Watch on the Weald

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wkps

Can Kent's Water Infrastructure Keep Pace with Planned Growth?

For most communities, water infrastructure is something that remains largely invisible until it stops working.

Over the past 18 months, however, thousands of households and businesses across Kent have experienced precisely that. A series of significant supply failures has raised questions not only about the resilience of the county's water infrastructure, but also about whether it can keep pace with the scale of housing growth planned across the county.

For communities, this is not simply a question of future development numbers. It is about ensuring that existing residents and new households have access to reliable essential services and that new development creates places that are properly supported from the outset.

In late November 2025, a major incident at South East Water's Pembury treatment works left tens of thousands of customers without running water after contamination affected the treatment process. Barely a month later, a burst water main in the Tunbridge Wells area resulted in a further 24,000 properties losing supply.

The disruption did not end there. In May 2026, widespread outages affected customers across parts of Kent, including Ashford, Maidstone, Whitstable and Herne Bay, during a period of unusually warm weather. The company attributed the problems to exceptionally high demand.

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These incidents have occurred against a backdrop of growing regulatory and political scrutiny. In May 2026, the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee reported that it had no confidence in the leadership of South East Water to address the company's ongoing failures and protect customers from disruption. The Committee highlighted concerns about leadership, governance, infrastructure maintenance and the company's response to major supply failures.

Following the Committee's report, South East Water's Chair and Chief Executive stepped down, further increasing scrutiny of the company's performance and future resilience.

The company has also faced scrutiny over leakage levels. South East Water has reported leakage of around 100 million litres of water each day, highlighting the scale of water lost from the network and the challenge of improving resilience while meeting future demand.

Against this backdrop, questions are increasingly being asked about the relationship between water resilience and planned growth.

The issue moved firmly into the planning arena earlier this year when South East Water responded to consultation on the emerging Tonbridge and Malling Local Plan. The company stated that its current Water Resources Management Plan did not identify sufficient water supply headroom to accommodate the full scale of housing growth proposed by the council.

Water supply headroom refers to the spare capacity available within the water supply system to meet future demand. Importantly, South East Water did not suggest that future housing growth could never be accommodated. Rather, it indicated that additional interventions, investment and future planning work would be required to support higher levels of development.

Nevertheless, the response has fuelled a wider debate about whether infrastructure planning is keeping pace with housing ambitions.

Political leaders across Kent have begun to voice their concerns

Maidstone Borough Council Leader Stuart Jeffery has raised concerns about whether water infrastructure is keeping pace with planned growth. In correspondence with South East Water, he highlighted concerns about repeated supply failures, future water availability and the need for water companies to play a stronger role in long term strategic planning for development.

Meanwhile, Canterbury City Council Leader Alan Baldock has called on ministers to consider placing South East Water into Special Administration, arguing that repeated supply failures demonstrate the need for stronger intervention and oversight.

These are lobbying positions rather than planning policy, but they illustrate the growing level of concern being expressed by elected representatives across the county.

The wider question is how these concerns sit alongside national planning policy

The National Planning Policy Framework requires local planning authorities to plan positively for housing growth and to meet identified needs wherever possible. However, it also makes clear that sustainable development depends on the provision of the infrastructure required to support new communities.

Infrastructure capacity, delivery and timing are therefore central considerations when assessing whether growth is genuinely sustainable.

This means that water infrastructure is not, in itself, a reason to halt development. However, where genuine constraints are identified, local authorities, water companies, and regulators must demonstrate how those constraints will be addressed through investment, phasing and long-term planning.

For local communities, the issue is therefore not whether growth should take place, but whether the supporting infrastructure is delivered alongside it. New homes create new communities, and those communities depend on reliable water supplies, effective drainage, transport connections, schools, healthcare and other essential services.

The challenge is also becoming more complex as climate change affects rainfall patterns, increases the likelihood of drought conditions, and places additional pressure on already stretched water resources.

For Kent, this is becoming an increasingly important challenge. The county is expected to accommodate substantial housing growth over coming decades while simultaneously adapting to climate change, increasing environmental pressures and growing demand for water.

The debate is therefore about more than temporary supply failures. It is about whether the infrastructure required to support future communities is being planned and delivered at the same pace as the homes themselves.

Recent events have brought that question sharply into focus. As Local Plans progress and housing targets continue to rise, ensuring that water infrastructure keeps pace with development may prove to be one of the most important planning and environmental issues facing Kent in the years ahead.

For parish and town councils, the key issue is not whether Kent should grow, but whether growth is supported by the infrastructure, environmental safeguards and long term investment needed to create sustainable communities.

Water resilience will be a critical test of whether future development is being planned in a way that properly balances housing needs, environmental pressures and the quality of life of both existing and future residents.

John Crawford
WKPS Planning

Leaving a Gift to WKPS

For more than 65 years, the Weald of Kent Protection Society has worked to protect the landscape, heritage and character of the Weald. Our work depends on the support of members, donations and legacy gifts.

Whether through a living legacy donation to WKPS today, or a gift in your Will, you can help ensure that this work continues for future generations. Every legacy, whatever its size, helps us remain a strong voice for the Weald and the issues that matter most to its communities and environment.

If you would like to find out more, please contact: **secretary@wkps.org.uk**

One Weald Documentary

The WKPS Council is considering commissioning a film of the Weald, its variety of attractions and features, its history, its unique qualities and attributes, and the flora and fauna especially identified with it. A film of this nature, it is thought, would provide a helpful educational tool (for all ages), and would help to advance the Society's view that this extraordinary and ancient habitat should be seen as one: One Weald.

It would also, we hope, serve as a background tool to support the important ongoing work the Society undertakes to protect the Weald from unsympathetic development and other inappropriate human interventions.

If you have any potentially relevant experience in this area, either in the making or commissioning of documentary or short films, or in their financing, we would be very pleased to hear from you. Please contact the Secretary and we will happily follow up with you at a time convenient to you.

If, more broadly, you would simply like to support this venture financially, again we would be pleased to hear from you. Further updates on the development of this initiative will be included in future editions of Watch on the Weald.

A Meeting of Minds

by Lou Carpenter
Marden Wildlife

There's so much that can be learned when the right people come together to share expertise. On 19th & 20th June, the third National Meadows Conference was held in the High Weald, at Kew Wakehurst. The purpose of this event is not to show we farmers the way to produce the maximum yield of grass for hay or silage, but to share knowledge around grasslands rich in plant species.

To some, these could be seen as an indulgence, as the hay crops they produce are small, and grazing is greatly restricted. Instead, they should be seen as small factories that help produce the products we need to address climate change and species loss. Helping to arrest the steep decline of our pollinator species makes sense to me as a practical farmer. After the last couple of hot summers, the provision of permanent grass swards to keep the soil surface cool makes sense too.

The theme of the conference this year was the science behind maintaining these special grasslands. Although this appears simple, they can easily be lost or damaged by insensitive management. And for those like me, creating new meadows from land taken out of arable fields, their creation is complex. It's a world away from 'wilding'. It was good to have speakers from the Open University on soils, and from Natural England on the intricate workings of the fungi in soils.

Carbon capture is regularly in the news as a way of softening harm to our climate. Much carbon capture happens under our feet where these fine fungal networks take carbon out of the air and lock it safely into the soil. The speaker was particularly enthusiastic about the waxcap fungal species, which are regularly found in Weald grasslands. They're often seen as a marker of ancient grasslands, particularly as some of our Weald churchyards have good populations of these bright-coloured tiny fungi. Our own special grassland site, Marden Meadow SSSI lacks waxcaps. We believe that this historic but very low-lying grassland may simply be too wet for them to thrive. But do have a look at Goudhurst churchyard in early autumn. There are friends of mine buried there, I do hope they enjoy this annual carnival of colour in the grass around their graves. To me, it's a potent reminder of life going on after loss.

We learnt more about the science of pollination and seeds, and, from Plantlife, more about their advocacy work for meadows. Their figure of 97% species-rich grassland lost since the 1930s is shocking, although probably many went in the war and immediately after. Feeding a hungry nation, and a hungry continent post-war, were the realities of that generation of farmers, including my dear late Dad. We face different perils in this modern era, and have adapted our farming accordingly. The spread of beautiful flowers are, to me, as satisfying as the full apple stores and hop pockets that Dad took a pride in. Actually, I think he would have envied the flowers too!

Meadow Vetchling

Road Garden

Road Rattle

Waxcaps

SAVE OAKEN WOOD

Oaken Wood in Maidstone (also known locally as Barming Woods) can be found on public records as far back as 1595. And is likely far older – a remnant of a larger, more ancient stretch of woodland. Its undisturbed, rich soils are a living network linking the past to the future. Its well-worn tracks a reminder that folk have been journeying these paths for centuries. This woodland truly is a living piece of heritage.

Large areas of the woodland have been managed as traditional rotational coppice for hundreds of years. Coppicing is not just a piece of Kent's unique social history but creates a habitat for many specialist species that thrive in the mosaic habitat created by the mix of managed woodland and mature native trees. Dormice, bats, turtledoves and nightjars are just a handful of the species recorded here, and the site is a treasure trove of insect life.

Dormice thrive in these woods but nationally their numbers have plummeted by 70% this century – they are one of Britain's most endangered mammals and are heavily protected. Loss of traditional woodland management techniques, like those found in Oaken Wood, are a major factor in their decline.

Oaken Wood is designated as a 'plantation on ancient woodland site' (PAWS). PAWS are a category of ancient woodland protected in the government's National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). This woodland is legally defined as 'irreplaceable' and has equivalent protection to 'built heritage', such as nationally listed buildings and scheduled monuments.

Oaken Wood is also a key geomorphological site, providing 'the best example in Britain of ridge and trough topography produced by intense cambering and gulling during the Pleistocene period' *(Natural England)*.

This spot is popular with walkers, families, cyclists and horse riders as a safe, green space away from the traffic and bustle of over-developed local neighbourhoods.

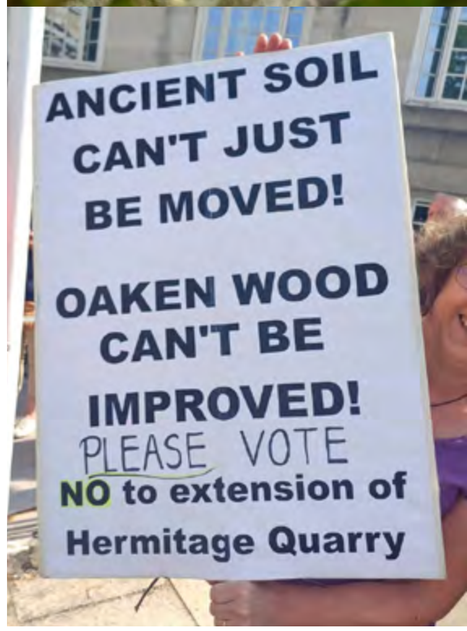
And yet the future is looking bleak for this green lung.

A quarry proposal, under Kent County Council's Minerals and Waste Sites Plan, places 120 acres of the woodland at high risk. The Woodland Trust have called this proposal the 'single biggest development threat to England's ancient woodland in decades.'

Despite a huge response to the 2023 public consultation on the proposals, and several years of campaigning by Friends of Oaken Wood, in July 2026 councillors voted (by a narrow majority) to name Oaken Wood as a suitable quarry site in their final plan.

The battle is not over. The plan now goes before a planning inspector appointed by the Secretary of State.

The *State of Nature 2023* report concludes that the UK is one of the most nature-depleted nations on Earth, and Kent is no exception. 10% of species in Kent are classified as threatened with extinction *(Kent Wildlife Trust)*. Kent's insect populations are declining more rapidly than the national average – an 89% decline in insect numbers since 2004 *(Bugs Matter Survey)*. Woodlands like Oaken Wood are so vital to the future wellbeing of our ecology and communities. We cannot allow it to be lost.



To find out more or to support the campaign to save this woodland for future generations please check out:

SAVE OAKEN WOOD!

friendsofoakenwood.wordpress.com

friendsofoakenwood@gmail.com

How Do We Influence Good House Design In The Weald?

The Weald of Kent is a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (now rebranded as National Landscapes) and so it is important that we amalgamate traditional local vernacular such as medieval hall houses, black timber agricultural barns and Oast houses with high quality sustainable new design that respects and strengthens the local identity rather than erodes it - protecting the Weald into the future.

Landscape led development

All new builds should respect the landscape setting and countryside that they inhabit and seek to retain as much of these characteristics as possible. We should aim to retain as much indigenous hedging, mature trees, and natural features of the particular countryside as possible. The whole housing estate will look more integrated if existing trees, hedging and natural fencing are retained or in the case of fencing, replicated. It is surprising how quickly native planting and natural features will soften new build in a relatively short time. All these features should shape the development rather than being treated as constraints to work around.

Local distinctiveness

History has dictated the layout of the current system of villages, hamlets and farms in the Weald. Fields and woodland were cleared to make way for development and this has resulted in the landscape you see today. Many of the historical villages and settlements are situated near waterways, ridgeways and the old roadways linking villages and towns across the Weald.

It is important that all new housing developments relate to their 'host' town or village and do not 'stick out' from the local character landscape and vernacular. They should integrate with the landscape when viewed from afar, and be softened by the style of build and layout.

Creating homes rather than housing estate 'silos'

Cycleways, walking routes, and roadways all need to reflect local character and all should help lead to integration with the existing community. Many of the existing historical Wealden street frontages have enclosed small front gardens or sit behind longer enclosed front gardens with natural planting and this should easily be incorporated into new design and build if that is the local character. Parking should be on site wherever possible although many villages have predominantly street parking. Poor design often uses hard standing that dominates the front of a house and it is easy to use other forms of parking such as small multi-car parking areas which can be softened by effective planting but still be convenient to use.

Respecting Wealden vernacular

Whether it is a housing estate or a single new build, unless it is a 'one off build' which has special architectural importance, it should reflect the local materials used and be designed in such a way as to reflect the surrounding architecture with high quality design ensuring sustainable homes for the future. If the nearby houses are listed low white timbered properties, it is incongruous to build large red brick family houses that stick out from the neighbours. There must be ebb and flow in the developments. Successful developments mimic the local built form of smaller clusters of houses. This of course is less cost effective but will integrate both socially and architecturally with the local Wealden landscape.

In the Weald we are seeing a good many larger housing estates built in a rush to fulfil numbers which have sadly lost sight of the original planning policies which were put in place in an attempt to integrate these developments into the local area.

Much of the new development at the back of Tenterden reflects the local vernacular with random small street build mixed in with larger houses and good planting. This has integrated into the built form of Tenterden with remarkable speed. However, you can also see how large developments outside Ashford on the A28 towards Bethersden have not integrated into the Wealden landscape and farmland. Infrastructure has been compromised in the bid to build numbers of houses.

Developments that encourage integration and the rural setting

During the past ten years we have heard many times that building developments of say 50 houses on the edge of smaller Wealden villages will sustain these villages for years to come. We now see that this is not happening easily. The infrastructure has been ignored, cars are the mode of transport, and those living in these new builds are not always integrating into the local community. Local schools are full; bus services are either non-existent or severely limited and life has become frenetic and village life has been lost. The lack of local infrastructure has led to the need to travel outside the area for schools, shops, doctors and other essential needs.

When we view new applications, we need to look at the design and access statements with great care and ensure that the numbers, size of houses, and local infrastructure will actually sustain the new houses AND the existing communities. If we do not do this, we will not be building a Wealden community.

As the need for homes increases, it is ever more important that good design, in the right place, reflecting the local needs for size of house and scale, with attention to surroundings is achieved.

Sarah Ellison & John Crawford
WKPS Planning

- ***Main Image: Barnwood Place, Smarden***
- ***Kent Weatherboard Cottage and Cranbrook Windmill***

UNCLOGGING THE PLANNING PIPELINE: **Can Nature-Based Solutions Protect Stodmarsh and Unlock Growth?**

Since 2020, development across parts of Kent has faced a major environmental challenge. The issue is not simply a shortage of land, but whether the natural environment can absorb the consequences of growth without incurring lasting harm.

The internationally important Stodmarsh wetlands, within the River Stour catchment, have become central to this debate. The challenge has been protecting a sensitive ecological system while enabling the delivery of much needed new homes.

Natural England advised that new development should not increase nitrogen and phosphorus entering watercourses connected to these protected habitats. Although development was not stopped, many housing schemes across Ashford, Canterbury and surrounding areas were delayed because suitable mitigation was difficult to secure.

The search for a solution has led to a new approach based on catchment-wide mitigation and nature-based intervention.

A new approach to nutrient mitigation

Ashford Borough Council and Canterbury City Council established Stour Environmental Credits Ltd to help address the issue. Rather than requiring every development to provide its own mitigation, developers can purchase nutrient credits where neutrality cannot be achieved on site.

The funds raised support approved mitigation projects, together with their long term management and monitoring. The approach allows developers to contribute towards measures elsewhere within the catchment that reduce nutrient levels entering the protected environment.

The main project supporting this framework is the Stodmarsh Stream Enhancement Scheme, delivered by Greenshank Environmental and Dace Environmental.

The concept is simple. Agricultural drainage channels often move water quickly through the landscape, allowing nutrients to travel with it. The enhancement scheme reshapes sections of these channels, slows water movement and increases vegetation alongside the watercourse.

This allows natural processes to remove nitrogen and phosphorus before water reaches the protected wetlands. In effect, the enhanced channels act as natural treatment systems rather than relying solely on engineered solutions.

Working with the landscape

The works are being delivered across 5 farm sites, using relatively small areas alongside existing drainage channels. This allows farming to continue while creating environmental benefits.

Project partners estimate that, subject to successful delivery, regulatory approval and developer participation, the scheme could provide sufficient nutrient credits to support up to 5,000 homes affected by nutrient neutrality requirements.

Alongside helping address housing delays, the project aims to improve water quality, biodiversity and ecological resilience across the wider River Stour catchment.

A solution that requires careful monitoring

From the perspective of the Weald of Kent Protection Society, the scheme represents an important shift towards a catchment based approach to environmental mitigation.

While this may provide a practical response to current constraints, its success will depend on effective delivery, monitoring and long term management.

The key question, as always, is whether the scheme achieves the environmental outcomes promised. Nature-based solutions may have an important role in tackling nutrient pollution, but their success must ultimately be measured through improvements in water quality, habitat condition and ecological resilience.

The challenge remains ensuring development takes place in the right locations, with the necessary infrastructure, while safeguarding the landscapes and habitats that make Kent special.

John Crawford
WKPS Planning

Planning Appeals Changes: Why Getting It Right First Time Matters More Than Ever

Planning decisions influence the future of our communities, affecting housing, roads, landscape, heritage and infrastructure. Once development takes place, change is often permanent and difficult to reverse.

For communities and parish councils, effective participation depends on raising relevant planning issues at the right stage. That stage is the planning application process, not the appeal stage.

Appeals are the exception rather than the rule

Planning appeals affect only a small proportion of planning applications, but tend to have major implications on the community. Each year, hundreds of thousands of applications are decided by local councils, but only around 3% to 5% proceed to the Planning Inspectorate.

However, appeals involving major housing and strategic development schemes are more significant because developers are more likely to challenge refusals. This makes the quality of the original decision-making process particularly important.

What changed from April 2026?

From 1 April 2026, changes to planning appeal procedures introduced a stronger focus on getting decisions right first time.

The appeal process is increasingly not a second opportunity to substantially improve an application. Instead, the Planning Inspectorate will focus closely on whether the council reached the correct decision based on the information available when the application was determined.

This means greater importance will be placed on:

- The original plans and supporting documents
- Technical assessments and evidence
- Consultation responses from residents, community groups, parish councils and statutory consultees
- The Council Officer Report and Decision Notice

Why early representations now matter more than ever

For residents, community groups and parish councils, the message is clear: important issues need to be raised properly during the original consultation period.

- Effective representations should:
- Clearly identify the planning issues involved
- Explain the potential harm or impact being raised
- Refer to relevant National Planning Policy Framework, Local Plan or Neighbourhood Plan policies where appropriate
- Provide local knowledge, evidence or supporting information wherever possible

Issues that are not properly raised at the application stage may be much harder to introduce later.

What this means for communities and parish councils

For communities across the Weald of Kent, these changes reinforce the importance of becoming involved early in the planning process.

Residents, local groups and parish councils all have an important role in helping decision makers understand the potential impacts of development proposals.

Representations should focus on planning considerations such as:

- Landscape and local character
- Highway impacts and accessibility
- Flooding and drainage
- Heritage and biodiversity
- Infrastructure capacity such as water supply and transport

A well prepared and evidence based response submitted during the original consultation period is the most effective way to influence decisions.

The key message

The planning system is becoming more front loaded. The most effective opportunity to influence development is when an application is first submitted and considered by the local planning authority.

For communities across the Weald of Kent, the principle is simple:

If an issue matters, it needs to be raised clearly and supported by evidence at the beginning of the process, because there may be limited opportunity to do so later.

John Crawford
WKPS Planning

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Habitat Restoration: A Lifeline for Nature

I really wanted to write a positive story for this edition of Watch on the Weald, but as far as UK bird populations are concerned, it's a struggle to find many successes in recent years.

While Red Kites and White-tailed Eagles have seen their population increase, helped by reintroductions, more than half of our UK songbirds are threatened or in decline. In fact, it's not just birds that are at risk; hedgehogs, butterflies and bees are all plummeting to their lowest ever recorded numbers nationwide. However, what many of us share in this country is the desire to help and restore nature.

Large charities, such as the RSPB and Greenpeace, lobby our government to better protect our green spaces and all creatures who depend on them. These charities (with our support) command the attention of the powers that be, and encourage change, such as the ban on neonicotinoid pesticides, and record-breaking commitments to nature-friendly farming and tree planting. These pledges from the government wouldn't happen without our continued drive to force change.

On a less grand scale, as individuals we can improve the habitat we provide in our homes and gardens, and join local wildlife groups or charities such as WKPS. Nowadays, you'll likely find your town or village has its own wildlife group, and as a group of people, more action can be taken to improve the fortunes of our struggling wildlife populations across our towns and villages.

The positive story therefore must be the continued and ever-growing desire to restore habitat and oversee a change in fortunes for our flora and fauna. As a birdwatcher and nature-lover, there's nothing more I'd love to see than a return of the Turtle Dove to farmlands across the Weald. These charming birds even have their own project named after them (Operation Turtle Dove), as a combination of groups, including the RSPB, seek to save it from extinction in the UK. The population of Swifts in the UK has, much like the Turtle Dove, suffered a sharp decline in the past 50 years too, but again like the Turtle Dove, has projects across the country to fight and reverse this trend.

As people, we don't just have to hope these birds can survive, we can actively help them to do so - and the more of us who join in, the better our wildlife will fare.

Joe Rawles, *Feathers Wild Bird Care*

When Darkness Falls: The Secret World of the Low Weald's Moths

A year of moth surveying across ancient woodlands, meadows and hedgerows reveals one of Kent's richest hidden wildlife spectacles.

There is a special moment that comes with moth trapping.

The sun has disappeared, the last Blackbird has fallen silent and, for a few minutes, nothing much seems to happen. Then, almost imperceptibly, the first moth arrives. Before long another follows, then half a dozen more. By midnight, what appeared to be an empty meadow, or quiet woodland edge has revealed itself to be teeming with life.

The night comes alive

Over the past year I have been surveying several farms across the Low Weald, from ancient woodlands and species-rich meadows to hedgerows, ponds and wet woodland. Every visit has reinforced the same conclusion. Beneath the darkness lies one of Kent's richest, and least appreciated wildlife spectacles.

A landscape rich in moths

One June night alone produced almost **300 species of moth**, around **twelve per cent of all the species known from Britain**. That is an astonishing figure, but perhaps even more remarkable was the consistency: wherever the trap was placed, provided the surrounding habitat had been managed sympathetically, the moths came in astonishing numbers and variety.

People often think of moths as rather drab, dusty creatures that gather around porch lights. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Some resemble tiny jewels, others fragments of polished wood or pieces of fresh lichen. The aptly named Brussels Lace looks as though it has been cut from delicate embroidery, while Scarce Merveille du Jour is one of the most beautiful insects in Britain, its green and white camouflage blending perfectly with lichen-covered oak trunks. Olive Crescent, Great Prominent and Great Tortrix are hardly household names, yet each tells a story about the health of our woodlands.

Perhaps the greatest surprise last year was the discovery of **Wood Tortrix - a species not recorded in West Kent since 1954**. Finding it again after more than seventy years was a reminder that nature often has pleasant surprises waiting for those prepared to look carefully enough.

More than a light trap

Some of the most exciting discoveries happened in broad daylight. A tiny leaf mine on a lime leaf, a silken case attached to vegetation, or the feeding signs of a hungry caterpillar can reveal far more than a single adult moth. They prove that a species is breeding successfully.

One such discovery came while beating branches over a tray in search of larvae. Among the debris was the larval case of the *Birch Bagworm* – a tiny creature that many people, even experienced naturalists, could easily overlook. Yet finding it was every bit as exciting as any rare moth that landed in the trap that night.

Why the Low Weald matters

The Low Weald remains one of the few places where the countryside still forms an intricate mosaic. Ancient woodland merges into flower-rich meadows. Wide hedgerows and shaws connect scattered copses. Ponds, ditches and streams thread their way through pasture grazed at low intensity. It is exactly this complexity that moths need.

Unlike many insects, moths often depend on several different habitats during their lives. A caterpillar may feed on blackthorn in a hedgerow, the adult may nectar on knapweed in a meadow, while the pupa spends the winter hidden beneath leaf litter in woodland. Remove any one of these pieces and the life cycle begins to unravel.

That is why the farms surveyed have proved so rewarding. Their value lies not in one exceptional meadow or one ancient wood, but in the way every habitat connects with the next. Wildlife does not recognise field boundaries, and neither do moths.

Encouragingly, these habitats have not survived by accident. They are the result of thoughtful land management. Traditional hay cuts, light grazing, rotational hedge cutting, restored woodland rides and the retention of ponds and scrub have all helped create conditions in which wildlife can flourish.

The benefits extend far beyond moths. The same habitats support bats feeding over ponds, Nightingales singing from dense scrub, butterflies gliding along sunny woodland rides and orchids flowering across unimproved meadows. Moths simply provide one of the best ways of measuring how healthy these landscapes really are.

A hidden world worth protecting

Despite recording hundreds of species, I am convinced we have barely scratched the surface. Every survey produced something unexpected. Every new site added species that had not appeared elsewhere. The more we look, the richer the Low Weald becomes.

Perhaps that is the greatest appeal of moths. Even after decades of recording, every warm summer evening carries the possibility of seeing something completely new. There is always one more trap to open, one more moth to identify and one more mystery waiting in the darkness.

Most people will never see this hidden world. While we sleep, thousands of moths are pollinating wildflowers, feeding bats, sustaining birds and quietly carrying out roles that hold our ecosystems together.

The next time you step outside on a warm summer evening, pause for a moment. Look towards the hedgerow or the edge of the woodland. The darkness may seem empty, but it is alive with hundreds of species going about lives that have unfolded here for thousands of years.

The more time I spend exploring the Low Weald after dark, the more convinced I become that some of its greatest wildlife treasures are not those we see by day, but those that emerge only after the sun has set.

David Shenton
Kent Moth Group

Main Image: Great Prominent (Peridea anceps)

Hedge Beauty aka Geoff (Alabonia geoffrella)

Scarce Merveille du Jour (Moma alpium)

All images courtesy of Smarden Local History Society

A WALK IN SMARDEN

Smarden was once just a fertile clearing in the Wealden forest, but with the passing of centuries it has evolved into a village of ancient timber-framed houses which line The Street and the surrounding rural areas.

Smarden's present-day character can be traced back to Edward III's grant of a Royal Charter in 1332, which provided for a weekly market and an annual fair lasting five days around Michaelmas Day, on 29 September, a day traditionally marking the end of the harvest and the beginning of Autumn. By the late 15th Century, the weaving industry and Smarden Town, as it became known, flourished as a producer of broadcloth and kersey featuring prominently on Kent county maps of the 18th Century. So it was the wealth of Smarden's cloth industry that shaped the wonderful architecture that you find in the village today.

In 1573, Elizabeth I passed through Smarden on her way from Sissinghurst Castle and three years later renewed the Charter. Copies of both Charters hang in the heritage centre. By the late 18th Century, with the exception of some residual linen production, the textile trade had faded away, the fair and market had also declined, and agriculture with the arrival of the hop industry and its characteristic Oast houses, became once more Smarden's way of life.

Smarden's houses can roughly be divided into three architectural styles and three main phases although these can overlap; between 1400 and 1700 timber frames with wattle and daub, brick and tile infill; between 1700 and 1850 timber frames with weatherboarding or tile hung cladding; and from 1850 onwards brick or other contemporary materials.

To pick out just a few of the village's historic houses will give you a taster, however if you want to walk the streets of Smarden please contact the Local History Society and it can e-mail you an information sheet on the houses in Smarden, which gives a fascinating insight into a typical Wealden village and its historical connections.

Park in the Village Hall car park and as you leave you will see on the opposite side of the road a large weather-boarded house called Jubilee House. It was built in 1772 by Henry Ottaway, a timber merchant to promote this style of building rather than the brick houses which were starting to become more popular.

Jubilee House - now and past

Chessenden House - now and past

As you walk down The Street towards the Church opposite the Minnis you will come to Chessenden House, once named Smarden House. It is a hall-house built in two phases, the first 1450–1480 and then 1480–1510. Look carefully as the 'joins' are very visible from the outside, as is the repositioned front door. The prominent gable end was added in the 17th Century possibly around the same time as the chimney was inserted. In its early life this was probably the house of a rich weaver or merchant but it has since been subject to many uses, including an interval as the village workhouse.

On the same side of the street, slightly further, on is Dragon House. A weaver's house of medieval origin, gable end on to The Street in Flemish style and adorned with carvings. The wealthiest weaver in 16th Century Smarden was of Flemish origin and was known as Dragoner. He may be the origin of these carvings and of the house itself.

If you turn right past the Chequers Inn, which dates from the 14th Century, note the curved weatherboarding on the corner of the Pub leading into Water Lane.

Round the corner in Water Lane the first house on the left is Hartnup House. A 15th Century building depicting the York & Lancashire roses on the north-west doorway. The decorated gable beam, of the 1671 additions by Mathew Hartnup, bears his name, date and two rhinoceros that are a symbol of his membership of the Guild of Apothecaries. Second on the left is Cloth Hall dating back to 1470–1500 when it was a weaver's dwelling and workshop with warehouse room in the roof space. Note the ladder, hook and chain at the gable end. Set in the grass verge by the roadside are several large Bethersden marble stones. These are the last lingering traces of the packhorse route to the port of Faversham.

Walk back to The Street and continue around the S-bend past the Gallery and into Cage Lane. Walk across Town Bridge which was built in 1650 and walk towards the far end of Smarden Village. On the right you will come to The Thatched House, which is another weaver's cottage, used for Miss Marple's Cottage in the 1980 film version of The Mirror Crack'd starring Angela Lansbury and Elizabeth Taylor. Shortly after on the left hand side is Mill House. There has reputedly been a mill on this site since the 12th Century. The last, a post mill, was active until 1912 but fell into disrepair. Mill House looks much the same today and the pond is still there but all that remains of the mill itself is a raised mound in the garden.

Mill House - now and past

There are many interesting and varied walks round Smarden taking in the Wealden landscape and rich history of its houses. St Michael the Archangel Church is open daily for visitors and the Tower can be climbed on special occasions. The Church itself is renowned for its unusually wide nave, accounting for it being known as 'The Barn of Kent'. It is believed this is a result of the wealth generated by the Wealden cloth industry during the 14th Century. Check the Smarden and Biddenden Churches website for details, and Smarden History channel on YouTube for videos about the village's history.

Sarah Ellison, *WKPS Planning*

Main Image: Hartnup House - now

New Local Plans Underway Across the Weald of Kent

The Ashford, Tunbridge Wells and Maidstone Borough Councils have all begun preparing new Local Plans that will shape housing, employment, infrastructure and environmental protection across much of the Weald of Kent for the decades to come.

Although each authority is at an early stage, the decisions made through these Plans will determine not only where development takes place, but whether the infrastructure needed to support it can be delivered at the right time and in the right place. This includes water supply, wastewater treatment, transport, schools, healthcare and other essential services.

Ashford Borough Council has confirmed to WKPS that it will work closely with South East Water and Southern Water during Plan preparation. Current forecasts indicate that water supplies should be sufficient across most of the borough until around 2030, but additional capacity will be required thereafter. As Ashford's new Local Plan will extend to 2043, long-term water resilience will be an important consideration.

Ashford is preparing a new Local Plan under the Government's revised planning system. No sites have yet been allocated and the Council is still developing its overall strategy. The first major opportunity for public involvement will be the Regulation 18 consultation, expected in late 2026.

Tunbridge Wells is reviewing its recently adopted Local Plan for the period 2029-2044. A 4-week Scoping Consultation was expected to begin in July 2026, while landowners and developers have been invited to submit potential development sites.

Maidstone has also begun work on a new Local Plan and is currently undertaking a Call for Sites. In both cases, the submission of land does not indicate that it will be allocated for development.

The Statutory Timetable the Borough Councils Must Follow

Publish local plan timetable	The timetable must be kept up-to-date and set out the anticipated and actual dates for key plan-making stages.
Publish notice of intention to commence local plan preparation	Publication of notice which commences a minimum 4-month notice period so that stakeholders are aware plan-making is beginning.
Scoping consultation	Inviting feedback from stakeholders on how to engage with them and what the plan should contain.
Gateway 1: self-assessment of readiness	Publication of a document setting out details of how you have got ready for plan-making, marking formal commencement of plan-making for the purposes of the 30-month timeframe.
Consultation: proposed local plan content and evidence	Minimum 6-week consultation on the proposed local plan content and evidence, including a draft vision.
Gateway 2	Seeking observations and advice from PINS to support the early resolution of potential soundness issues and progress towards the 'prescribed requirements'.
Consultation: proposed local plan	Minimum 8-week consultation on the proposed local plan and its supporting documents.
Gateway 3	Testing if the proposed local plan has met the 'prescribed requirements' and can proceed to examination.
Examination	Examination of the local plan against the tests of soundness, to be set out in national policy.
Adoption	Publication of the local plan and adoption statement.

WKPS believes that future growth should be judged not only by the number of homes delivered, but by the quality of places created. New development should respond positively to the landscape, reflect local character, provide high-quality green infrastructure, support biodiversity, and integrate successfully with existing communities. Well-designed places, supported by the infrastructure communities need, are essential if growth is to be genuinely sustainable.

WKPS will continue to engage constructively with all three councils and encourages residents to participate in future consultations as the Plans progress.

John Crawford
WKPS Planning

Protecting Our Pets and Protecting Our Rivers: A Modern Approach to Parasite Control

Our pets host a variety of parasites that live on or inside them and often cause significant harm. While fleas and worms are familiar names, the parasite world is far broader, spanning external ectoparasites such as ticks and fleas, and internal endoparasites including lungworms, tapeworms, and roundworms.

Here in our beautiful corner of the Weald and the wider South of England, understanding these parasites is key to keeping pets safe. Local tick populations peak from May to June and again from August to November. Fleas, meanwhile, remain a year-round issue, easily surviving winter inside our homes. Internal parasites also persist year-round, often relying on intermediary hosts like snails and slugs to complete their life cycles.

Traditional veterinary advice has long been to 'blanket treat' all pets for all parasites, all year round. However, a modern, more holistic approach - based on assessing each pet's individual risk, lifestyle, and local parasite distribution, and supported by the British Veterinary Association - is now considered best practice. This approach protects both pets and the environment.

This shift is driven by growing awareness of the ecological impact of routine parasiticide use. Many common parasite treatments contain highly potent chemicals that do not remain confined to the pet; they are washed off or excreted into the environment, where they can harm wildlife and pollinators such as bees. The Environment Agency has repeatedly found pesticide concentrations in waterways exceeding toxicity thresholds for aquatic life and a University of Sussex study found fipronil and imidacloprid - active ingredients in widely used flea treatments - in up to 98% of freshwater samples from English rivers.

To safeguard both pets and the environment, we must work with our vets to evaluate each pet's individual risk. This includes considering age, lifestyle, walking environments, household health status (as some parasites can transmit diseases to humans), and any travel plans.

Ultimately, the ecological cost of year-round blanket chemical treatments is beginning to outweigh the benefits. By moving toward mindful, targeted protection, we can keep our pets healthy while helping the Weald's wildlife and waterways thrive.

Luca Gaffuri
MRCVS DVM GPCert(Endo)
Pure Vet, Ashford

Ancient Woodlands – Irreplaceable and Feeling the Pressure

The AGM discussion was promoted by a panel comprising Frankie Woodgate (Wealden Forester), Peregrine Massey and Mike Bax (owners of Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland in the Weald). The panel explored:

- The strong Wealden heritage
- Nature of the ancient woodland resource
- The influence of man and local economy over the ages
- Non-native species and lasting features
- The human/forest relationship in One Weald

Peregrine Massey chaired the discussion explaining the features of a typical ancient woodland in the Weald with its extensive stands of Oak over Hornbeam, Sweet Chestnut and Hazel Coppice, alongside other scattered broadleaved species including Wild Cherry, Ash and the locally celebrated Chequers (Wild Service).

There is very little true ancient woodland left in the UK. Most of what we have in the Weald is semi-natural, worked by man over the centuries, but recorded as existing since 1600.

Frankie explained that the vibrant and diverse character of Wealden woodland arises from human intervention from neolithic times through to industrialisation. Industrialisation in the Weald came early with the iron industry firstly developed by the Romans but later more extensively by the Anglo Saxons. Hornbeam was widely planted to provide fuel for the Bloomeries, and a burgeoning iron industry in the medieval period led to processing of the Oak standards to provide timber for building, planting and coppicing Sweet Chestnut for hop poles and fencing materials, the manufacture of hurdles from Hazel and of course utilisation of all woodland by-products for firewood.

Evidence from these activities is everywhere to be seen in the semi-natural ancient woodlands of the Weald. There are long oval sawpits excavated to enable double-handed saws to cut timber laid across the pit with the man above the log known as the "Topdog" and the man in the pit below the log as the "Underdog". (Bet you didn't know that!) Round excavated areas in the woodlands are almost certainly charcoal hearths and many of the ponds were formed by the extraction of iron-bearing material, others by extraction of Marle or Bethersden Marble. These treasured and diverse habitats are there because people have created them in order to make a living.

So the woodlands of the Weald were shaped by the activities of man and it was not until the two World Wars that they were left to flourish naturally once again. Too much intervention is damaging but daylight in the woodland is beneficial, leading to ground cover and flora alongside habitats for birds, butterflies and fauna.

Mike Bax explained that the semi-natural ancient woodland can not simply be replaced by planting. The habitats and species assembly takes thousands of years to establish itself. Secondary woodland does not have the enriched soils that supports mycorrhizal fungi and plants such as Wood Anemones (famous semi-natural ancient woodland indicators) which expand their range at a rate of no more than 2cm or 3cm per year.

Development proposals suggest that ancient woodlands can be replaced with a simple planting plan but that is misleading and protection for ancient woodlands should be absolute alongside encouragement towards connectivity wherever that can be achieved.

There must be recognition that woodland management is hard work and expensive and the various timber products are undervalued.

Public access complicates these issues. Woodland byways are constantly abused by off-roading motorbikes and 4x4s. They speed noisily through vulnerable areas disturbing breeding birds and other species.

The Hoads Wood saga was catastrophic. This is an ancient SSSI woodland between Hothfield and Bethersden. It had been carved up following sale into leisure plots and no owners could be found to take responsibility. Fly tipping of industrial waste became established on a large scale and there were catastrophic delays in intervention by the Environment Agency and Authority. Legal costs would have probably been less than £100K to bring an end to the activity early on, but now the clearance operation is estimated at around £10M and years will pass before the woodland recovers from this vandalism.

Audience discussion considered the role of the Forestry Commission with its Conifer plantings and it was noted that there is now more emphasis on planting broadleaf species such as Oak and Sweet Chestnut. A working forest provides timber and wildlife, but also access for the general public. Concern was expressed in relation to tree planting initiatives and their onward management. Expenditure on existing resources might provide better direction and more sequestered carbon, than new planting.

Another growing problem relates to expanding deer populations and the need for regular culling to prevent long-term damage to the woodland resource.

WHAT'S ON 2026

Saturday 12th September | Weald of Kent Ploughing Match

WKPS will have a stand at this great family event. For details visit wkpma.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), a.k.a. Chequer Trees, are an ancient woodland indicator. Weald of Kent Protection Society 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, or for further details, please visit wkps.org.uk/upcoming-events

If you have any suggestions for future events WKPS could organise please get in touch with **secretary@wkps.org.uk** or call **01580 861246 | 07919 871543**

JOIN
WEALD OF KENT PROTECTION SOCIETY

WKPS plays a crucial role in the stewardship of the Weald environment by linking people to place, preventing or mitigating poor land management, and fostering care for our shared natural capital and characterful landscape.

Protect our Wealden landscape & heritage from being destroyed and forgotten. **Become a WKPS member TODAY** and help us to connect with and engage people to build the respect our wonderful Weald needs, to ensure its protection for future generations – **before it's too late**.

wkps.org.uk/join

Weald of Kent Protection Society

Registered Charity: 261992

CONNECT • PROTECT • RESPECT

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