



West Berkshire  
Countryside Society

# UPSTREAM

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European Eels © Darryl Clifton-Dey

## ARK Eels in Schools

Action for the River Kennet (ARK, a registered charity) is the Rivers Trust for the Kennet catchment. 'Eels in School' is an exciting educational outreach project that we've been running over the last few months for five schools in Wiltshire and Berkshire.

This year's schools were Great Bedwyn Primary, Ramsbury Primary, Stockcross Primary, Welford & Wickham Primary and St Michael's Aldbourne. Over the years we have worked with many schools from as far upstream as Lockeridge all the way downstream to Reading.

The project is a really hands on way to get not only the students, but the teachers and parents too, discovering their river and that we can all play a role

in preserving it by being water smart. There is a lot of wildlife in our rivers and it needs a plentiful supply of clean, flowing water. We explain that we live in a water stressed area and whenever we turn on the tap or hosepipe or flush the loo, we are using water that comes from the chalk aquifer. We all need water, but we can be more efficient and use less, leaving more to reach our rivers. This project is part of our Water Matters work in partnership with Thames Water.

Classes ranging between Year 3 and Year 6 have spent three months caring for and learning about the European eel. These unusual and critically endangered fish have been living in the classrooms in a specially set up tank. The students have witnessed the transformation from glass eel to elver (one of several life cycle stages in the eel's life) and through a range of educational activities provided by ARK (both in the classroom and in the

river) the students have gained a greater understanding of and a passion for their local rivers.

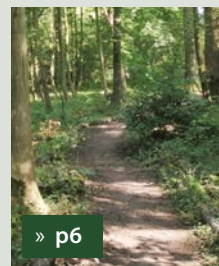
The eels have travelled all the way from the Sargasso Sea to spend most of their life in our freshwater rivers, before returning back to the Sargasso to spawn. They are a brilliant fish to ignite an interest in what lives in our rivers and streams. The release days this year have been a real highlight of the project. We have been particularly fortunate to have been able to make arrangements with local fisheries and hold our release days at some very beautiful and well managed locations along the Kennet. This is when the classes get to spend a full or half day with us in and by the river, starting with getting into wellies and waders to release their elvers into the river to continue their life cycle.

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West Berkshire Countryside Society

*Caring for our Countryside – Join Us and Help Make a Difference.*

# West Berkshire Countryside Society

The aim of the West Berkshire Countryside Society is to promote the understanding, appreciation and conservation of the West Berkshire countryside... furthering these objectives through practical conservation work and guided walks and talks from local experts. It was formed in 2012 by amalgamating the Friends of the Pang, Kennet & Lambourn Valleys; the Bucklebury Heathland Conservation Group; the Pang Valley Conservation Volunteers & the Barn Owl Group.

Upstream is our quarterly publication designed to highlight conservation matters in West Berkshire and beyond and to publicise the activities of the Society.

**Chair, Webmaster & Enquiries:**

**Membership Secretary:**

**Upstream Editor:**

**Tony McDonald**

**Jathan Rayner (membership@westberkscountryside.org.uk)**

**John Salmon (upstreameditor2017@btinternet.com)**

**Hon President:**

**Dick Greenaway MBE RD**

Initial contact for all above and for the Barn Owl Group, Bucklebury Heathland Conservation Group and West Berks Conservation Volunteers should, unless otherwise stated, be made via enquiries@westberkscountryside.org.uk

## Volunteers' Task Diary

For outdoor events please wear suitable footwear and clothing. Most practical tasks start at 10am and usually finish around 3pm, unless otherwise stated, so bring a packed lunch. However, we are more than happy to accept any time you can spare! All tools are provided. A map of each task location can be found on the website diary page by clicking on the grid reference shown for that task.

Date/ Time	Venue	Details
October 2019		
Tue 01 Oct 10.00	Winterbourne Wood	Coppicing. Park in the entrance to the wood SU447 717.
Tue 08 Oct 10.00	The Malt House, West Woodhay	Maintenance of hedges laid in previous years. Please remember to bring your own lunch with you on this task, our hosts at the Malt House now supply lunch for us during our March visit but not for other occasions SU395 637.
Sat 12 Oct 10.30-13.00	Bucklebury Common	Heathland management. Join the Bucklebury Heathland Group to help maintain this important heathland habitat. Meet at Angels Corner. SU550 688.
Tue 15 Oct 10.00	Cleeve Water Meadow, Garden Cottage, Streatley	Ongoing maintenance of this important Thames side water meadow. Park in the recreation ground car park at the top of Cleeve Court Road SU593 812.
Tue 22 Oct 10.00	Bucklebury Common	Heathland management. Cutting silver birch and Scots pine saplings. Hopefully a bonfire. Parking at Angels Corner SU550 688.
Tue 29 Oct 10.00	Padworth Common BBOWT site	Woodland management. Park in the Common car park SU619 648.
November 2019		
Tue 05 Nov 10.00	Redhill Wood	Ride widening and brash clearance. Parking off road; park on entrance to the main ride SU419 642.
Sun 10 Nov 10.30-13.00	Bucklebury Common	Heathland management. Join the Bucklebury Heathland Group to help maintain this important heathland habitat. Meet at Angels Corner SU550 688.
Tue 12 Nov 10.00	Furze Hill, Hermitage	Woodland and butterfly habitat management on this parish wildlife site. Parking at new village hall – through double gates off Pinewood Crescent SU511 739.
Tue 19 Nov 10.00	Boxford Water Meadow Site #1 Westbrook, Boxford	Scrub and vegetation clearance on this SSSI. Parking in access track off Westbrook SU426 717.
Tue 26 Nov 10.00	Bucklebury Common	Heathland management. Cutting silver birch and Scots pine saplings. Hopefully a bonfire. Parking at Angels Corner SU550 688.
December 2019		
Tue 03 Dec 10.00	Ashampstead Common	Veteran Tree Halo Polishing. Help us maintain the glades that help our veterans prosper. We will be cutting back bracken, bramble and small saplings. Meet at The Cottage, Ashampstead Common SU5765 7512.
Tue 10 Dec 10.00	Boxford Water Meadow Site #2 Westbrook, Boxford	Scrub and vegetation clearance on this SSSI. Parking in access track off Westbrook SU426 717.
Sat 14 Dec 10.30-13.00	Bucklebury Common	Heathland management. Join the Bucklebury Heathland Group to help maintain this important heathland habitat. Meet at Angels Corner SU 550 688.
Tue 17 Dec 10.00	Stanford Dingley River bank clearance #1	Clearing selected trees and scrub along the riverbank of the Pang to allow light into the bed of the river. Park on the Byway which runs South from Bucklebury Road in Stanford Dingley opposite the entrance to Pangfield Farm SU566 716.
24 & 31 Dec	No Tasks!	





# Conservation Volunteers Round Up

We made two visits to **Hosehill Lake, Theale**, to continue improving the perimeter path which becomes very muddy in winter. Sections of it slope sideways, so we laid 40 metres of wood revetments along the lower edge and chipped away at the higher one to provide a bed for stone chippings that we wheelbarrowed some distance, raked level and then “whacked” with a powered compactor. Usually we provide our own lunches, but on the second visit we ate at the nearby Fox and Hounds pub as a “thank you” for allowing us to use its car-park. Our visit to **Rushall Manor Farm** again attracted a large turnout of volunteers – 27 – to continue managing the woodland that is proving increasingly popular to introduce organised groups of school-children to the countryside (see article on page 8). Not only are visitor numbers increasing but also wild flowers, due in great part to the efforts of our group and others in widening rides to let in light and sunshine.

Our annual visit to **Kings Copse, Bradfield**, in search of Himalayan Balsam began frustratingly since it wasn't in flower and so was difficult to

spot. However, once we got our eye, in we found more and more to pull up, especially adjacent to the stream whose waters might have spread seeds downstream had we not removed the plants. Similarly at **Sulham Meadow**, initially we had to seek out ragwort in areas where we've worked for some years, but then discovered some quite dense patches to pull up and bag for removal. The National Trust may have splendid rhododendrons which people pay to see, but the mature, invasive *Ponticum Rhododendrons* are not so popular at **Grimsbury Fort**. On two visits this summer we removed them from the southern outer bank of the ancient earthwork, letting light in to the beech woods and allowing regeneration of rich biodiversity.

At **Winterbourne Wood** we continued the process, started eight years ago, of eradicating bracken on a ridge rich with primroses and other wild flowers. With the main area now clear, we worked to enlarge it. The huge number of butterflies – where once there were none – was evidence that we are succeeding in encouraging greater biodiversity in what was a barren area.

We also battled bracken at **Holt Lodge Farm**. With no cattle having browsed the area and due to the weather earlier in the year, the amount of bracken was daunting and the work demanding on a south-facing slope in full sunlight. But, buoyed by our success in “bashing” it elsewhere, we talked of returning twice next year to continue the fight.

At **Elm Farm** in mid-May we prepared the donkey field for summer, clearing brambles from footpaths and from the meadow. Though we did not aim to eradicate them all – brambles are a wildlife resource – we sought to limit their presence in the meadow lest they smother Spring's wild flowers. In early August at the **Malt House** we protected hazel coppice stools with fencing to prevent regrowth being eaten by deer. We repaired or replaced existing protection and removed it where it was no longer required. We find that wire fencing around each stool proves much more resilient than protection made from brash.

Constant rain did not deter a good turnout at **Furze Hill, Hermitage**. We made three large scallops in the “butterfly larder” and cut patches in the wild-flower meadow as part of its rotational management, raking up impressive heaps of vegetation. We also raked up hay from three meadows at **Ashampstead Common**, though here Yattendon Estates had cut them the previous week. Formerly used to stack harvested trees, they were once impacted, rutted mud, but years of efforts by volunteers have turned them into flower-rich glades.

**Terry Crawford**



Ride Widening at Rushall Manor Farm

© Tony McDonald



'We had a fantastic release day! Thank you so much for your inspirational passion for our rivers and wildlife. We have loved learning and looking after the eels. It was very special to set them free in such a beautiful location,' said Great Bedwyn Primary School teacher Kathryn Bengtsson, whose class had also used the project to do some excellent creative writing work. Bedwyn's release was on picturesque stretch of the Kennet owned by Hungerford Town and Manor, where the classes got to meet Hungerford Town and Manor River Keeper Jimmy Hill and Constable

to the Town & Manor Nick Lumley. Nick said, 'I am delighted to see local schools getting involved with the ecology of the River Kennet. ARK have brought huge improvements to the River Kennet through their work and we're hoping that the eels will flourish in their new home with us.'

Ramsbury Primary, Stockcross and Welford & Wickham released their eels into the Kennet at the stunning Avington Estate. The classes had picnics in the sunshine and led riverbank walks, as well as meeting American signal crayfish (an invasive non-native species).



Releasing the elvers

© Anna Forbes

To learn more about ARK visit [www.riverkennet.org](http://www.riverkennet.org) and or contact [anna@riverkennet.org](mailto:anna@riverkennet.org)

Anna Forbes – ARK Project Officer

## Chalara Ash Dieback

Chalara ash dieback was first identified in eastern Europe in 1992. It is now believed it may have arrived in the UK prior to 2006, its presence being confirmed in 2012 and is now present throughout England. The disease is highly destructive of the Common ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*). Ash is a useful and versatile native tree species, providing important habitats and food for species such as Bullfinches, Privet hawk moths and diverse communities of bryophytes and lichens. It can grow in a variety of soils, climatic conditions and is therefore both very common and widespread.

The disease is caused by a fungus named *H. fraxineus*, which is of Asian origin where it has co-evolved with the Asian ash species to which it causes little damage. Unfortunately, our Common ash is more susceptible to the fungus and can be killed either directly through its actions, or indirectly by weakening the trees and facilitating attacks by other pests or diseases. Whilst *H. fraxineus* is the pathogen, the disease itself is known as 'chalara' or 'chalara ash dieback' and the latter helps to distinguish it from other causes of dieback on ash.

Symptoms of ash dieback are most obvious on young trees, or new foliage. Small, black, dead spots on the leaves are caused where the airborne fungal

spores land. These spots expand, extending through the leaf, into the leaf stalks and shoots. This blackening and wilting is most visible between July and September, when it can safely be distinguished from the onset of autumn. Most infected leaves are shed prematurely, but the fungus progresses into the twigs, branches, causing dark infected areas (lesions) to form in the bark. These often have a characteristic elongated-diamond shape, centred on where the infection joins the larger branch or stem. The lesions typically spread up and down from the joint as the infection spreads in both directions; they are usually brown, often with a purple hue and stand out from the paler, healthy bark. These distinctive lesions should be visible throughout the year.

Where the lesions expand to encircle branches, they compromise the transport of water within the tree, causing other leaves to wilt, wither and die. Over time the fungus continues to spread towards the trunk, potentially cutting off the tree's supply of fluid and nutrients from the roots and resulting in death. Whilst it can kill young and coppiced trees quite quickly, older trees take longer to succumb, perhaps in combination with pressure from another pest or pathogen.

The future of our Common ash is uncertain. Currently there is no known



Chalara Ash Dieback

© Ana Perez-Sierra, Forest Research

efficient prevention or treatment. However, there is a glimmer of hope. A low proportion of trees (1-5% of the population) are showing a partial tolerance to *H. fraxineus* and selected breeding from them may enable the possible long-term adaptation of ash. To aid this, Forest Research are leading a mass screening trial to identify tolerance or resistance individuals. In 2013 almost 155,000 ash seedlings from a variety of regions were planted in areas where the disease is most prevalent. After five years 575 young trees remained free of symptoms and others, which were infected, but remained alive. Researchers have made 1355 grafted trees in what is hoped will become a source of seeds for planting in the longer term.

Further information on this disease can be found at [www.observatree.org.uk/portal/ash-dieback](http://www.observatree.org.uk/portal/ash-dieback) and it can be reported via <https://treealert.forestresearch.gov.uk/index.php/spod>

Peter Crow, Project Manager for Observatree – based on Observatree and partner materials.

# Ground Nesting Birds

## at Greenham and Snelsmore Commons

Greenham and Snelsmore Commons are both home to a number of important and vulnerable species of bird that nest on or near the ground, and are particularly suited to the heathland habitats here. One of the most notable species is the Nightjar – which we featured in Upstream this time last year. A number of pairs of nightjar nest and breed on Greenham Common each year. I am pleased to report that after a 2 year absence nightjars have returned to Snelsmore Common. During BBOWT's annual surveys this year, we heard two males churring at Snelsmore Common, possibly one of them with a mate.

Woodlarks and Dartford warblers are resident to the UK, while other species like tree pipits fly north from their wintering grounds in Africa in the spring and summer months to take advantage of feeding and nesting opportunities in Europe. A number of woodlarks regularly breed at Greenham, which is a stronghold for this species in West Berkshire. Tree pipits and woodlark have both been seen at Snelsmore Common this year, and we hope that they may return and breed there next year.

Dartford warblers, which nest low down in gorse and other scrub, are very vulnerable to cold winters but their numbers seem to be recovering

this year after the Beast from the East and the heavy snows in February-March 2018. The bare, gravel areas at Greenham Common are important for waders including little ringed plovers and lapwings, which need this habitat on which to breed. Little ringed plovers bred successfully here for the second consecutive year.

All these birds are very sensitive to disturbance from humans and dogs while they are nesting. BBOWT carefully manages both places for wildlife and people. For the last few years, BBOWT has employed seasonal wardens to advise visitors to the commons on the zoning restrictions in force between March and August, which protect the birds and their young during the nesting season. Visitors are encouraged away from areas where birds are nesting and asked to walk in other areas where they won't disturb the birds.

This year our wardens, Clare, Ruth and Steve have been out on the commons chatting to visitors, carrying out surveys, enforcing the zoning restrictions, and running events such as bug hunts and wildlife walks. Outside the breeding season, BBOWT's staff and volunteers manage areas of birch scrub and gorse, cut areas of heather, and maintain bare gravel areas so that



Little Ringed Plover

© BBOWT



Woodlark

© BBOWT



Lapwing

© BBOWT

there are the right habitats for the different species of ground nesting birds and waders to breed.

Through the combination of BBOWT's continued management of these reserves, grazing by graziers' cattle on Greenham Common and our own ponies on Snelsmore Common, the sterling work of our wardens, and the understanding of our visitors, we hope to create the right conditions so that more of these species are able to breed successfully.

If you would like to get involved and join one of our volunteer conservation work parties to help us improve the commons for these wonderful birds and the wealth of other wildlife that lives here, please get in touch. Visit BBOWT's volunteer page at [bbowt.org.uk/volunteer](https://bbowt.org.uk/volunteer) to find out more.

Simon Barnett, Berkshire Land Manager for Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT)



Dartford Warbler

© BBOWT



# The Story of Furze Hill

Since May 2013 Hermitage Parish Council (HPC) has owned about 6 hectares of public open space known as Furze Hill. Originally known as the Cementation Site, it was part of a brick works with clay and sand pits, becoming a base for the construction of the M4 and then a place where heavy machinery was stored. The area had become derelict. The land came with a 10-year management plan and a commuted sum to last for 23 years. These funds are to cover the mowing of the recreation ground, health and safety inspections of play areas and trees, fencing repairs

and replacements. The land beyond the 6 hectares has been separately developed for housing. HPC manages Furze Hill in a manner that recognises its duty to protect biodiversity as well as to provide an area for public relaxation and enjoyment.

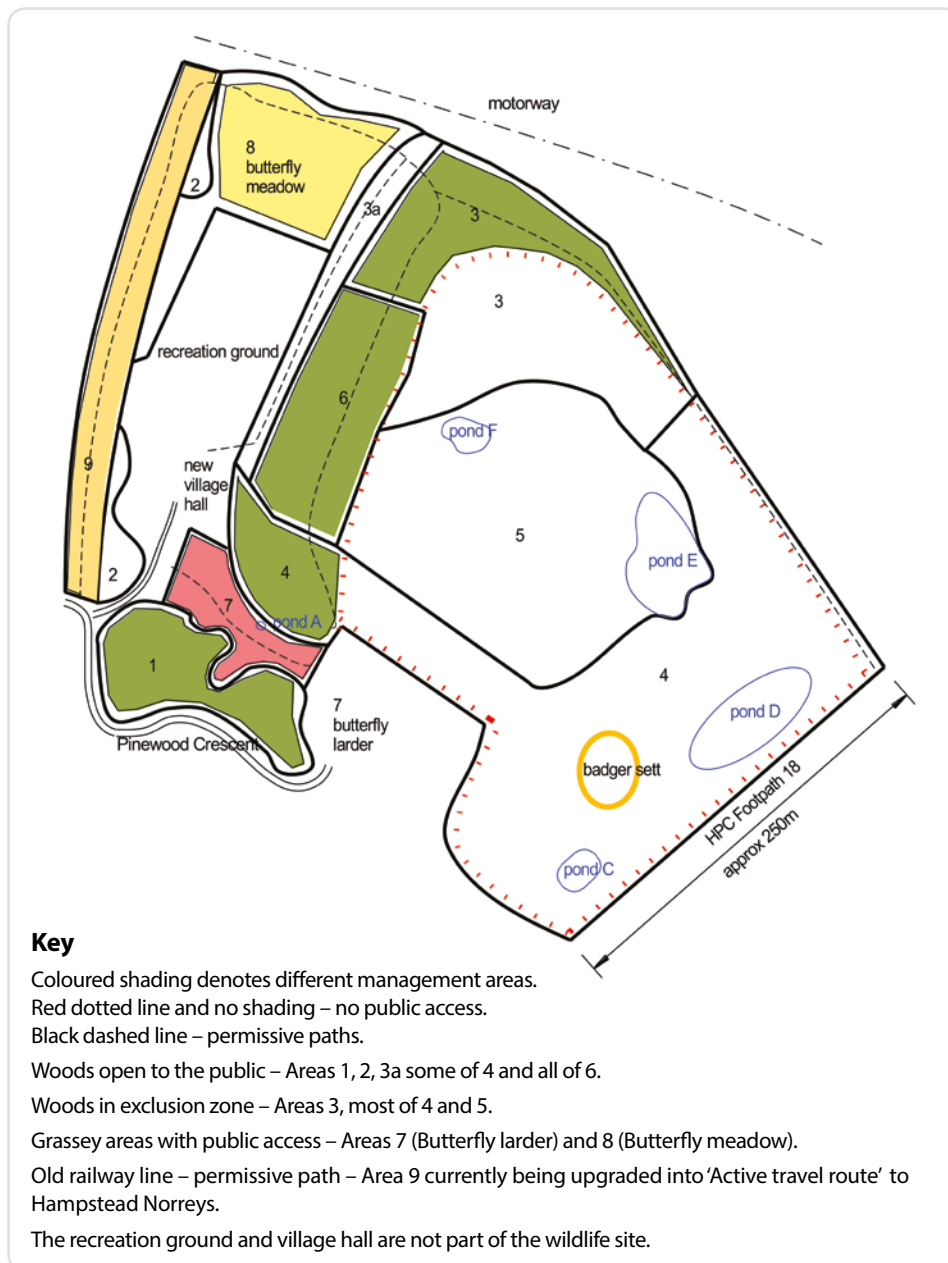
The public open space, consists of a recreation ground, village hall, and nine management areas, including: a butterfly meadow, a butterfly larder; and open access woodland. A larger section of woodland is fenced off (the 'exclusion' zone) for safety reasons. It contains an enormous, active badger sett and ponds supposedly used by

great crested newts, although a survey in mid-2017 only discovered a handful of smooth and palmate newts. A cliff face 4 or 5 metres high which has the potential to become a Local Geology Site is included in the exclusion zone.

When HPC became the site owner, the woods had been designated a 'Wildlife Heritage Site' - now known as a Local Wildlife Site. After a survey carried out by Thames Valley Environmental Records, the butterfly meadow gained the same designation. There is a Tree Preservation Order on all of the woods, so works can only be carried out with permission from the Tree Officer. The management plan specifies that brash is made into dead hedges or left around its source.

Before the site was handed over to HPC a tree Health and Safety survey was carried out and the necessary works undertaken. The village is fortunate in that its residents include a retired Natural England ecologist, Heather Whetter and Charles Gilchrist, a naturalist, who provide valuable advice. The management plan is a dynamic document and HPC adheres to it with guidance from Heather and Charles. Health and Safety surveys of trees within falling distance of paths are carried out every three years.

In the early years our work concentrated on renovating the meadow each August, as meadows are rarer than woods. At other times of the year boardwalks were installed in the boggy areas. In the last couple of years some of the hazel stools in the exclusion zone have been coppiced and have so far escaped the attention of muntjac. Scottish and Southern Energy has recently clear felled a 5-metre strip of land below the power cables which cross the exclusion zone. This left an enormous amount of brash which WBCS volunteers turned into a series of dead hedges and created a ride, as described in the management





plan. It was also a benefit to the ponds which were previously screened from passing birdlife. In spring there are displays of wood anemone, star shaped white flowers open when the sun shines, bluebells, primroses and sanicle, a bit like a miniature cow parsley in the woods.

The butterfly meadow and the butterfly larder, which is across the drive from the car park, are managed for the grizzled skipper butterfly, *Pyrus malvae*. Grizzled skipper numbers are decreasing nationally. These areas have been planted with fragrant agrimony, the caterpillar's food plant in remediation for the habitat lost to house building. The meadow also contains transplanted bee orchids. Both areas have a hibernaculum. The bushy areas on the west of the recreation ground are wildlife corridors.

In August 2013 the butterfly meadow needed renovation, so it was strimmed by tractor and the arisings raked off. The management plan specifies that one quarter of the meadow is strimmed each year, at a height of 150 mm, in rotation. The uncut areas continue to provide invertebrate habitat. One third of the butterfly larder is strimmed annually, so far bracken removal has been the focus of the activity

In August you may see wild parsnip, which resembles yellow cow parsley. We try to make sure that this does not grow close to paths as the sap can cause a rash if gets on skin in the sun. When pulled out it definitely smells like parsnip.

Since 2013, the WBCS' volunteers have visited quarterly. A small group of villagers initially known as the Friday Gang (now the Thursday Team) do



Woodlands & Permissive Path

©JMS

work in the parish on one morning a week. 400 saplings and protection were provided by Ovo Energy. Residents & the WBCS have helped by planting a hedge atop the butterfly meadow and another hedge to screen the MUGA (multi use games area). The main boardwalks mentioned earlier were financed by West Berkshire Parish Plan Grants, match funded by volunteer labour with the very first boardwalk installed at the site utilising recycled plastic boards donated by WBCS.

The westerly flank of the site comprises a disused railway line which will become part of the Newbury to Didcot Active Travel Route. The ATR is a Right of Way for walkers and riders of horses and push bikes. This work & the wildlife seen along the route will be the subject of articles in Upstream in 2020.

The high numbers of dog walkers, playing children, woodland strollers, not to mention constant sightings of butterflies and orchids, is testament to this land being a highly positive asset for Hermitage and a living testament to the work which has been carried out there by the villagers and WBCS.

Ruth Cottingham & Chris Genge



Butterfly Meadow

©JMS



Don't forget our website!  
[www.westberkscountryside.org.uk](http://www.westberkscountryside.org.uk)



# John Simonds Trust – Making a Difference

When John Simonds died as a nineteen-year-old in 1983, the Trust was established in his memory. Initially a dream arising out of tragic circumstances, the Trust, established at Rushall Farm is now nationally recognised for its services to education in the countryside.

The Trust's goals are to:

- encourage qualities of leadership, self-confidence, mutual respect and resilience in young people.
- promote a love and understanding of the countryside.
- enable people to learn about the countryside and agriculture.
- develop co-operation between the agricultural community and the public.
- develop an understanding of the importance of conservation and sustainability.

When children come to the farm they cannot "not bother". As they step off the coach, they have no choice but to experience the natural and farmed world from sounds and smells, the wind and rain, sheep and cows, stinging nettles and bluebells and all within an area of poor phone reception. We have a skilled team of trained staff to ensure that learning

in this environment is memorable, challenging, distinctive and can be done safely. Each year about 14,000 children come to the farm.

Over the last two years we have been improving the facilities, the parking and safety for children on the Manor site, and now have a new lease in place from our landlord William Cumber which includes the former charcoal production facility at Oaklands Yard. At a cost of c.£85,000 this building has been converted into a workshop where children with special needs can be catered for more appropriately.

The needs of young people coming from two local special schools have increased considerably. The new facility at Oaklands Yard offers the opportunity to provide a special place which is accessible for all in a secure space where we will have the opportunity to develop current activities– and new ones including raised beds, beehives, tool storage and a greenhouse. It will also cater for other defined groups from schools where children are not thriving in the classroom; provide a base for individual young people struggling with mental health problems; and become a base for Forest Schools and Life Skills work with groups.

## Date for your Diary

Fungi Fruits and Autumn Woods,  
Sunday 20th Oct at 2pm

Join Charles Gilchrist for a short walk in Hermitage woods. Please check our web site diary page for parking details a little nearer the date of the walk.

Alongside the many children coming on day visits and camps we are developing Life Skills courses when pupils come over several weeks into an encouraging environment. Pilot schemes have met with considerable success. The Headteacher of one primary school reported that the social skills of her targeted students had improved considerably. One pupil who was very disruptive had, on his own admission, become a model pupil, and that was confirmed by his teacher!

There has also been considerable success with Year 7 pupils from one particular school. One girl, who suffered from high levels of anxiety, interviewed Steve Waters (who runs the farm), which was published in the school newspaper - which is sent to all parents. This encouraged the student to join an acting group and she has subsequently appeared in a stage production. Her mother was delighted.

Another had not spoken to others for at least two years. She was undergoing work with therapists to improve this situation. This girl spoke to JST staff on the first day of her Life Skills Course (to the amazement of her Head of Year) and has continued to speak.

The WBCS has always been a staunch supporter of the work here; with funding for tools, waders, a demonstration charcoal kiln, an observation hive & a donation towards the Oaklands Yard project. We have drawn deeply upon the knowledge of Dick Greenaway – in person and his books. We are also most grateful for the regular visits of the WBCS Volunteers which help us to maintain our woodlands and encourage their diversity of habitats and species.

John Bishop OBE



Oaklands Yard interior refurbishment

© John Bishop