

## Autumn/Winter 2009

## Newsletter 42

### 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

It was at Michelmas 1989 that the newly formed Company, The Magog Trust, purchased the 66.10 ha arable field off Haverhill Road for £327,000. This followed a period of intense campaigning and fund raising from February 1989, including the sale of 'GOGS' of which around 3,000, costing £5 each, were purchased. These are nominal portions of land solely for fund raising purposes i.e. they do not actually exist. They are no longer relevant in terms of current upkeep and maintenance and are no substitute for Membership!

The Official Opening of the site was in June 1993 by which time the planting of six woods totalling 9.7 ha was started in March 1991 under the Farm Woodland Scheme. Arable farming had started on this land in 1894 with the last harvest gathered in 1990.



To celebrate the event we are holding a series of **Guided Walks on the Magog Down on Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> September.** Do come along and see the Magog Down as it is now, twenty years on and hear more of how the Trust is achieving its aims.

*From the Car Park  
11am, 2pm & 5pm  
£2 per person*

### Objectives of The Magog Trust

- The provision of facilities for
- *-informal recreation and a dogs-on-lead site except in designated areas*
  - *-the conservation, protection and restoration of the countryside in Cambridgeshire*
  - *-the support of registered charities having similar objectives*

### Purchase Grants/Donations

Edmund Vestey (loan repaid)	£100,000
Bank loan	£100,000
Grant SCDC	£90,000
GOGs and donations	£15,000
Cambridge County Council	£10,000
Cambridge City Council grant	£9,500
Stapleford Parish Council grant	£3,000
<b>Car Park</b>	
Countryside Commission	£10,000
SCDC	£12,000



## Flowers on the Down

### Sainfoin (*Onobrychis viciifolia*)

The beautiful and bright pink flowers of sainfoin, with their red veins, can be spotted from a distance. They are held in dense, conical terminal spikes well above the leaves. Part of the legume family, the plants grow on grassland, agricultural land and wasteland. The leaves are pinnate, alternate, with 6 to 14 pairs of oblong to linear leaflets. Sainfoin has been blooming on the Down over the summer and typically bloom between June and

September, pollinated by honey bees and solitary bees. These highly nutritious plants were important forage for heavy working horses in agriculture being introduced for fodder in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and named from the French, St Foyn. We believe the last crop on Magog Down was in the 1940s. It is an excellent source of nectar for honey production as well as pollen for bee food.

## Seats On The Down

Have you ever chanced to pause a while on one of the seats on the Magog Down? You may wonder how they got there and who they are for. There are now 46 seats, many of which are on the North Down giving views of Cambridge, the rest on the South Down, right to the furthest points which catch the evening light in summer. All these seats have been donated to the Magog Trust, the majority in memory of a loved one. One of the first is for Harold Holt, a noted village personality and a founder Governor of the Magog Trust who did so much in obtaining grants from SCDC when the project started.

Happily the last seat installed was enjoyed this summer, on his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, by the person to whom it is dedicated, Professor

Thurston Shaw. He also lived in Stapleford and amongst his other accomplishments, was a President of Cambridgeshire Ramblers Association, often walking up from the village to visit the Gog Magog Hills. He contributed saplings of the original Spindleberry trees to the woods on the Magog Down which he propagated in his garden.



In June this year, an excellent job was completed by 15 scouts and 4 leaders from the Shelford Scout Group with 12

seats on the South Down cleaned and treated with boiled linseed oil.

For the present, no further seat donations are being accepted, as we feel the present distribution is just right.

## Volunteer Groups

As reported in the last Newsletter, small working groups are undertaking various tasks on a monthly basis on the Down. Over the latter part of the spring and summer work has been carried out on the Bowl Barrow largely clearing remaining weed debris mostly of Fumitory and Sow Thistle. There have been a couple of sessions in the sheep paddocks pulling ragwort. The Weeds Act 1959 specifies five injurious weeds: Common Ragwort, Spear Thistle, Creeping of Field Thistle, Broad Leaved Dock and Curled Dock. Common ragwort is the only one of the five weeds specified which poses a risk to animal health. If ingested by horses, ponies and other livestock, common ragwort causes cumulative liver damage and can have potentially fatal consequences.



*If you have an hour or two to spare on the first Wednesday of each month, do come and join us at 2.30pm in the Car Park.*

## The Myxomycetes or Slime Moulds

Despite their vital role in soil ecology, the *Myxomycetes* go largely unregarded by field naturalists due largely to their small size and unpredictable occurrence.

Sometimes known as *Mycetozoa* or "fungus animals", the slime moulds have traditionally been studied by mycologists, but they are now classified as Protozoa. They spend the greater part of their life in the soil or in decaying wood in the form of single celled myxamoebae feeding on organic matter and bacteria. Unlike fungi, they are not decomposers, and cannot break down cellulose. They play a vital role in the carbon cycle and also release nitrates and phosphates into the soil.

Slime moulds only become evident at the fruiting stage. After fusion of compatible myxamoebae the newly formed diploid cell undergoes multiple nuclear divisions without cell division to form a plasmodium (the slime in slime mould), which eventually migrates to the surface of the soil or log, or up the stems of plants to produce visible and often brightly



coloured sporocarps, and to release their spores into the air.

*Myxomycetes* can be found almost anywhere in damp conditions after rain. Most are no more than a few millimetres tall, but many species

produce large clusters of sporocarps, or are brightly coloured, making them easier to find.

Only a few species have been recorded from Magog Down:

One of the largest fruit bodies belongs to *Enteridium lycoperdon* (left), once thought to be a variety of puffball. It forms silvery cushions up to 10 cm across, usually on dead standing trees in spring. As it matures, the silvery covering becomes whiter, and eventually ruptures to



release a mass of cocoa brown spores.

*Arcyria denudata* produces clusters of stalked, pink sporangia on rotten wood, which when mature look like tiny loafahs. The "spongy" part of the loafah is the capillitium - a network of elastic threads or elaters which support the spores and aid their dispersal.

The sporangia of *Didymium difforme* are stalkless, resting on the surface of the substrate of leaf litter. They are less than 1mm tall and up to about 1mm long, forming elongated plasmodiocarps. Being covered in an eggshell like crust of lime crystals, the young sporangia are white, but on maturity the peridium ruptures to reveal a blackish mass of spores.

*Mucilago crustacea* can be found encrusting plant stems with a white spongy mass of fused sporangia up to several cm long. The white colour is caused by lime in the sporangium walls, which disrupt to release a black spore mass, but it is the immature creamy white or pale yellow plasmodial slime that gives this species its common name of "Dog's Vomit"!

John Holden

### Dates for your diary

1 <sup>st</sup> Saturday of month	Stapleford Bird Club on the Down
1 <sup>st</sup> Wednesday	Down Working Group
27 <sup>th</sup> September 2009	Down Walks
10 <sup>th</sup> October 2009	AGM Johnson Hall, Stapleford
4 <sup>th</sup> April 2010	Easter Day Service on Down
June 2010	Stapleford Village Show
29 <sup>th</sup> September 2010	Members' 21 <sup>st</sup> Birthday Party

### Badgers on Little Trees Hill.

There is evidence of badger activity in the sandy soil strata behind the Bowl Barrow at the top of Little Trees Hill, which is a scheduled site of archaeological interest and we would like to prevent damage to the archaeological site if possible by deterring further badger activity.

Cambridge Mammal Group carried out a survey in June 2009 when there appeared to be one definitely active hole on the inner (pit) edge of the Bowl Barrow, along with 2-3 other large holes, which did not appear to be currently in use.



Some of the holes have large hills of chalk spoil below them, showing that badgers have tried digging in the chalk, but they may have found it hard going and decided to abandon it. All holes are in areas with numerous tree roots, which would hamper digging. The overall conclusion was that all the badger holes appeared to come from one family and one sett only. Possibly one or two badgers

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### Woods and Trees

Plans are being drawn up for the management of the woodlands, now in their 16<sup>th</sup> year of growth. You can help support this work through donation which will be entered in the Book of Trees and can be in memory of a loved one, or to commemorate an anniversary, birthday or perhaps a birth or a baptism. Please send your donation to [administrator@magogtrust.org.uk](mailto:administrator@magogtrust.org.uk) with subject line **tree support**

were currently using some of the holes, but if there was a larger group present earlier in the year, they could have moved on, as often seen elsewhere with badger families.

Christine Newell

To help determine where to erect suitable deterrant fencing, Archaeology Rheesearch, with permission from English Heritage, carried out resistivity and Wenner array surveys. The technique utilises a series of ground resistance measurements along a line with equal but progressively increasing separation between the measurements: the greater the separation between the measurement points, the greater the depth of the determination. The data suggest that the curved feature found is a shallow, relatively flat bottomed ditch about 1.5m wide. So that, despite the poor operation conditions on the site, a curved segment of the ditch of the Bowl Barrow was located.

Working with advice from these groups, the National Trust and English Heritage we have fitted oneway exclusion gates to ensure the young have left. The holes will then be backfilled and the surface covered with chain link fencing to prevent further incursion. The fence will then be completed.

We have been made more aware of the extensive small mammal activity in the area of the clunch pits and hope to carry out further surveys in the future.

## Grass cutting on Magog Down

There are several reasons for the programme of grass cutting on Magog Down which include:

- *reduction in the soil fertility*
- *creation of a range of grassland habitats*
- *enhancing enjoyment of Magog Down*

The natural processes continually recycle nutrients within the ecosystem. In a restoration project such as ours the additional nutrients from previous arable fertilisers need to be taken out of the natural cycle.

Cutting and removing annual growth in the first decade or so makes a significant contribution to restoring a low fertility cycle. Thereafter, the process is slower. It is easy to forget that some of the famed chalk grassland areas have been grazed for many centuries.



Grazing creates a mosaic of habitats as animals selectively graze unless food is in short supply. The challenge on Magog Down is to recreate this situation whilst allowing the area to be enjoyed for quiet recreation. To aid the development of a variety of habitats with differing physical structures, (tall, short, more or less branched plants of differing species over the seasons) we need to try to mimic this using machinery and animals. The habitats also need to show 'connectivity' i.e. insects, birds, plants etc can easily move between different suitable areas.

This year's cut of the North Down has been extensive because invasive shrub species, such as blackthorn, wild clematis and dewberry had colonised areas well away from the woodland edges. We also had an increasing thistle problem, which must be controlled by law. A new pattern of cutting will be developed over the next few years with a triennial cut of any one area to achieve these objectives and create an interesting and enjoyable experience of visiting Magog Down.

Several groups help the trust by recording species of insects and birds all of which data helps management in decision making. However, it is vital that an immediate report of anything thought special or needing attention be made. We were dismayed to learn we had destroyed a Willow Warbler's nest this year. As can be seen from the photo our contractors are skilled and very co-operative leaving even small areas uncut where needed. Under Higher Level Environmental Stewardship (HLS) cutting is permitted between 15 July and 31 August. As this coincides with cereal harvest timing can be problematic. In a wet season we prefer to cut early before dying grasses lodge and create a heavy wet thatch, which is more difficult to remove.

Whilst waiting for the trucks to return to continue foraging, I was sitting in the winnowed grass watching the aeronautical skills of about 20 Swifts as they feasted on the insects sent up from the cutting. *Sheer delight!*

Lucy Evans

@ Like all other charitable organisations, recent increases in postal charges impacts on our communication attempts. We would like to expand our database of email addresses to cover as many members as possible.

Members please send an email to [administrator@magogtrust.org.uk](mailto:administrator@magogtrust.org.uk) with **email address** in the subject line so that we can update our files.