



Special Covid Edition No. 5

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Potatoes in the Savernake

‘reports in the London papers that it [Savernake Forest] has been entirely cleared for the planting of potatoes are, to say the least, grossly exaggerated.’

This quotation is from J D Grose’s report on *The Impact of War on the Wiltshire Flora* from ‘The Wiltshire Archaeological & Natural History Magazine. Vol. L. December 1942 - December 1944’, made me smile and roused my curiosity. I came across this report from a discussion on the decline in heathland in Wiltshire, which took place on the Wiltshire Botanical Society WhatsApp group during spring 2020, where Grose’s work and accounts were acknowledged. Thank you to Martin Buckland for sharing this article from his horticultural and botanical collection and to Steven Jackson for the link to the Biodiversity Heritage Library: a treasure trove articles and somewhere to get lost on a rainy day. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/>

The report, produced by Grose and others commented that only an indication of changes caused by war time activities was possible and to forecast possible later effects. The report dealt with woodlands, clearance of shrub and heathland, ploughing of lowland pastures and fallows, downland cultivation, pasture, weeds of cultivation and garden and roadsides. There are also sections on activities linked to the war, such as tank tracks, airfields, army camps and factories, air raid shelters and new railway tracks and changes to the flora due to these.



Wood Vetch

Felling in woodlands, which had been largely managed by coppicing, was causing concern as some trees had been fully removed. The woodlands would be able to regenerate, if allowed to seed, but Grose comments on the Forestry Commission’s post-war plan to re-plant with alien conifers instead of native trees; he hoped they would have a ‘change of heart’. If only! Not all was negative though, with woodland clearance seeing the re-emergence of Wood Vetch *Vicia sylvatica* in Clout’s Wood, Wroughton. Columbines had also been noted in some cleared woods. In some areas, where woodland had been completely cleared bracken now dominated, so regeneration would be difficult. There had also been damage from dragging and carting, however this had encouraged Toad Rush *Juncus bufonius* and Water-purslane *Lythrum portula* to colonise ruts at Hen’s Wood, Marlborough. Both species were previously uncommon in this area.

Shrub and heathland had been extensively cleared with Grose commenting that in a letter to the local press ‘a Wiltshire gentleman recently stated that the clearance of scrubland was his hobby!’ Such clearance had been undertaken much more thoroughly with shrub and small trees uprooted to allow ploughing and cultivation. Previously the limited scrub in Wiltshire, on lightly grazed acidic soil, was home some rare to Wiltshire species, especially around the margins. Grose hoped that when cultivation ceased heath and scrub would revert, but a number of rarer and more local plants would be lost as the seed bank would no longer be available. He particularly lamented the loss of Petty Whin *Genista anglica* and Creeping Willow *Salix repens* at Lydiard Plain, the former not seen elsewhere in North Wiltshire and the later only at one other known locality. Clench Common had also been cleared and land reclaimed for cultivation on Malmesbury Common.

Notably much of the lowland pastures and fallows were now under cultivation and Grose thought that these could ‘revert substantially to its pre-war state in due course’. Flax was a common crop during the war, used for rope, fabric and parachute harnesses, with linseed an important food stuff for cattle. Grose notes that flax was previously grown extensively in Wiltshire from the Anglo-Saxon period to the 19th century. He expected stray plants to be found for a number of years even if cultivation ceased. Smooth Cat’s-ear *Hypochaeris glabra*, and Small Cudweed *Filago minima*, known in a field at Sandy Lane were now lost and Grose hoped these would re-emerge. Sadly it would appear that this has not been the case. A number of fields had been left fallow in 1940 due to suspected un-exploded bombs.

Gentle slopes on the downs had been ploughed and again Grose felt there should be little permanent effect to the flora, especially as the steeper slopes, which cannot be cultivated, could act as a seed bank. However Grose thought



Tuberous Thistle - Pat Woodruffe

that the scarce Tuberous Thistle *Cirsium tuberosum* at North Down, Cherhill was unlikely to re-appear, but the hybrid *C. acaule x tuberosum* (*C. x medium*) would most likely survive. It would appear that all was not lost with these rare *Cirsium* species with some recovery having occurred by careful habitat management.

Lowland pastures and less steep downs were little changed with more intensive grazing offset by a decreased size of herds and flocks with fewer rabbits due to shooting and trapping. Shortage of labour on some farms had meant that 'injurious pasture invaders' had not been dealt with and between Clyffe Pypard and Bincknoll there had been an increase of Woolly Thistle *Cirsium eriophorum*.

Disturbance of previously uncultivated land had favoured Corncockle *Agrostemma githago* and Cornflower *Centaurea cyanus*, had reappeared in several places; both now rare. Field Cow-wheat *Melampyrum arvense*, not recorded since 1895, was recorded at Aldbourne and Silbury Hill. However most regularly cultivated fields seemed free from unusual weeds and Grose put this down to better cultivation and the use of home produced seed instead of imported. Due to gardens not being cultivated ornamental flowers had set seed, which had escaped into the wider environment. Less treatment of roadside verges had allowed taller grasses to become more dominant, notably Cock's-foot *Dactylis glomerata* and False Oat-Grass *Arrhenatherum elatius*, a management issue which continues today.

Activities more directly associated with war time had also had an effect. The caterpillar tracks of armoured vehicles had caused bare slopes and damage to bushes and young trees. The tracks soon became overgrown by a mixture of downland plants and spread seeds more widely to areas away from their normal habitats. In 1943 the first colonists on a Warminster Down track were by Meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria*, Sneezewort *Achillea ptarmica* and Meadow Fescue *Schedonorus pratensis*, all happier with wetter feet.

Where airfields, camps and factories had been built areas had been enclosed and grazing ceased, allowing coarser grasses such as Upright Brome *Bromopsis erecta* and False Oat-Grass *Arrhenatherum elatius* to increase. On bare ground caused by building rapid colonisation by Weld *Reseda luteola*, Shepherd's-purse *Capsella bursa-pastoris* and Common Nettle *Urtica dioica* had occurred. Grose anticipated that these sites would rapidly reverse to pre-war states once grazing resumed.

Herbs had continued to be collected for medical and other uses. However the number of professional collectors was small and although a long list of medicinal herbs was circulated and collection organised by the Ministry of Supply with assistance by the Women's Institute and the Women's Royal Voluntary Service the amount collected in Wiltshire was relatively small, possibly due to the lack of drying facilities. Most commonly collected were dandelion roots, elder flowers, nettles and comfrey leaves. Larger quantities of rosehips and horse chestnuts were collected later on in the war period.

I knew about rose hips, for vitamin C, as the syrup still featured in 1960s school diners; especially with ice-cream or rice pudding and was always greeted with great excitement. However I was unaware of the importance of horse chestnuts in both world wars. The extracted starch could be fermented anaerobically to produce acetone, a vital component for explosive manufacture.

Before the war railway tracks had been sprayed with a solution of sodium chlorate and calcium chloride (Atlacide). This practice had been largely abandoned and there had been more widespread growth of Annual Wall-rocket *Diplotaxis muralis*, Thale Cress *Arabidopsis thaliana*, Common Toadflax *Linaria vulgaris* and Small Toadflax *Chaenorhinum minus*. Where new tracks had been laid, for a factory in North Wiltshire a couple of new to the area plants, Small Cudweed *Filago minima* and Sheep's-bit *Jasione montana* were noted. There were no known occurrences of these within forty miles, so they were presumed to have arrived on re-used sleepers or rolling stock. Grose wondered if they would become established. It would appear not.

Home guard trenches, cut in the early 1940s had largely become re-vegetated by the end of the war. A number of trenches had become partially aquatic with Canadian Waterweed *Elodea canadensis*, Curled Pondweed *Potamogeton crispus* growing vigorously in a new habitat. Yellow Iris *Iris pseudacorus*, Soft-rush *Juncus effusus*, Jointed Rush *J. articulatus* and Hard Rush *J. inflexus* had also been recorded, in these new trench habitats and Grose suspects that visiting birds had been responsible for their introduction as similar colonisation occurred in bomb craters. Presumably these new habitats were near to towns and areas which needed special protection, so largely vanished in the immediate post-war period.

I found this article useful background to our ever changing flora and enjoyed the historical insight. I will look out for those potatoes in the Savernake!

Alison Robinson

Botanising At Speed

Some of you who know me may know of a rather disconcerting habit I have (actually I have more than one). But what I'm thinking of in this case is the habit of botanising from a moving car. To my knowledge it's not taught on any course. It is a natural skill (questionable).



Over many years it has led to some interesting finds.

My first ever sighting of Greater Spearwort *Ranunculus*

lingua was when passing a village pond at speed; I am told that I did an almost 180° turn without stopping. You'll be glad to know it was a previously unknown location (for the *Ranunculus*, not the U-turn).

This type of botanising has its advantages, certainly on the motorway where stopping is a no-no, so being able to identify species at speed is about the only option. One example is Danish Scurvygrass *Cochlearia danica*, whose distinctive pinkish flowers from late January onwards create nowadays a ribbon throughout the length of the M4 and A303 central reservations in Wilts. There's no way you could saunter down these carriageways on foot.

I'm not alone in this habit. A certain VC recorder from Somerset, who is not a fan of botanising while driving, regularly uses me as the driver, while her GPS is put to good use getting instant grid reference locations of species we pass.

Many years ago, when undertaking work in Salisbury and travelling regularly down the A36, it became evident that whilst driving, I was looking at a large number of native Black Poplars *Populus nigra* subsp. *betulifolia*, which until that moment remained unrecorded. One afternoon on returning home along this stretch I had a couple of hours to spare. With the use of a pair of binoculars with a bit of basic triangulation, I managed to record from the car 136 trees in 27 one-kilometre squares. Fear not, this did involve actually stopping the car in the odd lay-by.

In 2019, on travelling back from Royal Wootton Bassett with Martin, a totally unknown native Black Poplar turned up on the side of the road. I'm still apologising to Martin for the abrupt emergency stop.

So keep your eyes out but also remember the Highway Code.

Dave Green

Spotted by Pat in RHS 'The Garden' Nov 2019, as a caption to a photograph –

'Local young people cleared ferns at RHS Bridgewater as part of their introduction to nature'.



Field Meetings 2021

I just wanted to let you know that I cannot promise any type of programme for field meetings in 2021. With the rest of life on-hold at present together with the unknown factor of when restrictions will be lifted enough to support group gatherings, I have not planned any diary dates. The original idea was to simply use the 2020 diary as a basis for this season, but I am guessing that until the majority of the population have had both their COVID-19 inoculations then restrictions on large gatherings will remain.

As soon as I have any news, I will of course contact you all immediately. In the meantime the Committee will keep you informed and amused with regular newsletters. Please feel free to send us any articles, amusing anecdotes, notes on your favourite wild flower or perhaps a site you like to botanise at.

Martin Buckland

Do you have any news or comments? I would be pleased to publish these in the next issue. Maybe you would like to write a full-blown article.

By email: richard@theaisbitts.co.uk. By post: Richard Aisbitt, 84 Goddard Avenue, Swindon, SN1 4HT

Get to know your committee

Dave Green

Who influenced you most growing up?

My dad. It was only years later that I realised quite how much of a grounding he gave me and all things nature. Born a country boy, he moved into the city, but never lost that love of the countryside. A fisherman, he took me fishing with him as soon as I could walk. All those hours sitting by the riverside, talking to him about what was around me, a process of osmosis.

Who do you admire now?

Absolutely everybody who works in the NHS and the emergency and caring services over these months of pandemic.

What did you do in your working life?

I was apprenticed as an electrician after leaving school at 15; qualified at 21. Had my own business at 23 and never ever worked for anyone else ever again. Over the years I became a builder until my early 40s when Ali and I set up an ecological consultancy. This was in the early years of this profession, and a lot of the work that we did was new and innovative.

Why botany?

In 1973 when I had long hair and smoked interesting-smelling cigarettes, I decided to walk the Ridgeway in Wiltshire. I came across a totally unknown plant to me, Common Vetch. It was perhaps the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. That was it. From that point on I wanted to be a botanist

What is your best find?

I love new records. I botanise but I also I hunt. Over the years I've learnt to look at habitats and say, "Oh, if those species are growing there may also be something much rarer." I have a critical eye for detail and have been able to recognise and identify and record species not known to science. I've been very fortunate in life to work with some amazing botanists.

Do you have a favourite garden flower?

Probably daffodils: they lift my mood and tell me that spring is here.

What books are you reading now?

Just finished: The Hidden life of trees by Peter Wohlleben, wonderful.

Am reading: Rewilding by Paul Jepson and Cain Blyth. Cain took over our consultancy and has taken it into this new very important area of Ecology/Conservation.

Mind you there's always about five floras/technical Botany books open on my desk at any time.

Name one thing people may not know about you.

At the age of 10 I suffered a bad accident in the playground - who remembers swingboats? I spent 10 weeks in hospital, nearly lost my left leg and missed the 11+ exams, so went to a pretty rough secondary school. A few years ago I was diagnosed as dyslexic, which may go some way to explaining why school wasn't my favourite time and I never took any exams.

I was the BSBI referee for VC7 N Wilts for over 20 years.

Aside from Botany what are your other interests?

Walking, architecture - oh and did I mention botany? And travel. This will be the first year in at least 25 that I have not spent some weeks in the Far East, or somewhere else hot.

Dave



Update from the Project Group

During 2020 this recently formed group was tasked with looking at where this society should be putting its recording energies post the Atlas Project. Any proposed group gatherings/ field meetings are on hold at the moment due to the pandemic, but these will, of course, return as a major part of the annual calendar as soon as permitted.

Below we have set out the proposed future recording activities for the society over the next few years. This certainly does not preclude members from other botanising; if you find yourself in a special place, do please let us know what was there.

- 1) **Ongoing updating of 1km square recording**, with a view for data to go forward to new Wiltshire Flora.
- 2) **Hunting the rarities**. This will include looking for rare, localised, or under-recorded species in the county
- 3) **Survey of County Wildlife Sites (CWS) and/or SSSIs**. We are hoping to gain access to this group of sites and will report progress as and when it takes place. We hope that some of our members might know the owners of such sites that are local to them and be able to help us to make contact with them. The personal touch can work wonders.

It might be winter but there are still things to see in the botanical world. Below is one such species that we need our members help with.

Danish Scurvygrass *Cochlearia danica*

Much has been reported in recent years of the increase of salt loving plants on our major roads. If you look at present maps of the county, especially relating to Danish Scurvygrass, it becomes evident that this plant is frequent along the A303 the A36 and the M4 and also in areas around and to the south of Salisbury and around Chippenham. This is a species can be seen flowering from the car from February onwards.

We would like to ask our members to record the locations where they see the plants and to send them to Richard.



Danish Scurvygrass - from Syme, English Botany, 1868



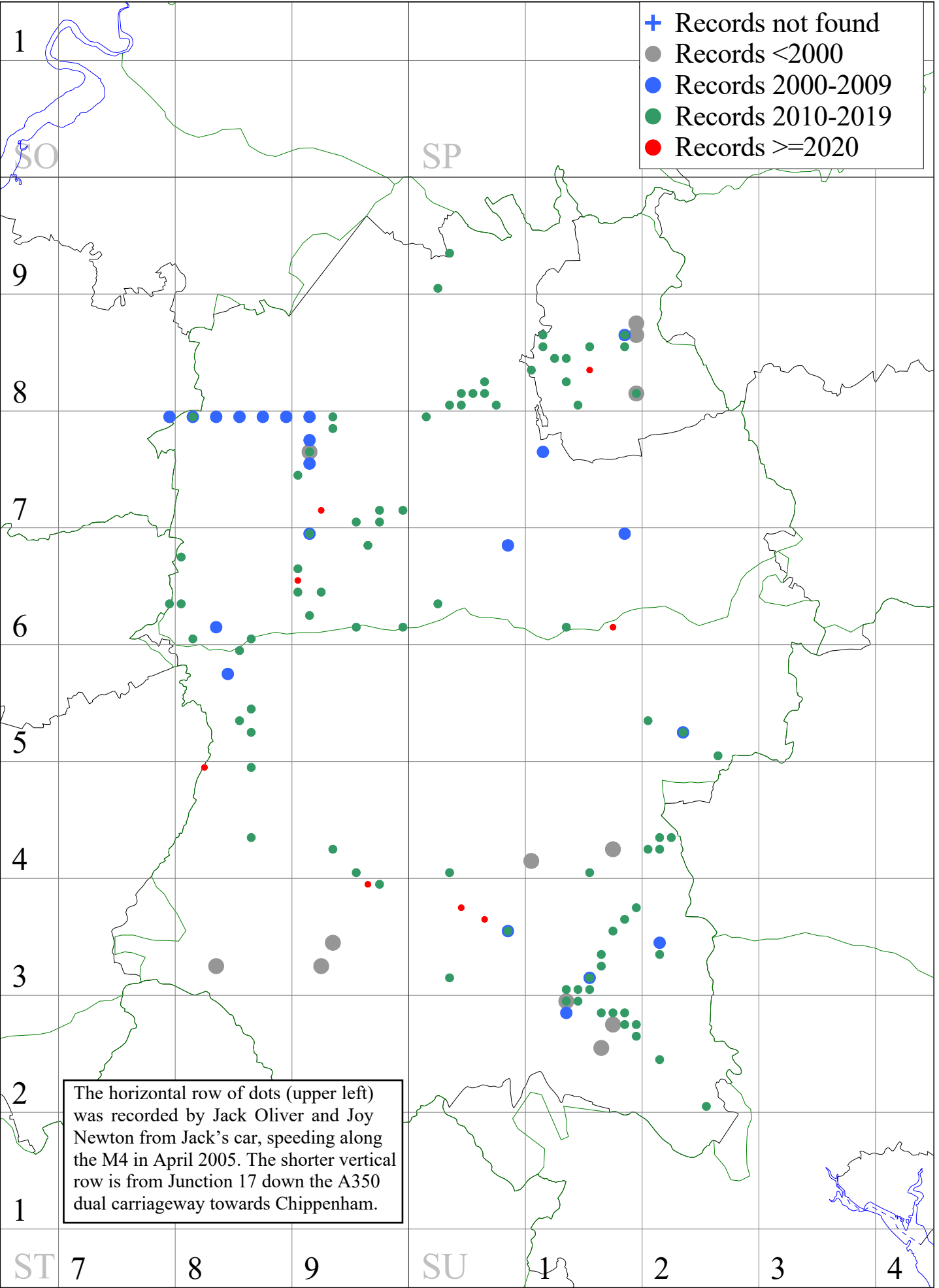
Spurge Laurel - photo Mariko Whyte

Another plant worth looking out for at this time of year is **Spurge Laurel** *Daphne laureola*. It often grows on the edge of ancient woodlands and has greenish, highly scented flowers in February.

Quite a few garden bulbs and corms set seed easily and wander around, sometimes outside the boundaries of an owner's property. These too are worthy of note although we hope that, in years to come, they will not be regarded as invasive!

More detailed information about some of these projects, how to choose your square and access the current data held by the society will appear in the next newsletter.

Cochlearia danica (Danish Scurvygrass)





Franchises Lodge

Some feedback from our meetings in March and May 2019

We made two visits to this newly established RSPB reserve, one to look in part of the woodland and the other to record in a series of fields known as Pimlico Fields which include two small slivers of SSSI. We split into small groups and recorded each field separately (see Newsletter Issue 49, 2020). Although the results were rather disappointing, in that we did not find any of the flagship species for which the SSSI status had been granted, we were able to supply the RSPB with a comprehensive spreadsheet of the condition in which we found it.

Last February, I was asked to report these findings and also those which Anne, Sue, Ness and I had made from other parts of the woodland to the site's AGM. I did this and commented that, as far as the fields were concerned, management was badly needed, and damage to any existing flora was unlikely. The events of 2020 precluded further visits but it turns out that the RSPB management group have made the most of that time. The 2021 AGM, held on Zoom, reported that volunteers had now cleared the fields of old fencing and other debris and that new fences and water are to be laid on ready for extensive cattle grazing which will also extend into the adjacent wood-pasture. The plan is to take a late hay crop from the fields.

I have also heard that survey work is being carried out on a New Forest Northern Cluster Farm Project and that the WBS results from 2019 have been made available to those involved in the work! Isn't it great to learn that our work – pleasurable as it was – is actually valued?

Pat Woodruffe

Residential Visit to Suffolk, May 2021

This visit has been cancelled and all participants who had booked group accommodation have been informed.

Following the start of the new year lockdown about half of the members who signed up in 2020 had serious reservations about participating. Also, doubt was cast on the legality of people from at least eight households meeting together under one roof for several nights as soon as next May. As a result, the committee felt that the best course of action would be to cancel, which I have done. To my surprise, the 'non-refundable' deposit is being returned to Sue Fitzpatrick, who will be contacting those involved. Presumably this is because of the unprecedented circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Let us hope that the vaccination programme will be effective and we can, perhaps, look forward to a weekend together later in the year.

Pat Woodruffe.

Subscriptions 2021. Those of you who usually pay by cheque are welcome to do so, posting it to me at:

Sue Fitzpatrick, 4 Wyndham Park, Salisbury, SP1 3BA.

Or better still create a standing order or bank transfer - email me and I will give you the account details.

Subs remain £15 single, £20 family.

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Cover picture: Field Cow-wheat, featured in Alison Robinson's article. Photo Richard Aisbitt, Isle of Wight