
Downley Common Newsletter

Bonfire Edition

Quarterly Newsletter of the Downley Common Preservation Society - Issue 1. November 1996

Welcome !

Welcome to the first edition of the Common Newsletter! The purpose of this newsletter is to keep you in touch with what's going on around Downley Common, to entertain you with stories past and present and to act as a focal point for those interested in Common activities.

This edition is being distributed at the Bonfire and contains a Membership Application Form so that you can join the Society and receive future editions. Comments or contributions should be sent to Bill Thompson on 01494 520648 who edits the Newsletter.

Downley Common Preservation Society

The Downley Common Preservation Society exists to manage the Common for the benefit of the local community and to ensure its conservation for the future and is charged by the Dashwood Estate with that responsibility. In practical terms, that means cutting and flailing grass, clearing undergrowth and brambles, removing litter and generally ensuring that the Common doesn't become overgrown and choked with undesirable growth. There is in fact a management plan which is currently being updated - more of that in a future edition.

The officers of the Society are:

Chairman - John Willson
Secretary - Norman Belson
Treasurer - Pam Brooks
Members Sec. - Don Murray

Members are welcome to attend the Quarterly Meetings held at Sunnybank Methodist Church (see

Diary). Membership costs £6 for families, £4 for individuals and £2 for Senior Citizens/Students payable annually. Those wishing to join should fill in the form overleaf and contact Don Murray on 01494 528360

Downley Common Bonfire & Torchlight Procession

The fire and procession have now been taking place continuously on every 5th November (and only the 5th) for almost forty years, and before that, separate fires would celebrate the burning of Guy Fawkes and perhaps the coming of winter.

Downley Common Preservation Society measures its year on "The Bonfire", and from September onwards members almost instinctively find themselves out on the Common harvesting hawthorn bushes for fuel. Without the hawthorns there would be no fire and with the current management plan there seems to be just enough regrowth to replace the trees cut down. Hawthorns are Celtic magical trees, a symbol of life at Beltane, the Celtic festival on May 1st, and in the burning at the beginning of winter, may symbolise the ending of the growing year, exactly half a year later.

Some local people may remember the earlier days of the Bonfire, when any profit went to the Village Hall fund and Mr Selwood designed the homemade torch, still used today. This consists of an empty catfood or baked bean can, clout nailed to a wooden stick, then filled with wadding and paraffin and lit to produce a smoky red flame - the procession being a sight hardly equalled by the Bonfire itself.

Then there was Alan Hunt in the 1960s, a local journalist and great enthusiast for the care of the Common, pulling hawthorns out by the roots with the antique american "Farmall" tractor, more at home in Kansas or Oklahoma than the slippery slope of Downley Common. Mick and Sheila Sinnatt and crew followed with another tractor, a David Brown 880, much more stable on the Common; Mick driving straight down the slopes was a sight to behold!

Today the Bonfire and procession provide a great opportunity for all the people of Downley to meet together again, exchange greetings and revel in the almost anarchic vision of the great fire, a primitive statement to the coming winter that we shall not starve, will not freeze and that the symbol of fire is welcome security in the dark evenings stretching ahead until the spring.

Further articles about bonfires and their significance will appear in forthcoming editions.

John Willson

Diary Dates

5 November 1996, 7.00pm - Bonfire. The Common
10 November 1996, 10.00am - Clear up the Bonfire site
27 November 1996, 7.30pm - Committee Mtg. Norman's
8 January 1997, 8.00pm - Quarterly Mtg. Sunnybank

Environmental Survey

In order to effectively manage and conserve the Common, it is first necessary to know what exists on the Common. It was clear from a recent survey of Naphill Common by Dr Chris Smith, that a trained eye can reveal much more about the Common that you or I can from a cursory glance. Following the Naphill Common survey therefore we applied for grant aid assistance to carry out a similar survey and the following comments were recorded by Chris Damant, the Chilterns Project Officer at Bucks County Council after he paid a visit to the Common accompanied by Chris Smith.

"I was especially pleased to see both Roesel's Bush Cricket and Long Winged Cone Head. Both these species of Orthoptera (crickets and grasshoppers) have recently become very topical due to increases in their range.

The Long Winged Cone Head was very much a South Coast species in 1988. It has now been recorded as far north as south Buckinghamshire and this year new records for the River Chess area and Downley Common confirm its increasing northerly range, probably due to hotter summers and an increase in rough roadside verges and set-aside.

The same is also true of Roesel's Bush Cricket which we have plotted moving slowly northwards from Bradenham a few years ago and now recorded around Bletchley.

I was also very pleased to see such a rich and varied area of acid grassland including some heather. Very little heath is now recorded in the Buckinghamshire Chilterns, a few bushy areas at Coombe Hill, Hawridge and Cholesbury, Naphill and Wheeler End Common are all that remains.

The Common is a tremendous asset for the area and local community and I am only too glad to be able to assist with the management of the Common". Once the survey is complete we will be able to put in place an updated management plan to take account of all we have learned.

Norman Belson

Commonside be left unmown in order to develop the flora - an initiative that has drawn praise from Bucks County Council. He was also active in the Parish Map project, bringing his skills from the film and TV industry. His contribution will be sorely missed and the Society extends its condolences to his family.

Edwin Burrows

Edwin Burrows was a well-known local figure who made a significant contribution to affairs in Downley. Although he came originally from the north of England, he lived in Downley for many years, being a member of the parish council for 41 years, from the times when Downley was a ward of West Wycombe to when it became a parish in its own right. He wore the first badge of office of the parish with some pride and was still council chairman at his death.

Edwin Burrows was the headmaster of Downley Middle School for many years until his retirement in the 1980s. He was also Chairman of the Common Preservation Society in recent years. Edwin Burrows was a one-off - he is sadly missed.

Pam Brookes

Obituaries

Terry Reddings

Terry Reddings who died in October was a committed member of the Society and a respected local man with an enthusiasm for the local community. He had a love of the Common and first suggested that parts of the grassed area on

Membership Application Reply Slip

Name:

Address:

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Telephone:

I attach payment for the following class of membership (please tick)

Family (£6)

Individual (£4)

OAP/Student (£2)

Return to Don Murray (Membership Sec.), 31 Plomer Green Avenue, Downley, High Wycombe HP13 5LW or contact him on 01494 528360
