

Green Gym



"THE LOPPER"

full of little cuttings.

Sonning Common

Number 27 March 2011

It's November, it's snowing, so it must be Kennylands !!



The weather patterns seem to be more consistent and we are getting early winter snow and then pre-Christmas snow. So blackthorn clearance at Kennylands is a welcome alternative to travelling long distances on frozen slippery roads, the tea break was a welcome chance to thaw out our hands.



Christmas Dinner Raffle

Thanks to Julia and Jean for organising a most enjoyable 2010 Christmas dinner at Badgemoor Golf Club. This year we held a charity raffle, where the winner was awarded a memento of Green Gym work and also nominated the recipient charity. It was, most appropriately, Julia who bought the winning ticket. The charity Julia nominated was Launchpad (formerly Reading single homeless project) which helps disadvantaged youngsters to get set for life. We raised a total of £100 - thanks to all who bought tickets. The prize was a mounted set of polished slices of wood from 9 different tree species that we have coppiced or cut down from different sites that we have visited over the last few years.



Nettlebed Common

We continued to clear the invading birch, brambles and gorse to allow the heather regeneration on Nettlebed Common. In addition there was a large willow which had split asunder and partially blocked one of the footpaths.



We had to use Robert's winch and the chainsaw to fell it. Then we winched it away from the other trees before cutting it into logs.



GRASPING THE NETTLE - Julia Booker

While raking the remains of last year's stinging nettles from the bank of the stream at Ewelme on 5th March the conversation turned to the many uses of nettles. We knew about nettle soup and that arthritic joints can be helped by nettle stings. There was vague talk of cloth-making. Mike Saunders drinks nettle tea (though he's not sure what it does for him). I decided to investigate.

The name of the Nettle (*Urtica dioica* and *Urtica urens*) is from the Anglo-Saxon *Netel*, a needle. The needles are actually hollow hairs (trichomes) which sting by injecting histamine and other chemicals. Its fibre is very similar that of hemp or flax, and was used from olden times for making all types of **cloth** ranging from fine-textured for the softest shirts down to the coarsest, such as sailcloth. Nettle fibres were still used in Scotland up to the 17th century for weaving household linens. When Germany and Austria ran short of cotton during the First World War, they used nettle cloth to make army shirts and other clothing. They made a great quantity from nettles growing in the wild before having to bring them into cultivation. To make cloth from nettles they must be dried and steeped before the fibres are mechanically separated and then spun into yarn.

Nettles can be made into manure for the garden – put them in a covered container (for the smell!) and add water. Once 'brewed' for a few weeks the strained liquid can be watered onto the soil or sprayed dilute onto the leaves of plants. The liquid also acts as an insect repellent (sounds like human repellent too, though apparently the smell soon goes). A decoction of nettle yields a beautiful and permanent green dye which is used for woollen stuffs in Russia. Dried and powdered nettles can be used as an additive to poultry feed to fatten hens and increase egg-production (I must try this).

The juice of nettle roots or leaves mixed with honey or sugar relieves bronchial and asthmatic troubles. A small piece of lint moistened with nettle juice may be placed in the nostril for bad nose-bleeds. The old herbalists recommended combing the hair daily with nettle juice to stimulate hair growth.

Add ginger, dandelion leaves and goosegrass to nettle tops to make nettle beer (the recipe is fiddly). Samuel Pepys refers to nettle pudding in his *Diary* February 1661: 'We did eat some Nettle porridge, which was very good'. One recipe for this uses 1 gallon of nettle tops, 2 large leeks or onions, 2 heads of broccoli or a small cabbage and ¼ lb. of rice. The chopped nettles, vegetables and rice are layered into a muslin bag, boiled until tender and served with gravy or melted butter.

For 4 servings of Nettle Soup: chop up 2 or 3 potatoes, a large onion and garlic cloves to taste, sauté them in a little oil and butter until starting to soften, then stir in a carrier-bagful of picked-over washed nettle tops. Add a litre of boiling stock (chicken or vegetable), bubble for about 12 minutes until the potato is soft, then liquidise before serving with a swirl of cream.

Besides the above there are many other uses for nettles, and we may ponder on these the next time we pull up or slash nettles. We may even speculate as to why Nettlebed got its name at our next session on Nettlebed Common (9th April). Apparently its origin is unknown – it could have been a site for medieval cloth-making or the arthritics' heaven. We shall never know.

Although we are wary of nettles, they are the exclusive larval food plant for larval Peacock and Small Tortoiseshell butterflies – so always try and leave some to grow.

Coppicing Course 12th February - Nick Odell

Thousands of years ago coppicing was done by beavers who could fell a 150mm willow overnight! Humans (who wiped out the beaver 400 years ago) learnt to coppice certain trees, encouraging new shoots to sprout and extending the life of the tree and hence producing more wood. Coppicing came from the French verb "couper" meaning "to cut".

Cutting down trees which are "coppicable" ones does not destroy them, as long as the stumps are cut so they do not rot. In 1086 coppicing was already well established in England and was an economic necessity for the people in the country areas. Some wild life also benefited from this action.

An old boardwalk discovered in Somerset, made out of coppiced materials - the base section contained oak, ash and lime whereas the cross parts consisted of alder and hazel. Coppicing took place in Winter and people made a living by constructing artefacts from coppiced wood. Coppicing was done in rotation so as to provide a steady income.

Animals can damage coppiced trees and so Pollarding of trees was also commonplace. The trees were cut off above browse height and animals could be grazed beneath them without the trees being damaged. Pollarding is also referred to as Wood Pasture and would take place in areas such as the New Forest where there were many animals. Woodlands came under pressure, especially with the advent of charcoal burning. By the mid 19th century demand for coppicing products had diminished with coal and metal being used instead. After the First World War a lot of coppicing went into dereliction - "overstood coppice". "Singling" with oak and ash meant keeping just one trunk.

Hazel was a key species for coppicing being both flexible and strong enough to make hurdles, hedging, pea sticks, wattle and bean poles. The denser sweet chestnut was used for fencing and hop growing frames; willow was used for basketry and living sculpture; oak was used for tanning leather; ash was used for gate hurdles and tool handles; birch was used for brooms and faggots which were bundles of odds and ends from coppicing; alder was used for charcoal; beech was used rarely for firewood and sycamore was good for wood turning.

Rotation of coppicing depended on how quickly the species grew. A wood on a ten year rotation might well have ten divisions. Conifers do not coppice, nor do suckering species such as elm, blackthorn or aspen. The enemies of coppicing are rabbits and fallow deer. After about one year's growth new shoots should be above deer reach.

Wildlife of the coppiced wood are flowers such as dog violet, oxlip, wood anemone, yellow archangel, bluebells and early purple orchid. A typical butterfly is the Duke of Burgundy and possible birds to be seen are the bullfinch, chiffchaff and turtledove. The hazel dormouse comes out at night and eats the hazelnuts!

The losers from coppicing are mosses, molluscs, deadwood invertebrates, fungi and bats. These all like crowded, damp conditions.

When coppicing or pollarding, cut at an angle to allow water run-off and avoid tree rot. "Layering" is when you lay down the shoot and peg it so as to encourage growth in a different area always layer uphill and protect from deer browsing.

Mill Meadows pond restoration



A hard mornings work at mill meadows restored one of the ponds which had become overgrown. The root system was so intertwined that everything had to be cut apart before it could be pulkled up. Thanks to Sally Rankin for the photos.



First Aid refresher course



Three years pass very quickly so it was time to refresh all the first aiders skills. Two sessions were held so we should all be confident about what to do in an emergency.

Greys Court bluebell wood clearance



Each year we make more of an impression on the brambles, bracken and laurel to give the bluebells a chance to flower and multiply. This year should be even better than last as we have opened up the areas near the path so that only the bluebells are showing.



Aston Rowant Christmas and Juniper planting

The annual Christmas spud roast and feast was held on a bitterly cold day in December. The trees were coated in ice from the previous weeks of freezing fog, but we all kept warm by the fire. Steve discovered a rather attractive fungus called green elf cup, which apparently is rarely seen, on a piece of rotting beech.

A happy bunch of juniper planters take tea and cakes in the cold January sun!



Cleeve Court Meadows scrub clearance

We have started working at Cleeve Court meadows on the north bank of the Thames at Streatley. This is a long term project in conjunction with other groups of volunteers to remove overgrown willows and scrub, clear out blocked ditches and generally allow the water meadows to regenerate.

Before



After



St. Katharine's Parmoor

One of the tasks this quarter was to start the digging of the plot that



Robert sprayed in October and has been covered with weed suppressant plastic all winter. The group from High Wycombe have continued this work every Thursday and the plot is now ready for fertiliser. The box/honeysuckle hedges have all been trimmed and are producing buds for the spring. Many thanks go to all at St. Katharine's for providing us with delicious lunch's and on the 3rd March a wine and nibbles evening with the opportunity to meet other volunteers.

Hedge-laying at Reading Golf Club and Pack and Prime Lane

This year we chose three consecutive Thursdays to tackle the next 30m of hedgelaying at Reading Golf Club, giving everyone continuity of practice. As usual our first visit presented us with a wall of brambles and scrub out of which hedgelaying seemed doubtful. However, once we had gained access to the hedge it seemed a little less daunting.

Our second visit was preceded by snow and we were greeted by a very cold north-east wind. We started the day with a warm up cuppa and continued the process.



On the third visit we were determined to finish and indeed did so.

Over the three days stakes and binders were constantly being sourced from the nearby copse without which we could not have completed the job. A thoroughly enjoyable team effort.



Pack and Prime lane consisted of an end of season completion of the work we had started last year. There were long stretches of binders to be completed, some new stakes to be set and laying to be started.



In addition as the binders were finished a planting team followed with 50 new hazel bushes to be set in the areas where the existing material was either very sparse or dead. The work from winter 2009/2010 is showing good growth with lots of healthy flowers and catkins on the hazel.



Coppicing and path edging in Flowercroft Wood



We spent a lovely warm morning at lower boundary of Flowercroft Wood coppicing hazel. This was both to remove overhanging branches from the bridlepath and to use the brush to demarcate the footpath. Andrew Hawkins kindly let us collect a bundle of long hazel whips to use for hedgelaying binders at Pack and Prime Lane the following week.



He's fallen in the water ..



One of the hazards of working at Ewelme, is the distinct probability of getting soaked. Luckily Tony was re-equipped with some rather fetching spare clothing Jane had in her car, and warmed with wine and mince pies.

Dates for your diary

AGM 19:00 for 19:30
Monday April 18th, The Elizabeth Room Rotherfield Greys.

Andrew Hawkins will lead a Butterfly Walk through Flowercroft Wood, 14:00 at Peppard Church

Magazine contact: Chris Ash
Chrisp.ash@btinternet.com

Tel 0118 9471044

The Green Gym

C/o Health Centre, 39 Wood Lane,

Sonning Common

Enquiries - Robin - 0118 972 3528