

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - May 2009

Ruscombe Wood

Ruscombe Wood is situated just off the Ruscombe to Hare Hatch road, with a public access bridleway leading through it, and Stephen Lloyd is the co-ordinator for the Ruscombe Wood Conservation Group, which was established in 1992.

With the aid of an extract from the 1830s enclosure map, Stephen showed us that the wood was an important contribution to the 'industry' of the area. In the mid 19th century, a start was made on growing willows, used for basket making. A feature of the willow growing area was the large number of ponds - there being several in the area of New Road, Ruscombe. Many of these had probably originated as watering places for the drovers' routes (which tended to by-pass village centres, to keep the livestock away from houses). There is also a pond in Ruscombe Wood, which may also have been a 'watering place', or possibly a test clay dig, associated with the brick making industry locally (there having once been a large brick works nearby, where the Ruscombe Industrial Park is now).

The whole area relied on the willow trade. At Crazies Hill, for example, was a family of hurdlemakers - the house still having the name 'Hurdlemakers'. In the Ruscombe area, there was a lot of employment for willow strippers, who would remove the bark from the rods. In the centre of Twyford, Thomas Giles had established a large scale basket making business - the house still being called The Willows, with the shed behind that had been used to store the willow rods. Willow growing with the associated coppicing continued until the 1950s, when plastics started to replace willow. As a result, Ruscombe Wood fell to a state of decay.

Conservation was started in the 1990s. The undisturbed woodland was found to include many flowers varieties dating from Victorian times. For them to survive, however, coppicing is needed, so that they do not get overwhelmed by other plants, or are in too much shadow. Coppicing involves cutting off the tree in winter near ground level, leaving a sloping top so that the water can run off. There is then rapid growth from the remaining part of the tree, and these rods are what are used to make things. The usual practice is to leave one upright rod when coppicing, as this encourages the new growth to be upward and straight.

The 6 acre site includes a range of habitats, from open grassland to the ponded wetland, and a hazel coppice, surrounded by an ash coppice on the perimeter. Stephen took us pictorially through the year, month by month, with stunning photographs of the enormous variety of plants to be seen in the woodland. January, for example, brought us the first flowers of the year - hazel catkins. These are the male part of the plant, needing the wind to spread the pollen produced. The branches are used for water divining, and the nuts were used, in the days before marbles, for Victorian games. February was the time for celandine, a member of the buttercup family which can cause skin irritation. Beggars would rub their feet with it, in the hope of getting more sympathy and hence money, from those they met! White violets - a Victorian symbol of good luck and honesty - would appear in March - purple violets being seen for the first time since 1992 earlier this year. The arum is another of the spring plants, whilst goat willow is another - for a short time - beautiful tree producing blossom for bumble bees to make nectar. Around the pond, the apple blossom is from a tree about 100 years old, producing 'cider' apples with bright red stripes on a yellow skin.

The woodland buttercup flowers just before the bluebells, and is an indicator that this is an ancient woodland site. There is then a large spread of bluebells. Stephen told us that about 1/3 to 1/2 of the world

population of bluebells is to be found in Britain - and that about 1 in 1000 of them have white flowers.

Also around at this time is the hedge garlic, which has edible leaves. If cows eat the leaves, their milk becomes garlic flavoured! The ferns are a classic woodland flower. Folklore was that they were a deterrent to evil spirits or thunder and lightning. For that reason, ferns were often deliberately drow from gaps in the mortar of house brickwork. The arum also flowers in May and can emit a 'rotting beef' smell in the late afternoon, to attract insects to pollinate the flowers. The pond - now cleared of leaf litter - now has water all year round, and great crested newts now live there.

Four species of orchids are found in Ruscombe Wood, the twayblade being the first to flower, in the early summer. Forget-me-not, elder, common bramble, and cow parsley also appear at this time Rabbits like to eat cow parsley, which is good at attracting insects and beetles. The grassland area needs mowing in late summer, however, to prevent the nettles from taking over. A woodpile here gives a habitat for stag beetle larvae, which take 7 years to mature, and after a week or two to find a mate and lay eggs, they die.

The common spotted orchid flowers in late June, and then come the dog roses and champions. Ragwort - possibly so called from the ragged nature of its leaves can poison farm livestock. It is reputed to flower on July 25th, which is St James Day - ironically St James is the patron saint for horses. Other plants to be found in the wood at this time are bryony, burdock and greater willow herb - although nice in small doses, this can swamp everything if not carefully managed.

By late summer, the members of the nightshade family come to bloom, as does the 3rd of the orchids found at Ruscombe, the helleborine, and water mint, whilst the berries of the arum add a dash of colour.

As a result of the coppicing, the cut wood stakes are stacked - providing a further woodland habitat. As they are cut, they are sorted into stakes, binders or core wood, with as little waste as possible - and many are once again being used fro hedge laying or hurdlemaking.

In June, the Society is providing Historic Walks of Wargrave, on June 14th, as part of the Village Festival (now fully sold out!). On Tuesday, July 14th the Society has arranged a visit to Milton Manor House - an elegant 18th century house built by Inigo Jones for Bryant Barrett, lacemaker to King George III. The house is set in a splendid garden location with two lakes and enjoyable woodland walks. Anyone wishing to join this visit is asked to let the Society know by Tuesday June 23rd. The next Society meeting is on Tuesday, September 8th, when Martin Bishop tell us about Bats Balls and Biscuits - a look at the social life of Huntley and Palmers - in particular the development of cricket locally.