

Conserving and Restoring Wildflower-rich Grasslands in Monmouthshire

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Contact Us

For information about the group or to join MMG contact our membership secretary Marilyn Dunkelman marilyn@monmouthshiremeadows.org.uk tel. **01600 860031**, or use our [online membership form](#)

Contributions to the newsletter or items for the web site can be sent to Marilyn

Other contact details as well as news and events, and information about our meadow reserves at Kingcoed, Maryland and Trellech, are on our web site www.monmouthshiremeadows.org.uk

Follow us on Twitter
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From the Chair

Two years on from the start of the Covid pandemic, we really hope we are going to be back to normal this coming season, with meetings in person, Open Meadows days and appearance at various events and shows. So be sure to put all those dates in your diary - see [back page](#) for a full list.

It was a shame to have to cancel our Autumn social but do please come to our Spring meet and AGM in Monmouth (details on page 2). We are pleased to welcome Caroline Hanks who is the Facilitator of Herefordshire Meadows; a very different organisation as you will see.

Our scything courses proved so popular we are arranging some more, and we have other workshops and training opportunities to tempt you, some of which are being run for MMG members by Plantlife Cymru. Please see page 3 for more details.

The second edition of our Grassland Fungi field guide was launched in 2020, and during the 2021 season received some excellent reviews, resulting in very good sales. Many of the photographs taken for the book are now available to view online.

Jacynth and Jemima, our two Exmoor Ponies have spent the winter at Brook Barn near Tintern and are looking forward to going to their summer residences. As usual, very many thanks to Steph and Alan Poulter for all their work managing and caring for them.

After featuring garden meadows in our last newsletter, we now have a short discussion on rewilding. Whether it be Yellowstone National Park or one metre square patch then we can all do our bit.



Spring display – Green-winged Orchids and Cowslips (Keith Moseley)

Although recruitment of new members slowed down during the autumn and winter, as it always does, we are still growing as an organisation and our botanists will be busy again come spring, surveying members' land. If you have not had a survey yet, please get in touch with us. We now have over 300 members, and we

are starting to plan what we should do for our 20th anniversary in 2023 – suggestions are welcome!

Thank you to you all for continuing to support us, and helping spread the message about wildflower-rich grassland.

Rachel Morgan

AGM and Spring Meeting Tuesday 5th April 7.30pm at Bridges Centre, Monmouth

With speaker Caroline Hanks of Herefordshire Meadows

Sadly, because of the current uncertainties, we will not be having our traditional buffet supper at our Spring Meeting this year. Refreshments will be served – tea, coffee and cakes – and there will be wine available. There will still be plenty of time to socialise and meet friends, old and new.

Non-members interested in our work are very welcome.

The meeting will start with a short AGM followed by Caroline's talk: *Herefordshire Meadows – raising awareness of the wider benefits of flower-rich grassland for farmers and smallholders.*

Caroline studied Natural Sciences and Crop Protection and then worked overseas and in the UK on entomological research projects. She worked as a FWAG farm conservation adviser in Herefordshire from 2000. For the last 11 years she has been working freelance during which time she helped set up Herefordshire



Meadows in 2015. Initially formed as an informal discussion network, Herefordshire Meadows has been a Facilitation Funded group for almost six years during which time other funding has helped the group broaden its reach and activities. The team, including three part-time meadow advisers, has its main focus on meadow restoration and creation so that the wide-ranging benefits of flower-rich grasslands are being realised by farmers and smallholders and community projects across the County. Caroline will share some recent highlights as well as current challenges and opportunities.

Bridges Centre is located in Drybridge House, Drybridge Park, Monmouth NP25 5AS. Doors open at 7.30pm. There is no entry fee, but **please book in advance** as we need to know numbers. **There is a booking form on our web site, or contact the membership secretary Marilyn (details on page 1).**



Spring and Summer Events

Open Meadows Days

There will be two Open Meadows days in spring/summer this year, and we hope to hold a third in October to see grassland fungi at Trellech Wet Meadow.

On **Sunday 19th June** you can visit an amazing site in Cross Hands near Llansoy, with host Pip Morrison. There are ten acres of species-rich hay meadow, where our survey identified 36 indicators of unimproved grassland in one small field - a very high number for a meadow in Monmouthshire. Among them were Agrimony, Meadowsweet, Dyers Greenweed, both Bird's-foot Trefoil and Greater Birds-foot Trefoil, Zig-zag Clover and more. There will be an opportunity to visit our MMG reserve at Kingcoed too, which is not far away.

Saturday 2nd July is National Meadows Day, and we are celebrating with two Open Meadows near Talycoed. One is managed by Sally Jones, where she runs her business Welsh Organic Wildflowers. The second is Upper Red House Farm, an organic farm and home of Teona Dorian-Smith.

Details and directions for both days will be posted on the MMG web site nearer the time.

Training Courses and Workshops

As promised after last year's successful scything courses, we are putting on more short courses and workshops this season. All must be booked in advance, and some are already fully booked, but we are holding waiting lists. Information and booking forms can be found on our web site, and details are circulated to members via our email bulletins. Places are allocated on a first come, first served basis.

Meadow Making by Hand

Friday 27th May: MMG member Ian Rabjohns has offered to demonstrate the techniques he has used successfully to manage his meadow for many years.

Ian is a retired educator and naturalist and you can get a taste for his methods in his article on page 12. This is a great opportunity to learn more about the practical side of hands-on meadow management, and learn some tips from his experience.

Ian will include information on researching the history of past land use, some monitoring and record mapping techniques, mini habitats and their vulnerability. Numbers are limited, so please book early.

The course will run from 10am to 3.30pm (bring your own packed lunch, drinks will be provided). Note that the ground is steep, so not suitable for anyone with limited mobility.

Plantlife Courses

Plantlife Cymru's Magnificent Meadows team have funding to run courses throughout Wales this year, and are delivering two in our area for MMG members:

Meadow Management for Reptiles, Tuesday 26th April. A workshop led by Peter Hill of the Amphibian and Reptiles Trust ([ARC Trust](#)). At the time of writing this is fully booked.

Meadow Monitoring Methods, Wednesday 20th July. A half day workshop about the technique of Rapid Grassland Monitoring, which explains how to use regular surveys and records to assess how well your meadow restoration is doing and the effect your meadow management is having on its biodiversity. The course is led by Lucia Chmurova, Conservation Officer for Plantlife's Magnificent Meadows Cymru project.

Scything Courses

Scything tutor Andrea Gilpin is returning for two further scything courses on 28th and 30th July. These are also, provisionally, fully booked but for all these courses we are keeping a waiting list. There is a charge for the scything courses.

Future Courses

We have ideas for future activities so keep an eye out for our email bulletins. If you have any ideas, or have missed out on any courses that we might run again, please get in touch with Marilyn, as it helps to know where members' interests lie.



Homeward bound – the end of a useful day learning to scythe

It was a hot sunny day in 1978 and we were on a nature walk with two small children who were grumbling about being dragged along together with a group of more mature people. However amongst the group was another young couple also with two small grumbling children: none other than Lindsay (always known as Lins) and Stephanie Tyler. Our long friendship with them has very much been focussed on our mutual love of wildlife that Lins continued to the end, involved with Steph's bird work, moth trapping and interest in plants. I always remember Lins telling me that the best evenings he spent were in the farmhouse they owned in South Africa with a wealth of flowers outside and the identification books on the table. "What could be better" he said.

Lins was born in Northern Ireland but moved to Birkenhead, where he attended school, when he was 11. From there he went to study Veterinary Medicine at Cambridge: Fitzwilliam College. It was at Cambridge that he met a young Stephanie Monk and they married in 1966 in Lincolnshire. "What attracted you to Steph?" I asked. "Why, it was her sizeable PhD grant" he replied!!! His great and dry sense of humour was one of his great strengths and I derived much fun sparring with him.

They went on to have two children: Rob and Sally who provided them with five grandchildren that are very dear to them both.

Following Cambridge, Lins undertook a Tropical Medicine Course at Edinburgh, providing him with the qualifications to work in Veterinary Medicine overseas. He worked in several places including the UAE, Vietnam and several African countries. It was whilst in Ethiopia in 1976 that the family were taken hostage by the Tigray People's Liberation Army and kept under difficult and harsh conditions for eight months. This was a terrible ordeal for them but strength of character meant they were able to rebuild their lives following their release. "It was a sobering experience" he said: somewhat of an understatement I think!

Lins had many distinguished achievements including being instrumental in the eradication of rinderpest in cattle, developing sustainable disease control for Tsetse Fly, writing manuals and preparing training courses for vets in Britain and across Africa. Always modest about his achievements, which he rarely



Lins with Steph and Archie

talked about, we must acknowledge the huge and significant contribution he made to Veterinary Science.

Following his retirement he and Steph returned from Botswana to their cottage in the Wye Valley where Lins continued with his love of wildlife. He was also passionate about gardening and produced a wonderful range of fruit and vegetables for the kitchen as well as growing a range of cacti and indoor plants in his conservatory, that he was keen to show me whenever I went to collect Steph for a day out botanising. He also loved baking and was always producing mouth-watering cakes and meals; having fresh scones ready for Steph on her return from the field.

Readers of this tribute will best know Lins from the Meadows group and the support that he provided by being in charge of the Tracmaster on work parties and on earlier indoor meetings pouring generous glasses of wine. His modesty always made him say that his role was "purely supportive you know" but it was much more hands on than he would ever acknowledge.

I am sure you will join me in sending our best wishes to Steph, Rob, Sally and Steph's grandchildren.

A life well lived, we salute you Lins.

Elsa Wood

Help Needed to Find Breeding Curlews in Gwent

Verity Picken

Curlews will soon be back on their breeding sites in inland Gwent and your help in locating them is needed urgently!

Tragically, Curlews are in such steep decline that they could become extinct as a breeding species in Wales within the next decade. Loss of habitat, changes in farming practices and predation have driven this massive decrease. Silage fields, with grass too dense for tiny chicks to move through easily, may be cut three or four times a year so eggs and chicks often fall victim to heavy machinery. Hay meadows are far safer as they are cut late in the year and are easier for newly-hatched chicks to pass through in their search for food, mostly invertebrates. Other habitats used by Curlews for breeding include rough or wet grassland, bogs and moorland.

The Gwent Ornithological Society (GOS) has set up an email address Curlew@gwentbirds.org.uk to which you are asked to send **all** records of birds seen or heard in **inland** Gwent this spring and summer (coastal records are not required). Before we can target conservation work we need to know where these iconic birds are.

Please include the date, location (nearest town or village plus, if possible, the grid reference), the number

of birds, behaviour, any vocalisation (call or bubbling song) and the habitat (e.g. grassland, silage, bog) and any livestock present. **All information, no matter how little, will be helpful.**

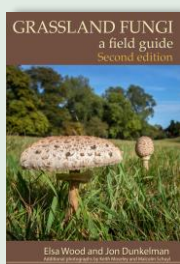
Curlews are site-faithful so check out any areas where you have seen them in the past – and keep an eye on your own meadows! Please spread the word far and wide – we want as many records as possible.

This lovely video will help with the identification of Curlews and their calls for those who are unfamiliar with them curlewcountry.org/2020/04/20/curlew-observation-training-film.



Curlew, photo by Andy Karran of Gwent Wildlife Trust

Grassland Fungi: A Field Guide



Some great reviews of this MMG publication on social media over the last few months have resulted in very pleasing sales for our second edition, published in 2020.

Autumn is peak fungi season of course, but there are still mushrooms to be spotted in grassland in spring and summer. Look out for St George's Mushroom for example (picture opposite), so named because it is visible on St George's day, 23rd April, but can often appear earlier.

Grassland Fungi A Field Guide by Elsa Wood and Jon Dunkelman is available from www.nhbs.com for £19.99 + p&p. All proceeds go to Monmouthshire Meadows Group.



The results are in for BSBI's eleventh New Year Plant Hunt, when plant-lovers across Britain and Ireland head out to see what is flowering in their local patch. 1,895 people took part this year – more than ever before – during this warmest New Year on record. Hunters were out recording wild and naturalised plants in bloom for up to three hours over the New Year period. This year, 669 different plant species were recorded in bloom compared to 710 last year and 615 in 2020.

As expected, the milder south and the coastal areas of Britain and Ireland had the highest numbers of species in flower – 107 in Swanage with more than 80 species also recorded at locations in Somerset, Cornwall, Jersey and Suffolk.

Although the 2022 New Year period itself was the warmest on record, temperatures leading up to the New Year Plant Hunt were only 1.1 degrees above average. This contrasts with temperatures leading up to the 2021 Hunt, when temperatures were 2.7 degrees above average and more species in bloom were recorded.

Andrew Rowley of BSBI's Events & Communications Committee has analysed the results. He said "2022 has been a record-breaking year, with more participants and more lists submitted than ever before, but we are still seeing the same split of native vs non-native plants".

The main findings from this year's data were:

- 53% of the flowering species reported were of plants which normally flower after midsummer and had managed to carry on flowering. These include 'Autumn Stragglers' such as Yarrow, Ragwort and Hogweed. This proportion is very similar to previous years.
- Only 25% were 'Springtime Specialists' like Primrose and Lesser Celandine. This proportion is similar to previous years.
- 22% of the records submitted were of species we might reasonably expect to flower at New Year, or species which we cannot easily be categorised as either 'early' or 'late'. These include typical 'All Year Rounders' such as Shepherd's-purse as well as 'Winter Specialists' such as Winter Heliotrope.
- The top four most frequently seen species were Daisy, Groundsel, Dandelion and Annual Meadow-grass – this was identical to last year's list and all

(native) plants that we would expect to be flowering at this time of year.

- White Dead-nettle moved into fifth position on the Top Twenty list of most frequent plants, replacing Smooth Sow-thistle which moved to number nine on the list.
- Gorse re-entered the Top Twenty replacing Yarrow, which dropped to number 15 on the list.
- 38% of species recorded were non-natives (aliens). This includes plants from warmer climates that have escaped from gardens or cultivation, become naturalised in the wild and were able to extend their flowering into the winter months.

As in previous years, urban areas tended to have more non-native species in flower than rural areas, as there are more sheltered and disturbed places with warm microclimates where alien plants can thrive.

Kevin Walker, BSBI Head of Science said "As Andrew's analysis of the New Year Plant Hunt data shows, our plants are responding to changing weather patterns, with more flowers being recorded during the past decade as we experience autumns and winters with warmer temperatures and fewer frosts. We cannot, however, prove conclusively that more species are flowering nowadays in midwinter compared to in past years. We can't say for sure yet what impacts these changes in flowering times will have on associated wildlife - but we can see that weather patterns are changing and our plants, both native and non-native, are responding."

Full results on the BSBI site: nyph.bsbi.org/results.php



Daisies, © Caroline Gill 2009-2022

carolinegillwildlife.blogspot.com/2017/03/more-insects-and-first-daisies.html

Woodland Creation

Where Does it Leave Grasslands?

The Woodland Trust has recently published a comprehensive **Woodland Creation Guide**, a detailed document aimed at giving advice to individuals, groups, landowners – anyone considering or planning to plant a number of trees. This is particularly important at a time when funding for tree planting schemes is being made available in the fight to limit climate change. There is a concern, described in our last issue and the subject of a recent Plantlife campaign, that other important habitats, grasslands and wetlands in particular, are being ignored in a rather simplistic approach to solving the complex problem of atmospheric carbon. Species-rich grassland and wetland habitats also hold carbon in their structure, and ill-considered tree planting schemes could do more harm than good by releasing this, at the same time as destroying valuable habitats.

The BBC and other news providers have recently reported on concerns that large firms are buying up farms in rural Wales to plant trees in order to "offset their guilt" over emissions, and that this mass planting of trees is likely to be destructive to valuable wildlife sites, and counterproductive to the aim of reducing atmospheric carbon. (*Climate change: Corporate mass tree planting 'damaging' nature - BBC News 10/11/2021*). Some of these schemes appear to be purely greenwashing exercises, some aim to profit from tree planting grants available, but the fear is that most are liable to be rushed through with little regard for the actual effect on atmospheric carbon levels, or care for the natural environment.

The *Woodland Creation Guide* expands on the basic concept of 'the right tree in the right place'. **It is worth noting the Trust's list of places where trees should NOT be planted. This includes sites with rare or protected species, grassland that has never been ploughed, wetlands, and heathland. The authors also stress the importance of leaving open spaces in woodland to encourage different habitats and enhance biodiversity value.**

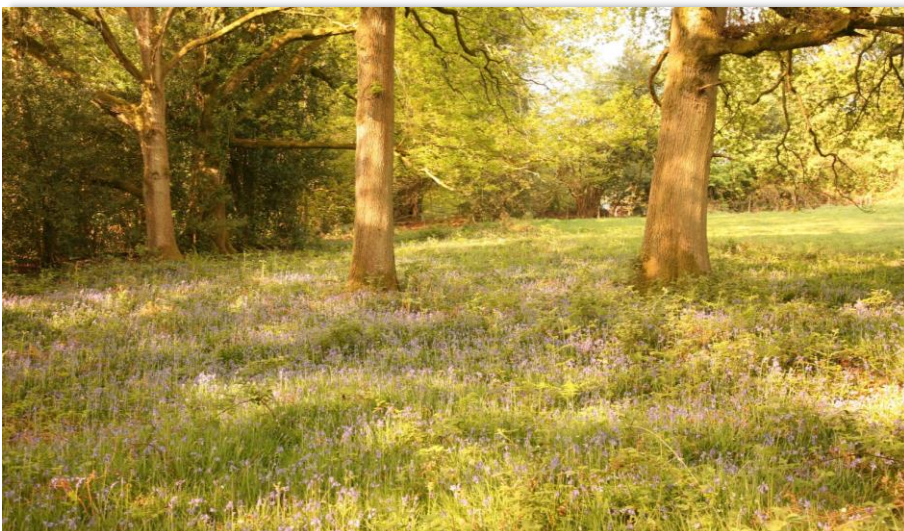
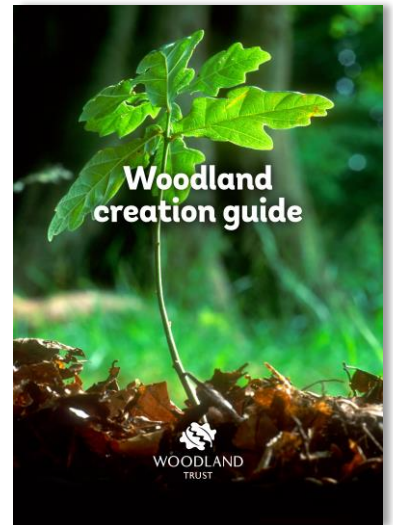
The guide recommends a rigorous process including: site assessment and full ecological surveys (with botanical assessments); determining factors affecting the design of the scheme; community and stakeholder engagement; and long term planning for management of the woodland. It advocates taking into account the potential to protect and restore other habitats within the scheme, considering the full ecology of the area to realise the full potential for enhancing biodiversity. It is stressed that natural regeneration of woodland is far better in terms of the carbon equation than planting new woodland. (This is largely because carbon is released whenever ground is disturbed, and the more species-rich the ground is, the more carbon it holds that can be released by digging.)

It is recommended reading for anyone planning such a project – but are the people who really need to read it paying attention?

Woodland Creation Guide: The Woodland Trust

www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/plant-trees/woodland-creation-guide

*Mixed woodland and grassland
(Jon Dunkelman)*



Rewilding - The Latest Conservation Fashion?

Rewilding seems to be one of the latest buzz words much bandied about these days. But what is rewilding and what does it mean for us? Is rewilding just the trendy new word for nature conservation? A layman's first thought might be that it is the opposite of farming (or active forms of natural resource management); abandoning the land and letting 'nature take its course'. Indeed, that is one interpretation, but these days it can mean different things to different people.

The term has been around for over 30 years. Originally the notion was applied only on very large areas stating the need for 'Core, Corridors, and Carnivores'. This means leaving key wild areas connected with corridors and utilising key species which will create wetland areas (Beavers), rootle and disturb the earth (pigs and boar), graze encroaching scrub (large herbivores), and apex predators which will form the top of the food chain (Lynx or Wolves).

In such areas as Yellowstone in the USA, all but wolves were already there. But without a top predator to keep browsers such as Elk in check, trees and grass had been grazed out. 25 years ago, 14 Wolves were brought in and had a positive impact on the ecosystem and biodiversity. There are different mouths doing different things.

A common comment to MMG is that surely meadows are the opposite of wild as they have to be managed to retain the habitat. Rewilding is interpreted solely as 'letting nature do its own thing', and as traditional meadows were created by humans to serve their farming needs, can they be considered a truly wild environment? But our familiar meadow species evolved before man started to manage grassland for livestock

purposes. There always was flower-rich grassland on poorer soils and rocky outcrops and these were maintained by wild grazing animals (such as Bison, Elk and Aurochs) which have now disappeared from our landscape. Farming practices replaced these animals by managing the land as hay meadows, enabling grassland species to survive.

Our small meadow remnants are now so scarce that every effort should be put into maintaining them by proper management regimes rather than risking their loss in any rewilding scheme. But as we cannot bring back the whole ecosystem, rewilding involves management to replicate the conditions needed for these species to survive. Rewilding projects therefore generally use other grazing animals, such as at the Knepp Castle Estate in Sussex. This is perhaps the most well-known rewilding project in Britain covering 3,500 acres (Yellowstone is 2.2 million acres - half the size of Wales -



*The English longhorn cow and calves, Knepp Estate
cc-by-sa/2.0 - © Patrick Roper - geograph.org.uk/p/5223238*



*The Auroch, picture from Vitantica.net
www.vitantica.net/2017/09/17/uro-antenato-dei-bovini-moderni*

and Monmouthshire is 345,000 acres). This traditional but marginal arable and dairy farm has now been given over to land regeneration and restoration. Such previously man-made features as land drains and fences have been removed which has led to the development of a range of natural habitats. Carnivores have not been introduced but grazing animals, in this case Longhorn cattle, standing in for their extinct ancestors the Aurochs, have been used as the drivers of habitat creation. Their numbers must be controlled by human intervention. Over twenty years such rare species as

Turtle Doves, Peregrine Falcons, and Purple Emperor butterflies are now present in significant numbers.

A latest craze for rewilding seems to have encouraged an enthusiasm for tree planting. Funders and volunteers love it as results are instantly visible. It is easier to plant a tree than manage a meadow for diverse species. (See our article on the Woodland Trust's guidance on woodland creation for our thoughts on how this impacts other habitats, page 7).

Many see an apparent conflict with modern farming and food production, and such bodies as The National Trust are wary of using the term 'rewilding' in their management plans. The world produces enough food for its population plus an extra 25%. But 40% of that food is wasted, so it is no wonder that people argue for land to maximise food production. In fact, rewilding can complement farming if integrated with regenerative agriculture.

But we should not muddle rewilding with tree planting and other conventional conservation measures which tend to focus on single species. Rewilding can be about letting go and seeing what happens, or where this isn't feasible then getting as close to it as possible.

Rewildingbritain.org.uk has a vision of rewilding upland Britain by removing excessive sheep grazing and minimizing deer and grouse moorland. Its website suggests steps to rewilding, summarised here:

- Before doing anything make a plan based on the existing land-use. It may be that you want to keep the same regime in some places. Get expert advice if you need to

- Get to know what others are doing in the area, and talk to your neighbours
- Think and mimic natural processes. Without animals you can still cut grass and trees in the way that wild browsers might. Ensure you protect an existing species-rich area. A good motto might be 'conserve the very best and rewild the rest'
- Be patient, measure and monitor - over years
- Celebrate your successes with others

You can join the [Monmouthshire Rewilding Facebook group](https://www.facebook.com/MonmouthshireRewilding) and the Wye Valley Rewilding Network www.wyevalleyrewilding.org. For more information a good starting point is the Knepp website knepp.co.uk/the-inspiration. Also see this issue of ECOS (the journal of the British Association of Nature Conservationists): [ECOS-37-2.pdf](https://www.banet.org.uk/ECOS-37-2.pdf)

What does that mean for Monmouthshire Meadows Group as conservers and restorers of wildflower-rich grasslands? I think we can safely say that we are right up there in the rewilding camp as we are saving one of the most endangered habitats in Britain. And we can also hold our head up in farming circles, as we are maintaining traditional agriculture. But as we know, it takes great effort and perseverance to create and maintain a hay meadow. So in one respect, rewilding is ecological restoration by another name. But it is perhaps a looser, more regenerative approach to enhancing biodiversity.

We can all rewild no matter how small the space.

Rachel Morgan

Some Meadows Facts from Plantlife

- * Over 700 species of wild plants grow in grassy meadows, pastures and fields
- * A typical meadow can be home to 570 flowers per square metre on a single day in early summer, that's nine million flowers in an average three-acre meadow
- * At peak nectar flow at the beginning of August, the flowers in a three-acre meadow can produce nearly 6kg of nectar sugar per day, enough to feed over half a million bees
- * Flower-rich grasslands and meadows can store 500% more carbon than fields of pure grass
- * Roots of meadow plants like Common Knapweed, Great Burnet and Bird's-foot Trefoil can reach down two metres into the ground, helping them survive drought, stabilise the soil, store carbon and bring up valuable minerals for livestock to eat
- * Looking at a flower like Ox-eye Daisy for just six seconds has been shown to lower your blood pressure
- * The plants in a typical meadow can support nearly 1,400 species of invertebrates, that's an army of bugs, beetles, flies, spiders, grasshoppers, crickets, butterflies and moths

The Meadows' Champion

A short history of Monmouthshire Meadows Group

Flower-rich meadows were once a common sight in the countryside and provided vital habitats for insects, animals and fungi, but they declined rapidly in the 20th century. This decline and the success of the Parish Grassland Project in St Briavels, Hewelsfield and Brockweir across the River Wye, prompted some concerned individuals to take action in South Wales.

Four friends – Diana Bevan, Maggie Biss, Caroline Howard and Stephanie Tyler – met in January 2003, with local landowners and interested individuals, and set up the Monmouthshire Meadows Group (MMG). The intention was (and still is) to try to prevent further decline and help small landowners promote wildflower-rich grasslands and manage their grasslands. In 2021 the group had over 330 members across Monmouthshire, who have anything from mini-meadows in their gardens to holdings of over 30 acres.

MMG helps members restore their land, by providing a botanical survey and giving training in species identification and management of grassland. Since 2006 it has had two Exmoor ponies, Jacinth and Jemima, who can be borrowed to graze fields naturally, and the group can provide contacts with local farmers who wish to graze ponies or sheep, as well as information about contractors and suppliers who can help with fencing, haymaking, tools and equipment. The group also works with schools, churches and local

councils to encourage more wildflower areas to be planted and maintained.

The charity owns two reserves and has a management agreement over a third. Kingcoed Meadows is an 11.8 acre reserve near Raglan, with a wide variety of grassland plants, including Spotted and Southern Marsh-orchids, Common Cat's-ear, Rough Hawkbit and Bird's-foot Trefoil.

Ida's Meadow near Maryland, near The Narth, is named after Ida Dunn, one of the first members of MMG, who died in 2014, aged 102. Her executors gave one acre of the rich meadowland around her old house to the charity; it has one of the richest known populations of Greater Butterfly Orchids in the county.

Trellech Wet Meadow, a 24-acre reserve, just outside the village of that name, is leased from the Church in Wales, through Monmouthshire County Council, and jointly managed by MMG and Gwent Wildlife Trust. It has varying habitats, from fields, bogs, streams, pools and woodland with a wide variety of flowers, trees and shrubs and associated birds, insects and animals.

The success of MMG has led to the initiative being copied across Wales, including in Carmarthenshire and Gwynedd, with others, as in Pembrokeshire, forming through the charity Plantlife.

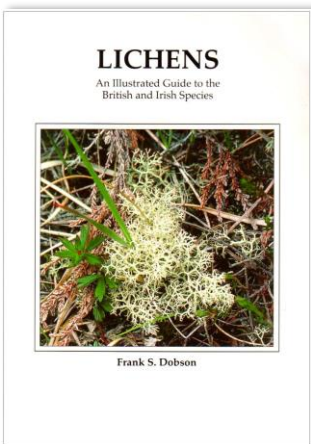
Pam Manfield



2023 will be the 20th anniversary of Monmouthshire Meadows Group. For our 10th anniversary we produced the book *Wildflower Meadows in Monmouthshire*, celebrating our success with members' own stories. We are looking for suggestions for the best way to celebrate this coming anniversary – please let us know your ideas

Liking Lichens

Jon Dunkelman



Frank S Dobson – and a set of the *FSC Colour Guides to Lichens* has set me off attempting (not very successfully) to identify the lichens here at The Beeches.

A lichen is usually an entity composed of a fungus and an alga. In this symbiotic relationship it seems to me that the alga is doing most of the work and the fungus is getting most of the benefit. A bit of a controlling relationship if you ask me. In essence the fungus provides a structure in which the alga lives and the alga provides the food.

Apparently, there are around 2,000 species in Britain and Ireland and once you start looking at twigs, tree trunks and stones you begin to believe that figure. A single twig can harbour many species cheek by jowl.

Lichens come in three main formats: those that are largely flattish and firmly attached to the wood or stone (*crustose*); those that have leafy lobes that typically can be lifted off whatever they are attached to (*foliose*) and those that are attached by a single point or stalk like appendage and are branched (*fruticose*).

There are different methods of reproduction with some lichens reproducing by releasing fungal spores that must alight on a suitable alga to develop, and others reproducing vegetatively by breaking off bits of the organism containing both algal cells and fungal hyphae.

All in all, it is a set of organisms little known about by the general public. They are difficult to study because of their size and the need in many cases to conduct

chemical tests or microscopy to confirm identity. On the positive side they are long lived organisms that are here year-round and when you are yearning to do some nature study mid-winter, lichens are there for you. A single twig can provide days of study! If you want to have a closer look a hand lens is a must and a USB microscope a useful tool. The Field Studies Council Guides are a great introduction, the Frank Dobson book superb if somewhat dense for the complete beginner and the following are useful:

- Facebook – Lichen Whisperers' Network
- Twitter – follow Mark Powell @obfuscans3
- www.britishlichensociety.org.uk
- [Plantlife website](http://Plantlife.org.uk) – search for *lichen*
- www.naturespot.org.uk/gallery/lichens



Top: *Physcia aipolia* (no English name), a foliose species
Middle: *Farinose Cartilage Lichen* (*Ramalina farinacea*), fruticose
Bottom: *Black Stone Flower* (*Parmotrema perlatum*), foliose
Pictures Jon Dunkelman

Hay Making at Mill Bank

Ian Rabjohns

This article grew out of the interest shown recently on scything. As someone who has suffered from a problematic back for many years that has always been an activity to be strenuously avoided! But when I came to this smallholding on the Black Brook I needed sheep to help manage the site, and the sheep needed hay in the winter.

Half a dozen retired old ladies from a farmer friend did for the first two years and had to put up with bought-in hay. Then I got a small flock of rare breed Balwen sheep and started to make my own hay off one small paddock (a tad over half an acre) that has for the past twenty years now been managed in a traditional way. That is, aftermath grazing by the six to eight ewes after hay has been taken off and maybe a short spell of grazing in early December. The field is small, steep, and totally unsuited to normal machinery so it was down to me.



The Balwens arrived and quickly got lost in overgrown fields! Only six of these were mine, the others were their mums who came to settle them in

Cutting is done with a sickle bar mower, tedding with blood, sweat and tears and a hay fork. Then the



Cutting the edge strip with the sickle bar mower

finished hay is raked downhill with a homemade wooden hay rake.

The hay field is managed for invertebrates as well as for the hay. As cutting time coincides with the peak period of the Ringlet and Meadow Brown butterflies and possibly with Skippers and Blues depending on the season, I do an early two-metre cut round the edge of the field and rake this off green. This gives a good strip that is unaffected by hay cutting and has grown to a suitable sward for butterflies by the time it is needed. This also has the benefit of cutting back intrusions such as bramble and bracken from encroaching. The raked off grass is dumped in a corner and becomes a haven for a huge variety of small beetles. Depending on the season I might leave a three-metre strip uncut for butterfly use.



The mower does not cut well going steeply downhill, it tends to push the sward flat even when running slowly, so all cutting is done either running uphill or across the slope. It is very reliable though and in twenty years I have only had to renew the oscillating blade after sixteen years of use.

As I am cutting for good hay my cut will be before those of you who are managing for flowers. The earlier cut keeps seed and gives better nutrient value in winter. The flora though has still improved with good numbers of Common Spotted-orchids and a wide selection of vetch species and finer grasses

Most of the coarse species such as Dock, Bracken, Hemlock and Cow Parsley that tend to spread and



to buy extra my fussy ewes don't particularly like hay from elsewhere!

As the years have gone by the nutrient store in the ground has become depleted, so with only small input from the sheep at aftermath grazing the productivity volume has gone down and the wildflower content gone up as such grass species as Cocksfoot and Yorkshire Fog have been reduced. I have just completed the end of winter task of raking out molehills to save a bit of wear and tear on the mower blade. If left they do get colonised by the Yellow Meadow Ants and build even bigger. This is allowed to happen in other parts of the holding.

dominate where grazing is not full time, have been largely eliminated by pulling.

It takes me between five and seven hours to turn the hay with a fork so a good weather window has to be there to allow at least four days start to finish. Each turn gets easier and quicker as it dries, and the weather dictates either two or three turns.

Then it's raking and forking bundles into the store shed at the bottom of the field. Not a nice job when it's being done in a rush as the weather threatens to turn.

This small field usually produces enough for the winter but when on occasions I do need



Welcome to our New Members

We are delighted to welcome these new members to the group:

Matthew Carney, Abergavenny

Liza and John Cawthorn, Caerleon

John Denton, Raglan

Jeremy Hart and Ruti Simon, Penallt

Lauren Quantick, Pontcanna

Yvonne and Alan Robertson, Earlswood

Kay Swift, Crick

Cherry Taylor, Llangattock Vibon Avel

Fiona and Conrad Williams, Upper Llanover

Louise Williams, The Narth

Membership is on a rolling year basis, with reminders sent out twice a year, in March and September. If you have any queries about your membership, contact our Membership Secretary, Marilyn Dunkelman, marilyn@monmouthshiremeadows.org.uk or phone 01600 860031

Success Story

When Gillian Knowland first joined MMG in 2012, Steph Tyler's survey showed that her 4½ acres held promise. A revisit to the site in 2021 shows just how much can change, and the fields now easily qualify as a Local Wildlife Site. Four species of orchids have appeared, and other new species such as Pignut, Field Woodrush, Rough Hawkbit and Ox-eye Daisy. Yellow Rattle was present in small numbers in 2012, but is now abundant. Heath Spotted- and Common Spotted-orchids have appeared, as well as a dense 'swarm' of Southern Marsh-orchids in one field. A Butterfly Orchid appeared in 2016, and was seen again in 2021, and the fields are now alive with small moths and other invertebrates.



Above and right: Gillian's Southern Marsh-orchids

Autumn Tales

Last autumn, Jules and Dave Barrell roped in visiting friends to tackle some overgrown hedges - mostly hazel stools that hadn't been touched for at least 30 years. Jules writes "we quickly abandoned any ideas of a regional style as a lot of the stems were too big to be pleached and there were huge gaps between each stool".

After that useful start, they continued working along the hedge through winter, managing about 250 feet, with much material going for stakes for the hedge, firewood, or poles for hurdle making. Jules says "ten minutes of cutting and pleaching then took us half an hour of clearing before we could do the next bit. It was a steep learning curve for us, knowing which stems to cut out and which to pleach, our quality of laying the stems improved as we went along. We have plans to fill in some of the gaps with some small saplings that have seeded themselves into the field. We have many more hedges that require laying so the birds still have plenty of nest sites, food and cover".



Above: Jules showing her hedge-laying skills. Below shows the brown area which was shaded by the hedge, hopefully this will help the grass grow back



If you find something new or unusual in your meadow, or have a story to tell, please send it in to us. We love to hear how our members are getting on, and to share our problems and our successes so we can all learn from our experiences.

Sue and Ian Mabblerley at [Nant y Bedd Garden](#) sent in a couple of photos of their new Grillo all-terrain mowing machine in action, clearing rushes and bracken. They came across the little fellow in the third photo below when they were clearing the bracken litter to sow more meadow seed from Gwent Wildlife Trust. If you look carefully you will spot that he has a spider on his nose! Proof, if needed, that meadows are great for wildlife. The bracken litter has been left in piles for the frog and his friend.

John Hinderer provided evidence of plants out of season with some pictures taken on 6th November (along with some in-season fungi). There were three Cowslips and a Violet in flower.

Clockwise from top right: Ian with the Grillo machine clearing bracken; pushing the Grillo through the meadow at Nant y Bedd; Sue's frog and friend; Violet on 6th November; Cowslips on 6th November



Adopt a Meadow

Adopt a Meadow is a new scheme MMG has created in cooperation with Connect Monmouthshire, the platform designed to facilitate collaboration and networking between volunteers and communities in the county.



Adopt a Meadow matches people who love nature and enjoy working on practical conservation projects with people who own an area of grassland but are unable to manage it by themselves. Both parties will benefit by working together to protect and enhance the biodiversity of the land. It is based on the Adopt a Garden scheme pioneered by Abergavenny Town Council on the same platform.

The aim is to develop the skills and knowledge of all parties, get together to do manual tasks such as hay cuts and bracken clearing, cultivate friendships and feel the health benefits, both mental and physical, of working to help nature and our environment.

How does the scheme work?

The meadow owner allows the adopter to manage the land according to a mutually agreed scheme, with the adopter planning and undertaking the work to suit their own timetable. It is important that the owner and adopter have shared values and can agree a

management plan that they are both enthusiastic about. It is hoped that both parties will become members of Monmouthshire Meadows Group to benefit from the advice and guidance MMG can provide.

Anyone interested in the scheme can sign up to Connect Monmouthshire, where there are forms to complete as the first step of the application process. MMG will assist with matching up owners and adopters and offer help with advice on the best management regime. The process is designed to ensure people are well matched, with common aims, and to provide safeguards by obtaining appropriate references. This is all completely free to use, and no money will be involved in the reciprocal process. If you are interested in taking part, either as a meadow owner or an adopter, you can join the platform here: connectmonmouthshire.org.

Or if you are not confident with the digital world get in touch with Marilyn, membership secretary of MMG, or with Clare from Connect Monmouthshire on hello@connectmonmouthshire.org



News from the Reserves: Trellech Wet Meadow

Work continues, in collaboration with Gwent Wildlife Trust, to manage the fields in the centre of Trellech. More hedge laying has taken place. Reserve manager Dick Coates, with help from Steph Tyler, has erected new nest-boxes, and a Barn Owl box will be installed soon. Dick reports finding eight or nine different species of Waxcaps on the meadows this autumn, including Pink Waxcap. However, the best fungi of the season were the group of Common Funnel, seen in the reserve for the first time (shown in the photo, although they grew to a much bigger size).

Most exciting of all, bee specialist and insect expert Roger Rushton, who spends his summers surveying local fields and gardens, has reported finding a very rare fly on the reserve. His records for 2021 have been checked by Dipterists Forum experts, who confirmed his finding of the Scarce Red-legged Robber Fly (*Dioctria cothurnata*), at both Wet Meadow and his own garden. This is a rarity only once found previously in Monmouthshire (1987 at Skenfrith). There is at least one other Welsh record, from mid-Wales, and a scattering of a few English records from Cumberland to the New Forest during the previous 150 years. This is a significant finding from a conservation point of view.



Nature Isn't Neat Now County-wide

Following a successful project based in Monmouth, led by Monmouthshire County Council and Monmouth Town Council, the Nature Isn't Neat (NiN) approach to improving biodiversity is being extended across the local authorities in Gwent. The aim is to manage green spaces across the counties in a way that creates wildflower-rich, pollinator-friendly habitats, combined with public engagement exercises and training opportunities to spread the message.



The five local authorities involved (Monmouthshire, Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Newport and Torfaen) are collaborating on creating Pollinator Policies and planning a programme of activities and events for 2022 to promote wildflower and pollinator management. It's a great outcome from a pioneering project, and well done to everyone from Nature Isn't Neat. www.monlife.co.uk/outdoor/nature-isnt-neat

Gwent Green Grid

NiN is part of a series of programmes to be delivered by Gwent Green Grid Partnership, a wider project to improve and develop 'green infrastructure', ("the network of natural and semi-natural features, green spaces, rivers and lakes that intersperse and connect villages, towns and cities") and to provide green job opportunities within the area. The partners are the five authorities together with Natural Resources Wales, Forest Research and the Severn Wye Energy Agency.

The organisations say they will work together to *"deliver a range of well-being benefits for local communities and plans to make improvements to green spaces, urban and country parks, cycleways and public rights of way. It will facilitate better woodland management and creation and take action to protect and enhance vital habitats for pollinators. The partnership will also explore better management of natural spaces to provide opportunities which deliver preventative health-focussed activity."*



Castle Meadows, Abergavenny

It is not always easy combining access with protecting nature - sometimes there will be conflicting priorities. In Abergavenny, as part of the County Council's Active Travel policy, a cycle route has been proposed across Castle Meadows, a flood plain area of grassland alongside the River Usk. This has proved controversial. Opponents of the scheme say that the Council wants to urbanise the meadows, treating it as a town park rather than a tranquil beauty spot managed for nature, and the plans will damage the biodiversity of the area. Monmouthshire County Council have launched a public consultation on the plans, with an online survey that closes on 25th March:

www.monmouthshire.gov.uk/2022/02/share-your-feedback-on-the-existing-connections-through-abergavenny-castle-meadows

The Wye Invasive Species Project

Wye Valley AONB are continuing to tackle three of the worst non-native invasive plant species: Himalayan Balsam, Japanese Knotweed and American Skunk Cabbage. There is information on how to identify these species on their web site:

www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk/caring-for-wye-valley-aonb/our-work/our-projects/invasive-non-native-species-initiative

If you spot any of these plants in the lower Wye Valley area, i.e. downstream of Monmouth, please report it to **Ellie Baggett, Lower Wye Nature Recovery Officer, at naturerecovery@wevalleyaonb.org.uk** with as much of the following information as you can:

- OS Grid Reference or What3Words address
- Photo/s of the species in situ
- Site information: where it's growing, access issues, livestock or pets present
- Details about the plants: what species, how abundant it looks (dominant, abundant, frequent, occasional, rare), whether it's been treated or managed
- Any information you have about the landowner.

If you know the landowner, please recommend they get in touch with the AONB as soon as possible. If you are the landowner please complete the [Access and INNS Control Consent Form](#) and return **by end May 2022** for the site to be considered for the 2022 control schedule.



Nature and Us

Natural Resources Wales has launched a survey to find out what people in Wales care about in their natural environment, as part of a wider series of national online events in February and March this year. Their Nature and Us survey is available to complete online or by post.



The survey asks about issues that affect the environment. The list includes climate change; wildlife and natural resources; droughts and floods; active travel and public transport; food production, healthier diets and sustainable farming; forestry and fishing practices; energy sources; natural and green spaces in rural and urban areas; waste and recycling; soil degradation; pollution; plastics and more.

Many of these areas overlap, and the hardest part of the survey is trying to identify which are a priority to tackle (the survey asks for your 'top four' issues in each list) when in reality they are all inter-related and all very important.

Access the survey at www.natureandus.wales or email natureandus@naturalresources.wales

The State of Britain's Hedgehogs



In February the British Hedgehog Preservation Society and the People's Trust for Endangered Species, under the banner of their Hedgehog Street project, launched The State of Britain's Hedgehogs 2022 report.

Hedgehogs were put on the IUCN Red List in 2020, indicating their vulnerability to becoming extinct in Great Britain. The latest report is depressing reading for rural hedgehogs, which continue to decline, but a bit of brighter news for urban hedgehogs which at least show a stable population, and even possibly recovering a little in some areas, albeit from a very low number. This highlights the importance of gardens and green spaces, and local action to create safe routes for hedgehogs who can wander up to two miles a night.

The report discusses possible reasons for the species decline, and the main factor, unsurprisingly, seems to be degradation and loss

of their habitat. While it is acknowledged that badgers can be a factor, as the two species compete for food and badgers will eat hedgehogs sometimes, they are unlikely to be a major factor. In 71% of rural sites where there were no badger setts, there were no hedgehogs either. Additionally, road casualties could account for around 10-20% of hedgehog deaths each year.

For more information and to find out what you can do look at www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk

A summary of the report is on

www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk/new-state-of-britains-hedgehog-report-issued-today



British Hedgehog Preservation Society

Monmouth Bee Festival

This year the annual festival celebrating pollinators and all things bee-related will be held on Saturday 2nd and Sunday 3rd July, around the town. On Sunday, events will focus around Nelson Gardens and Chippenham Fields. Organised by the Monmouth-based charity Bees for Development, each year this event has grown with more stalls and activities, games and exhibitions.



The programme has still to be announced but we understand there will be even more happening this year than last. Keep an eye on their web site monmouthbeefestival.co.uk



A socially distanced Bee Festival – Chippenham Fields, Monmouth 2021

The Greater Gwent State of Nature

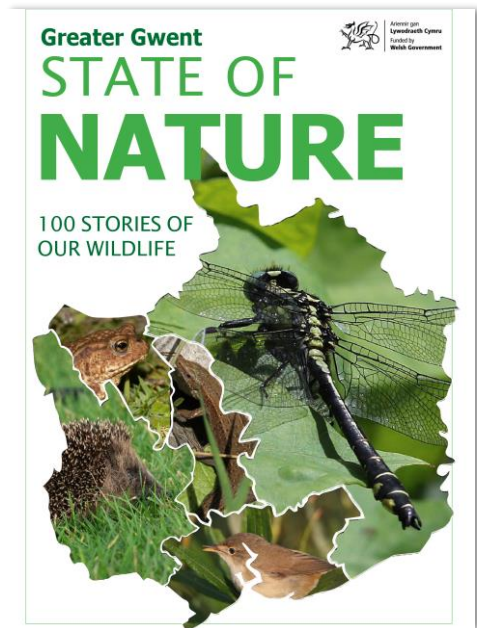
In 2019, a national partnership of over 70 conservation organisations published The State of Nature Report, a summary of the how human impacts are driving sweeping changes in wildlife across the whole of the UK.

Following their approach, in July 2021 the Resilient Greater Gwent Project (a consortium of environmental organisations including Gwent Wildlife Trust, Natural Resources Wales, SEWBRc and Buglife) published their own report on the state of wildlife in Gwent, focussing on 100 species (or groups of species) and using whatever data was available to assess the population and trends, threats and successes of each species. For some species there was more data than others, but the result is a useful compilation and summary of available information. The report is intended to help direct conservation efforts where they are most needed. However, one significant insight provided by the report is the need for wider species recording, highlighting areas where data is sparse.

The results, of course, are disturbing. Some species, such as Bittern, are making a small come-back and colonies of Greater and Lesser Horseshoe bats are thriving, but mostly it is a reflection of something we already know – the depletion of nature in general.

Most of the species included are from the Animal Kingdom, and MMG would have liked to see more

emphasis on flora and fungi. Flowers are represented by the Green-winged Orchid, Lesser Butterfly Orchid, and



Spreading Bellflower, with 'arable wildflowers' treated as a group. The section on fungi includes grassland Waxcaps, also treated as a group.

The full report is 500 pages but it is worth downloading it to use as a reference source, particularly if you have a specific interest in any of the 100 species included in the study.

www.gwentwildlife.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/Greater%20Gwent%20State%20of%20Nature%20284%29%20final.pdf

Monmouthshire Botany Group: The Monmouthshire Botany Group was established in 2013. It has more than 30 participants with between 10-20 attending field meetings. All are welcome to join the group and meet fellow and aspiring botanists.

The programme of walks shown on the following page is provisional as some venues may be changed. Days start at 10am continuing until about 3-4pm. All days are for helping to improve ID and recording skills. Booking is essential, and you will be sent the exact meeting point. Contact Steph Tyler steph_tyler2001@hotmail.com

Picture right: Adder's-tongue Fern found at Kingcoed Meadows reserve (Elsa Wood)



Dates for your Diary

The list is, of course, liable to change and you should confirm details in advance. Updates will be published on our web site, and by email bulletin to our members, together with activities of interest that we hear about from other organisations. Courses are all number dependent, and must be booked in advance

Tuesday 5th April: **MMG AGM** with talk by Caroline Hanks of Herefordshire Meadows (see page 2)

Saturday 23rd April: *Monmouthshire **Botany Group Walk**, in woodland probably Cockshoot Wood/Bishops Barnetts Wood near Chepstow

Tuesday 26th April: **Meadow Management for Reptiles** at Trellech Wet Meadow. A workshop run for MMG by Plantlife and the ARC Trust (fully booked)

Saturday 14th May: *Monmouthshire **Botany Group Walk** at Pontypool Park

Friday 27th May: **Meadow Making by Hand**, short day course run by Ian Rabjohn (see page 3)

Saturday 4th June: *Monmouthshire **Botany Group Walk** in Chepstow Park Wood

Sunday 19th June: MMG's **Open Meadows Day**, at members' fields near Llansoy

Wednesday 22nd June: *Monmouthshire **Botany Group Walk** near Caerwent

Saturday 2nd July: MMG's **Open Meadows Day** at members' fields near Talycoed

Saturday 2nd/Sunday 3rd July: **Monmouth Bee Festival**

Saturday 16th July: *Monmouthshire **Botany Group Walk** at The Punchbowl

Wednesday 20th July: **Meadow Monitoring Methods**, a half day workshop run by Plantlife (see page 3)

Thursday 28th July: **Scything course** with Andrea Gilpin (see page 3)

Saturday 30th July: **Scything course** with Andrea Gilpin (see page 3)

Saturday 13th August: *Monmouthshire **Botany Group Walk** at Garn Lakes

Saturday 10th September: *Monmouthshire **Botany Group Walk** along the River Ebbw, Newport

**Monmouthshire Botany Group see previous page*

For other events see:

Gwent Wildlife Trust: www.gwentwildlife.org/whats-on

Plantlife: www.plantlife.org.uk/uk/discover-wild-plants-nature/events

Monmouthshire Meadows Group is grateful for all the help both financial and physical given by our members. We are also indebted to the following for their sponsorship and help: **Keep Wales Tidy; The Long Forest Project; Sustainable Development Fund**, a **Natural Resources Wales** initiative in the **Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB); Gwent Wildlife Trust; Monmouthshire Natural Assets Project; Bee-friendly Monmouthshire; Raglan Community Council; Trellech United Community Council; The Welsh Church Fund**



The following sponsors assisted with the purchase of Kingcoed Meadows: **Biffa Award, The Alan Evans Memorial Trust, The Banister Charitable Trust, Foyle Foundation, Gwent Wildlife Trust, Habitataid, Ricardo Crawley Trust, New Grove Trust and Waterloo Foundation.**

Supported by

