was ceded to the manors of North East Kent and included in the record of these manors. However, it was first recorded in a charter of 804. Its origins lie in the people who travelled from the North East Manors to their 'dens' in the Weald. Some of the dens might be as much as 20 or 30 miles from the manors to which they belonged. The swineherds who looked after these dens would tend gradually to form small communities of their own in these dens. The drove roads created as a result of the human traffic at the time has created many of the roads we continue to use.

A detailed brochure is available from The Bell and Jorrocks pub and a walk around the 31 purple plaques which lie within the 30-mph limit is a fascinating and worthwhile experience.

Park in the village hall car park opposite the church, and first walk to the rear of the car park and look over the wonderful view of unspoilt Wealden landscape. Glance to

the left and see a tall chimney stack (5) which is situated adjacent to Pearson's Cottage and Oakleaves, which was operated as a builder's yard in the 19th century. The chimney served the steam machinery used in the yard and was only decommissioned in the 1970s.

Until the 20th century, Frittenden had two centres, the first around the Church of St Mary's and, from about 1845, the school. The second, which might be considered to be the commercial centre around the disjointed crossroads of Headcorn Road, Mill Lane, Biddenden Road and The Street.



Start the walk by turning right out of the car park and over the road on the left see St Mary's Church (1) which is a Grade II\* Listed Building of architectural and historic importance. It is built of brown Wealden sandstone and Bethersden marble with Caen stone dressings under a tiled roof. It sits in the centre of its churchyard.

A church has existed in Frittenden for some 800 years and was mentioned in the 'White Book' of St Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury around the year 1200. The parish has recorded the names of incumbents since 1279.

The medieval church fell into disrepair in the 18th and early 19th centuries but in 1839 the Rev. Edward Moore, a grandson of John Moore (Archbishop of Canterbury 1783-1806), was appointed to the curacy of Frittenden. He had considerable personal wealth and after restoring the Rectory (now Frittenden House) he paid for the church to be largely rebuilt between 1846 and 1848 to a design by the Birmingham architect, RC Hussey of the partnership Rickman and Hussey.

The Lych Gate (2) was erected in 1917 as a memorial to Rupert Inglis, Rector 1899-1916. Although too old to serve as a soldier in WW1 he enlisted as a chaplain and was killed during the Battle of the Somme while rescuing wounded soldiers.

Church Cottage (3) was erected as part of the 1846-8 renovation of the church. Pevsner describes it as one of the two Gothic houses built at this time. Adjacent to it, and within the churchyard, is what he described as an 'ecclesiastical tool shed'.

Well House (6) was also erected as part of the 1846-8 renovation of the church and is the other Gothic house. It gets its name from the large well in the garden which was one of the few sources of drinking water in the village before mains water arrived in 1924-5. The small building adjacent to the well was a one-time saddler's shop and sometime 'village lock-up'.

Continue towards the commercial centre at the crossroads passing Hill House (10), Old Bakehouse (11), The Old Jorrocks (12), Kent House (13), Forge Garage (14), Poplar Cottage (15), Manchester House (16); all commercial premises in their day.

Arriving at the crossroads, diagonally across is a gateway to a field. This is Bell Field (17), which had formed part of the Anglo-Saxon pasture. It was later the site of annual gatherings of the Frittenden Provident Society formed in 1839 as a Friendly Society providing welfare and support for workers, predominantly farm workers.

Walk a few hundred yards north along the main Frittenden Headcorn Road and Charity Farm Cottages and Farmhouse (19) appear on the right. Formerly Thomas Idenden's farmhouse, this is, after the church, probably the most historically important building in the parish.



Originally built in about 1450, the house and 28 acres were a charitable bequest by Thomas Idenden of Hawkhurst in 1566. Income from the property was to be put to 'poor maidens' marriage portions, e.g. a dowry, and to the relief of the poor households within the Parish of Frittenden. From 1620-1837 the charity's trustees leased the house and farm to the Parish as a Poor House and Farm. This closed in 1837 following the creation of the Cranbrook Union, but the Charity continues to this day.

Turning around, walk back to The Bell and Jorrocks, called the Bell Inn until 1969 (21). It was first documented in 1741 but was probably constructed earlier. Over the years it has provided a venue for meetings of various local societies and the Coroners Court!

There are a number of other interesting properties with and without purple plaques in the parish and we urge anyone interested in the historical aspect of the Weald of Kent to obtain a booklet and walk the village.

For further information visit the historical society's website [frittendenhistoricalsociety.co.uk](http://frittendenhistoricalsociety.co.uk)





## Combwell Wood

It's funny how you can live somewhere for years and miss what's right under your nose. In my case that place was the ancient woodland known as Combwell Wood, nestled into the Kent Sussex border adjacent to my village. This 273-acre habitat is far from ordinary. Continuously wooded from at least 1400 Combwell is a ghyll woodland, containing some globally-rare marvels and protected as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

Combwell (from the Old English *cumb* - a valley, and *wella* - a spring) has a totally unique ecosystem, akin to temperate rainforest. Its humidity and lack of pollution have allowed rare bryophyte species (mosses and liverworts), more commonly associated with the rainforests of Cornwall or Wales, to flourish here in the cool humid stream gullies, also known as ghylls.

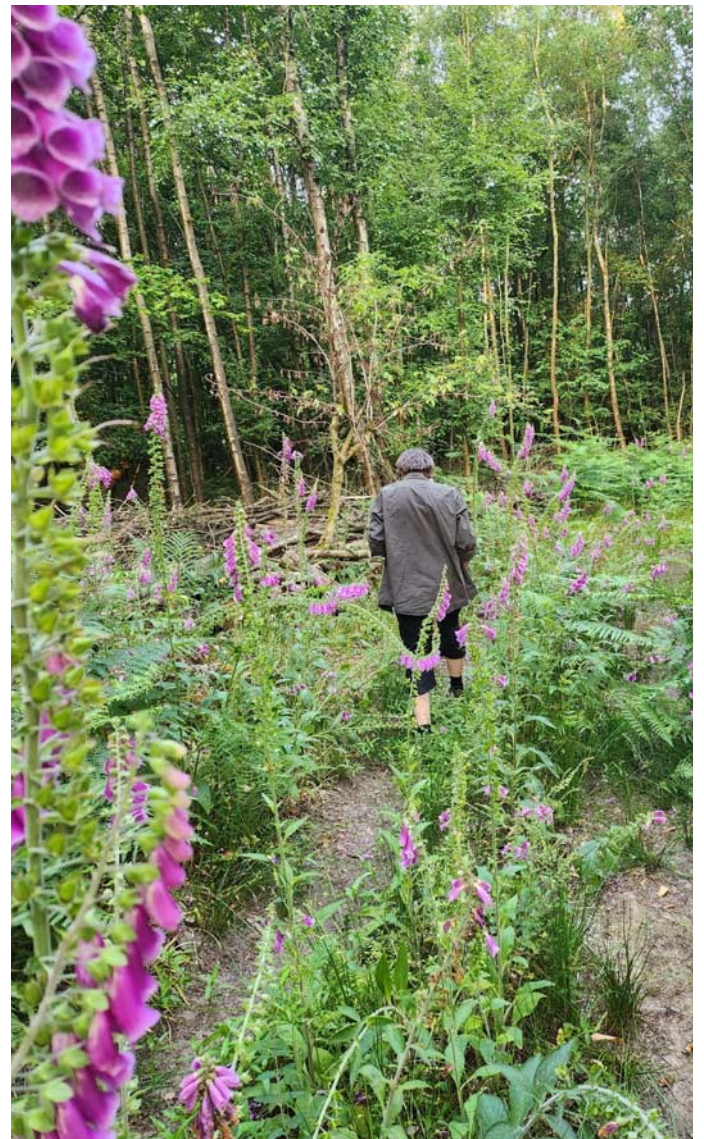
These ghylls are the heart of the site, narrow shady valleys fed by constant springs. Standing inside you appreciate that you are in a different climate zone. Cooler, quieter and thick with mosses.

Being in this woodland feels deeply restorative. This subjective effect has been studied and it has been discovered that after being in such environments for several hours human endorphin levels are frequently measurably higher for up to six weeks. Ghylls act as natural humidifiers, meaning the air never really dries out. In combination with the steep valleys of this woodland this results in a micro-climate 3-5°C colder than the surrounding area all year round. Many plant and insect species found here are survivors from the Atlantic warm period around 5,000 years ago.

The people who currently steward and protect Combwell Wood are equally fascinating and worth knowing about. Mark and Bo Herbert, and their young family, have been working and living in the woodland for more than 15 years. They have an intimate and extraordinary understanding of this vastly under-studied ecosystem and have taught me to see Combwell as a living record of how people and nature have worked together here for centuries.

Mark's work integrates his own observations and intuition with modern understanding of ecology and the traditional practices of the diverse people who preceded him in managing these woods. He follows the eminent botanists who have worked and studied here, including Dr Francis Rose and his student David Bellamy (who locals remember driving around nearby Kilndown in their motorcycle and sidecar!).

Mark has direct, detailed knowledge of the WW2 history of Combwell from speaking with older village residents. Land Girls produced charcoal from the woods. Combwell also lay under 'Doodlebug alley' where Spitfire pilots would bravely fly and tip the German bombs, preventing them reaching London. One resident, as a child, used a tractor to pull Doodlebug casings from the woods to sell to 'The Ministry'.



Going much further back the monks of the Augustin Combwell Priory managed these valleys for timber, fuel and fish ponds. They used the land carefully, coppicing, managing the water, and planting medicinal herbs which still thrive today.

Combwell certainly isn't a museum piece - Mark is emphatic that conservation is not about locking the gates and leaving nature alone but about balance and curating the wood in a way that keeps it optimally healthy. He leads a network of local owners and volunteers keeping traditional practices alive. Carefully coppicing hazel and chestnut and removing invasive species. Clearing the canopy in some areas has allowed sunlight to penetrate, provided glide paths for birds to enter and feast on the insects and has enabled moss spores dormant for over 100 years to germinate. The result is a landscape that's productive, biodiverse and frankly magical.

**Georgia Read-Cutting**  
*Kilndown*



## Nature notes

There is nothing unusual about Great Crested Grebes, nor are they particularly Wealden. They are a species of least concern and resident through most of the British Isles except parts of the extreme north and west. They are a water bird and feed on small fish and aquatic invertebrates. They have an impressive plume on their heads which needless to say didn't benefit their population numbers during Victorian times.

Generally, we see them on lakes, gravel pits and large ponds so imagine my surprise after the flood on 27 January when I came across the first Great Crested Grebe ever seen on Moat Farm during our 40 years, in our headstream tributary of the River Beult. By the following morning it was on a pond by the house which is less than a quarter of an acre and within two days it had migrated 25 yards to another pond of similar size in the garden. It has taken up residence there for the last two weeks and seems very happy. Plumage is in magnificent condition, but it lacks a mate.

What worries me in reading up on the species is that it needs 50 yards of water to take off and we simply can't provide that until the next flood, and right now (at the beginning of March) instead of leading a solitary life it should be courting with the wonderful display that you should look up on Google, if you can find the time. I assume that he or she will move



on shortly, but it has been fun hosting an unexpected visitor and the one thing it will have found is good feeding. The pond is full of small rudd and perch which are very much on its menu. I am worried about the toads, which have recently arrived to spawn. Toad or spawn, or both, may be on the menu? Anyway - a very welcome surprise - not a rarity, but a bird we don't usually see unless we happen to be close to an extensive body of water. I must make sure the mink trap is all systems go as mink are bound to fancy grebe. The natural world is a tricky place for survival, whoever you happen to be.

**Mike Bax**  
*WKPS Chairman*

# Dates for the diary 2026

## **Tuesday 28th April | Nightingale Evening, Shadoxhurst, 6.30pm**

Drinks and nibbles at the farm with an introductory talk from Michael Bax on the habits of the Nightingales. Followed by a wander through ancient woodland to hear the Nightingales sing.

## **Saturday 6th June | Spoon Carving and Ancient Woodland Workshop, near Ashford, 10am**

Run by Master Craftswoman Jill Swan and environmental Forester Frankie Woodgate of Weald Woodscapes. Combine learning the skills of a traditional craft and immersion in the ecological magic and majesty of an ancient woodland.

## **Thursday 11th June | President's Reception/WKPS AGM, Boldshaves, Woodchurch, 6.30 for 7pm**

The WKPS AGM, followed by a guest speaker and then a drinks reception with nibbles in the beautiful old barn. Complimentary event.

## **Saturday 20th and Sunday 21st June | Wealden Literary Festival, Boldshaves, Woodchurch**

For tickets and further information [www.wealdenliteraryfestival.co.uk](http://www.wealdenliteraryfestival.co.uk)

## **Sunday 21st June | Summer Solstice Walk, Hemsted Forest, 9.30am**

Summer solstice is at 9.24am, celebrate with a walk in the stunning forest. Bring your well-behaved dogs and enjoy with us. Complimentary event.



**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**

# Please come and join us

## **Thursday 2nd July | WKPS Summer Drinks Party, Stone-cum-Ebony, Wittersham, 6-8pm**

We have been invited to beautiful gardens in Stone-cum-Ebony. This will be a social event to come and meet the WKPS team, introduce new members and meet up with old friends.

## **Saturday 12th September | Weald of Kent Ploughing Match**

WKPS will have a stand. For details visit [wkpsma.co.uk](http://wkpsma.co.uk).

## **Saturday 19th September | A Kentish Iron-making Landscape Tour, Benenden, 11am**

Lindsay Akerman will give an introductory talk before guiding our walk of about an hour over the historic and panoramic landscape, observing iron age routeways, an iron age bloomery, later routeways, the culvert, examples of quarrying for various minerals at different periods, and an illustrated explanation of a deserted medieval farm. The walk will be followed by refreshments in Benenden Memorial Hall and some examples of relevant finds.

## **Saturday 17th October | Chequer Tree Safari, Shadoxhurst, 10.30am**

Wild Service Trees (*Sorbus torminalis*) are an ancient woodland indicator. WKPS and Marden Wildlife have been successful in propagating seed from three farms in the Weald. Come and learn about these amazing trees.



**To book on any of these events and for further details visit  
[wkps.org.uk/upcoming-events](http://wkps.org.uk/upcoming-events)**

# 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.

**Become a member and  
find out more: [wkps.org.uk](http://wkps.org.uk)  
[secretary@wkps.org.uk](mailto: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.

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# wkps

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