

The Green Linnet

The newsletter for owners of Sites of Nature Conservation Interest



Issue 24 : November 2021

Gillingham Royal Forest

The Gillingham Royal Forest project is a community partnership working to restore, recreate and reconnect the natural heritage of the historic former royal hunting forest. Launched in 2019, this project is made possible thanks to National Lottery players, Southern Co-op and South Western Railway Customer and Communities Improvement Fund (CCIF) and runs until 2023.

Gillingham Royal Forest has a rich history of people and wildlife. There are scheduled ancient monuments, ancient hedgerows and woodlands with veteran trees, ponds and the headlands of chalk streams. The natural and cultural features of this land form a living landscape of great importance and value to the local community, providing opportunities for learning, recreation and participation in conserving its heritage.

The former royal hunting forest dates from at least the 13th Century, when King John arrived in Gillingham to stay at a hunting lodge within a royal deer park, surrounded by extensive forest. Later, the lodge was to become known as 'King's Court'. Traces of its great rampart and moat can still be seen today and are scheduled ancient monuments. Royal interest in the forest declined from the 14th Century and in 1665 it was deforested, causing a period of social unrest that continued until the end of the English Civil War. Veteran oaks and ancient hedgerows remain as clues to a natural and social history that has created the landscape we see today.

Wildlife of the Gillingham Royal Forest include the protected species Bechstein's and Daubenton's bats. It is a hotspot for great crested newts and its streams and rivers are home to otters and water voles. Dormice and barn owls, as well as the silver washed fritillary and purple hairstreak butterflies can also be found here. We hope that volunteer surveyors will discover more about the wildlife of the area during the project.

Although we had to put the project on hold due to the Covid-19 restrictions through 2020, work on the project has now begun again in earnest and we look forward to continuing to work with landowners and members of the local community to develop opportunities for recreation, heritage and wildlife within the Gillingham Royal Forest.

Gillingham Royal Forest is a partnership project led by Dorset Wildlife Trust and

includes: Blackmore Vale Line Community Partnership, Dorset Council, Environment Agency, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group South West, Gillingham Action for Nature Group (GANG), Gillingham Local History Society and Museum, Gillingham Town Council, Gillingham Walkers, Motcombe Parish Council, Natural England, North Dorset Health Walks, NFU, Riverfly Group, Stour Catchment Partnership, The Three Rivers Partnership and U3A . Ongoing, the partners and community groups that we work with is likely to expand to include others as the project develops.

Events

Events, including guided walks, survey training, workshops and practical tasks will be published on our events guide at www.dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk/events and our new Gillingham Royal Forest e-news. For more information, please visit www.dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk/gillingham-royal-forest or contact Emma Godden on egodden@dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk.



King John hunting © BRITISH LIBRARY



Gillingham Royal Forest Project area

Map produced by Dorset Wildlife Trust © Crown copyright and database rights 2019 OS 0100060963



Part of a nationwide network of Wildlife Trusts

Duncliffe Wood from Coppleridge, Motcombe © Nicky Hoar



Made possible with



Protecting **Wildlife** for the Future

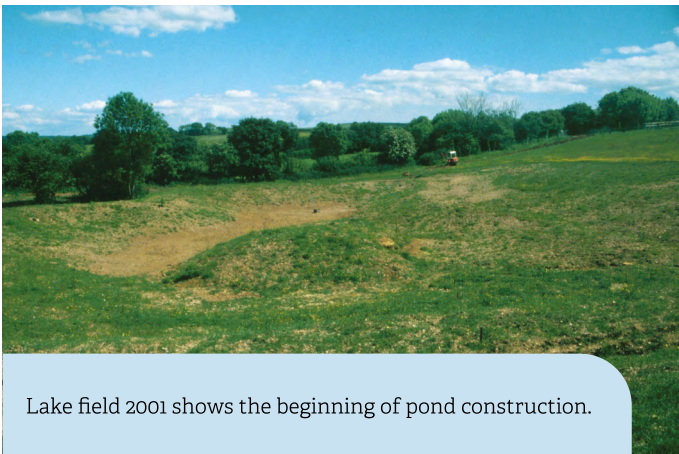
Providence Farm achieves SNCI status

Providence Farm is an 8 ha smallholding in Broadwindsor (near Beaminster in West Dorset). We moved here in late 1998. Four of the five fields had been used for grazing horses and the fifth (and largest) was a failed experiment in growing animal feed. We started by planting around 3000 trees and shrubs in a quarter of the area (thereby creating 'Mole Corks Wood' - taking its name from an old field name) and then we made a 0.2 ha pond. The pond has been a major factor in the environmental enhancement of the property. Not only did it bring many new bird and mammal species but, by spreading the excavated subsoil around, the variety of plants was increased too. Glow worms were a surprising feature - the perimeter of the pond became a favoured haunt as soon as the vegetation became naturally established and it has remained so ever since.

The wood is taking much longer to settle down and with many maintenance issues along the way: voles nesting in tree guards and gnawing their way through young trees; trees failing to get a grip in the thin soils over clay and needing stout staking; roe deer and squirrels attacking bark at various levels; a mysterious disease affecting some willow species; and now ash dieback of course. A balance must be struck between keeping rides open and removing really ugly failures on the one hand and wanting to allow natural decay processes on the other.

Half of the ex-arable field had been used for the tree planting; the other half was returned to permanent grassland. All of the grassland was initially managed for sheep and hay production with our own sheep, but five years of looking after Jacob sheep was enough to convince us that it made little sense. It was a lot of work, was not cost-effective and, on such a small area, was not conducive to the rehabilitation of all the fields. It was then that Pastures New - the DWT-managed scheme to spread wildflower seed around by moving 'green hay' from donor to recipient sites - came to the rescue. The Kingcombe Meadows reserve provided the hay which was collected by a forage harvester and conveyed to Providence Farm in large muck-spreader trailers, where it was sprayed over two prepared fields (the preparation followed hay making and involved savage disc harrowing to create about 40% bare soil exposure).

The following (2009) Spring saw an amazing transformation in the two recipient fields; yellow-rattle had arrived. Because of the species' parasitic control of the less desirable 'coarse' grasses which would otherwise limit floral diversity, this is the almost essential first step in any restoration back to 'flower-rich hay meadow' - but we hadn't expected such dominance. Sheep were now 'borrowed' from neighbours to graze the regrowth after the hay crop.



Lake field 2001 shows the beginning of pond construction.



The wildlife pond after 10 years.



Jacob sheep grazing the ex-arable field in 2004 (after being resown). This was before the 2008 seed transfer.



Green hay from Kingcombe Meadows nature reserve being spread in 2008.

By Mike Lowing, landowner



In 2009 the fields spread with green hay in the previous year were transformed; yellow rattle had arrived.



Green-winged orchid appeared in 2019.



Spreading green hay field onto field the hard way in 2011.



Small scale seed transfer by cut and collect machine and trailer.

Subsequent internal transfers of green hay to the other three fields have taken place both with the assistance of the Pastures New team and by using a small forage harvester which I use behind my compact tractor.

We have continued to plant trees (replacing ash may be an issue for the next owners!), construct ponds, remove barbed wire, lay hedges (some with the help of DWT's team of West Dorset volunteers) and generally trying to enhance our holding for the benefit of wildlife in general. It still provides a useful hay crop and grazing so is a compromise between normal grass farming and rewilding - the latter is not really a sensible option on so small an area. The reward has been increased variety of plants (green-winged orchid made a first appearance in 2018) and animals (otter has visited, water shrew is resident). Tangible recognition came in the form of SNCI status - recognised in late 2019.

We are very grateful for the advice and support which we have received from DWT along the way, particularly Nick Gray (West Dorset Conservation Officer). And a special thanks to Dorset Flora Group County Recorder Robin Walls who spent a painstaking day counting species in all five fields.

More than 70 hectares of grassland sites were enhanced, much of this with green hay and/or wildflower seed as part of the Pastures New project from 2007 to 2012.

This is the first of those sites to meet the criteria for selection as a SNCI.

Providence Farm achieves SNCI status

Providence Farm is an 8 ha smallholding in Broadwindsor (near Beaminster in West Dorset). Mike and Gerry Lowing moved there in late 1998. Four of the five fields had been used for grazing horses and the fifth (and largest) was a failed experiment in growing animal feed. They started by planting around 3000 trees and shrubs in a quarter of the area (thereby creating 'Mole Corke Wood' - taking its name from an old field name) and then they made a 0.2 ha pond. The pond has been a major factor in the environmental enhancement of the property. Not only did it bring many spreading the excavated subsoil around, the variety of plants was increased too. Glow worms were a surprising feature - the perimeter of the pond became a favoured haunt as soon as the vegetation became naturally established and it has remained so ever since.

The wood is taking much longer to settle down and with many maintenance issues along the way: voles nesting in tree guards and gnawing their way through young trees; trees falling to get a grip in the thin soils over clay and needing stout staking; roe deer and squirrels attacking bark at various levels; a mysterious disease affecting some willow species; and now sally dieback of course. A balance has to be struck between keeping rides open and removing really ugly failures on the one hand and wanting to allow natural decay processes on the other.

Half of the ex-arable field had been used for the tree planting; the other half was returned to permanent grassland. All of the grassland was initially managed for sheep and hay production with their own sheep but five years of looking after Jacob sheep was enough to convince the Lowings that it made little sense. It was a lot of work, was not cost-effective and, on such a small area, was not conducive to the rehabilitation of all the fields. It was then that the Pastures New - the DWT-managed scheme - to spread wildflower seed around by moving 'green hay' from donor to recipient sites - came to the rescue. The

The pond after ten years

Green hay received from Kingcombe Meadows in 2008



Future Agri-environment Funding

After many hurdles the Agriculture Act went through late in 2020 shortly before Brexit.

Farmed land covers over 70% of England (and Dorset), so it is crucial that future land management both produces high quality food and helps reverse the nature and climate emergencies.

We're pleased that the Agriculture Act targets funding for environmental 'public goods' and will be looking closely for measures that can help manage SNCIs and other places where wildlife can thrive.

The exact shape of future funding schemes is still to be determined, to which end Defra are funding some 'tests and trials' around the country. Dorset Wildlife Trust, FWAG South West and Dorset AONB are involved in one of these trials, so we will be ensuring that Defra have local examples and ideas from Dorset.

Meanwhile 2021 has seen some changes to Countryside Stewardship, and more detail provided on forthcoming reforms under the 'Agricultural Transition Plan' which sets out the basic shape of the future Environmental Land Management schemes and reductions in area-based payments. It is an uncertain time, which we'll need to work through together.



Dorset Wildlife Trust offer a wide range of consultancy services for owners and managers of existing SNCIs and for anyone else who wishes to improve biodiversity on their land. This support can range from wildlife surveys and fieldwork training to management advice and project development.

Please contact Hamish Murray hmurray@dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk if you would like more information or to arrange an initial site meeting.



Magical Marshwood Vale Landscape Enhancement Initiative

Funded by the National Grid, to offset the visual impact of their pylons in West Dorset, and working in partnership with Dorset AONB, DWT volunteers and contractors have, over the last few years, been busily engaged in habitat restoration in the Marshwood Vale. We've laid 1.8 kms of hedge, planted (and guarded) over 120 new hedgerow oak trees, recreated 7 Ha of wildflower meadow, grown local provenance wild daffodils from seed, restored 8 ponds in a Great Crested Newt heartland, and relieved 4 SNCIs of scrub and other injurious species. We've also carried out monitoring surveys on 10 other SNCIs in the project area, a swathe of land between Bridport and the Devon border extending 3 kms either side of the high voltage wires. Applications for Landscape Enhancement Initiative funding are currently over-subscribed but if you have a habitat restoration idea in sight of the pylons, do please get in touch with Nick Gray, DWT West Dorset Conservation Officer:
ngray@dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk

Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL)



The FiPL programme will provide funding to farmers and land managers within Dorset's AONBs for projects that support nature recovery, mitigate impacts of climate change, engage people with landscape and cultural heritage, or support nature-friendly, sustainable farm businesses. Contact Rachel Janes: rachel.janes@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk or 01305 228256. For more information see: <https://www.dorsetaonb.org.uk/resource/farming-in-protected-landscapes/>

For further information on SNCIs:

Mariko Whyte, Conservation Officer: mwhyte@dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk or 01305 264620

For advice on Countryside Stewardship (DWT):

Nick Gray, West Dorset Conservation Officer: 07824 438974 or ngray@dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk
Emily Newton, Landowner Liaison Officer: 07528557685 or enewton@dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk

Forestry Commission:

Chris Gibbard West Dorset and Weymouth & Portland): 01392 834278 and Ian Briscoe (rest of Dorset): 01392 834259

FWAGSW:

Alex Butler: alex.butler@fwagsw.org.uk

SNCI Project
financially supported by

