

# Backwell Environment Trust

Registered Charity No. 1109406

## Bulletin 14 - Spring 2009



### A very warm welcome to our latest spring bulletin

As ever its been another busy winter season for your Trust with major progress now being made with the purchase of Badgers Wood, new habitats being created by the hard working BET volunteers and new insights made on the archaeology front. To help you find your way around our action packed bulletin the contents are listed below:

## The Purchase of Badgers Wood

Archaeology in the Woodland

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The Holly Tree

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Woodland Report

Community Owls Project

Bird Nestboxes



### The Purchase of Badgers Wood - Episode 2

(Note : Badgers Wood is the name we have given to Cheston Combe Wood South because Coles Quarry cut through Badgers Combe. Note also we have chosen to ignore apostrophes!).

#### ***The story so far.***

At the time of the last Bulletin (October 2008) we had almost secured the required funding to buy Badgers Wood. A generous grant from YANSEC (The Landfill Communities Fund) had been received but was dependent on us finding 10% 'seed' money from independent sources i.e. not from BET. Our members and the Parish council had pledged the seed money but we had at the same

time lodged two grant applications with the Aggregates Levy, one via North Somerset and the other via Natural England.

**Now read on.**

Amazingly both our grant applications were successful and we were able to return seed money cheques to members and to decline the help which had been generously offered by the Parish Council.



We decided to stay local and go with the North Somerset grant and decline that from Natural England (we were not allowed both). Thus the funding is secure. However the course of true love never runs smooth and this goes for property transactions too.

The first snag was a letter from the vendor, the quarrying company Cemex, telling us that unfortunately they did not own all of the wood. In fact two of the fifteen acres of Badgers Wood are not theirs but belong to a Backwell resident. However they are still happy to sell us the thirteen acres they do own at the same price per acre. This sale is proceeding, but slowly.

In addition we have managed to negotiate terms for the other two acres with the private owner involved again at pretty much the same unit price and this sale too is proceeding slowly.

Once again we thought we were home and dry. However a new problem has emerged. There is a 300 metre stretch of cliff which is over 30 metres high separating Badgers Wood from the quarry below. Clearly this is a safety hazard and needs to be exceptionally well fenced. The Health and Safety Executive has told us that whoever owns the quarrying rights is responsible for the safety and stability of the cliff. However at the moment Cemex is proposing that BET takes responsibility for the fence protecting the cliff and on the advice of our solicitor we are resisting this proposal. There are also issues about the current state of the fence.

Thus it looks as though we still have a few more obstacles to overcome - **but we will battle on!**

**To be continued....**

**Bill Charnock**

## **Membership Renewal**

The membership year runs from April 1<sup>st</sup> to March 31<sup>st</sup> and renewals for 2009/10 are now due. We hope you will complete and return the enclosed form. The size of the membership is an important factor when applying for grants so although we seem to be very well established we do need to be able to demonstrate a wide base of support.

**Gift Aid is also a very important source of income for us so if possible please tick the relevant box and don't forget to sign the form.**

If you have joined or rejoined since January 1<sup>st</sup> 2009 please ignore this notice as your membership will go to March 31<sup>st</sup> 2010

We are very grateful to Barbara Hunt of solicitors Gregg Latchams WRH who are donating the first £1000 of their legal costs, to a fellow of the Royal Institute of Chartered surveyors for

advice on land issues, to our members and supporters and the Parish Council for moral and financial support, to North Somerset for the Aggregates Levy seed fund grant and of course to the Landfill Communities Fund in the shape of YANSEC (Yanley and North Somerset Environmental Company) for the bulk of the purchase price.

## **BET Trustees and Committee**

Following the AGM in November 2008 the trustees are as follows:

Bill Charnock, chairman and membership secretary, 462083, 17 Church Town,  
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Dr Terry Smith, 854317, 8, Friendship Road, Nailsea, botanical and environmental consultant, Acting Chairman, Nailsea Environment and Wildlife Trust (NEWT), [t.a.smith@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:t.a.smith@blueyonder.co.uk)



## **Archaeology in and Around the Woods**

The Jubilee Stone in BET's nature reserve (JSWNR) is not only a well-positioned spot from which to enjoy the beautiful views, but is situated in an area with many archaeological sites, from Iron Age through to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the field adjacent to the Stone are 4 possible Bronze Age barrows (c2400-1500BC.), one of which was excavated in 1898. A stone pavement was found 60cm under the surface, covering modern (ie. 19<sup>th</sup> century) items like animal bones, pottery and clay-pipes, but if a burial lay beneath that, it remained undisturbed.

Below in the valley by Flax Bourton was Roman Gatcombe (1<sup>st</sup> - 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.), an 8ha site of industrial buildings and workshops, within a 3-4metre high wall. In addition to



obtaining coal from Nailsea, the Romans may also have worked the seams of lead that run the entire length of the JSWNR, and where various 'humps and bumps' of later 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century mining can still be seen today.

There is also an Iron Age hillfort (although some ditches, ramparts and the interior have been destroyed by quarrying) but more tangible evidence comes from the burial cave in Badgers Wood, where the remains of 18-20 skeletons were discovered in 1936. Finds included both Iron Age and Roman pottery, flint and bone tools dating from 1<sup>st</sup> century BC - 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.

Two more recent sites are the ruins of a 18<sup>th</sup> century Warrener's cottage, and a partly restored limekiln. The Warrener was a man employed to look after and breed rabbits in long 'pillow' earthen mounds for their meat and fur. As for the limekiln, probably in use from c1843 - 1902, it converted locally quarried carboniferous limestone into lime, which was used to improve the soil, make mortar and for whitewashing buildings.

This has been an all-too brief look at archaeology in and around the woods belonging to BET and there are still many potentially interesting sites awaiting discovery in Badgers Wood.

**Jenny Greenslade**



### **The Nailsea Environment and Wildlife Trust (NEWT)**

The Nailsea Environment and Wildlife Trust (NEWT) has been offered funding from YANSEC for the purchase of six acres of land at Moorend Spout (ST466715) that is at present in private ownership. This area is well known for its natural beauty, provided by the Alder carr and an attractive waterfall. It is a particularly valuable wildlife habitat, low lying, and naturally water logged, and it is traversed by well-used public footpaths with bridges crossing the Middle Yeo and the Land Yeo. Lying half way between Nailsea and Tickenham, it is quite close to the schools in Pound Lane. With eight trustees we hope to manage the site to create more ponds, and to reduce the brambles so that we can restore the orchids that were growing there only a few years ago.



**Terry Smith**

**Did you know BET now has its very own website which gives information on forthcoming events, woodland management, archaeological features, photo galleries as well as many links to other environmental sites?**

**So why not visit us at : [www.bet.btik.com](http://www.bet.btik.com)**



❖ Once again, BET is extremely grateful to Terry Smith for setting up our new website ❖

## Jubilee Stone Wood in Springtime

As you know, this winter has been one of the coldest for many a year so I guess the advent of spring will be especially welcomed this year. As springtime slowly starts to arrive, the woodland floor bursts into life once more and it is a great time to locate and identify some of the fantastic flowers the nature reserve has to offer. So why not get out & about this spring and use the map & words below to locate some the best wildflower sites?



**Early Purple  
Orchid**



**Cowslip**



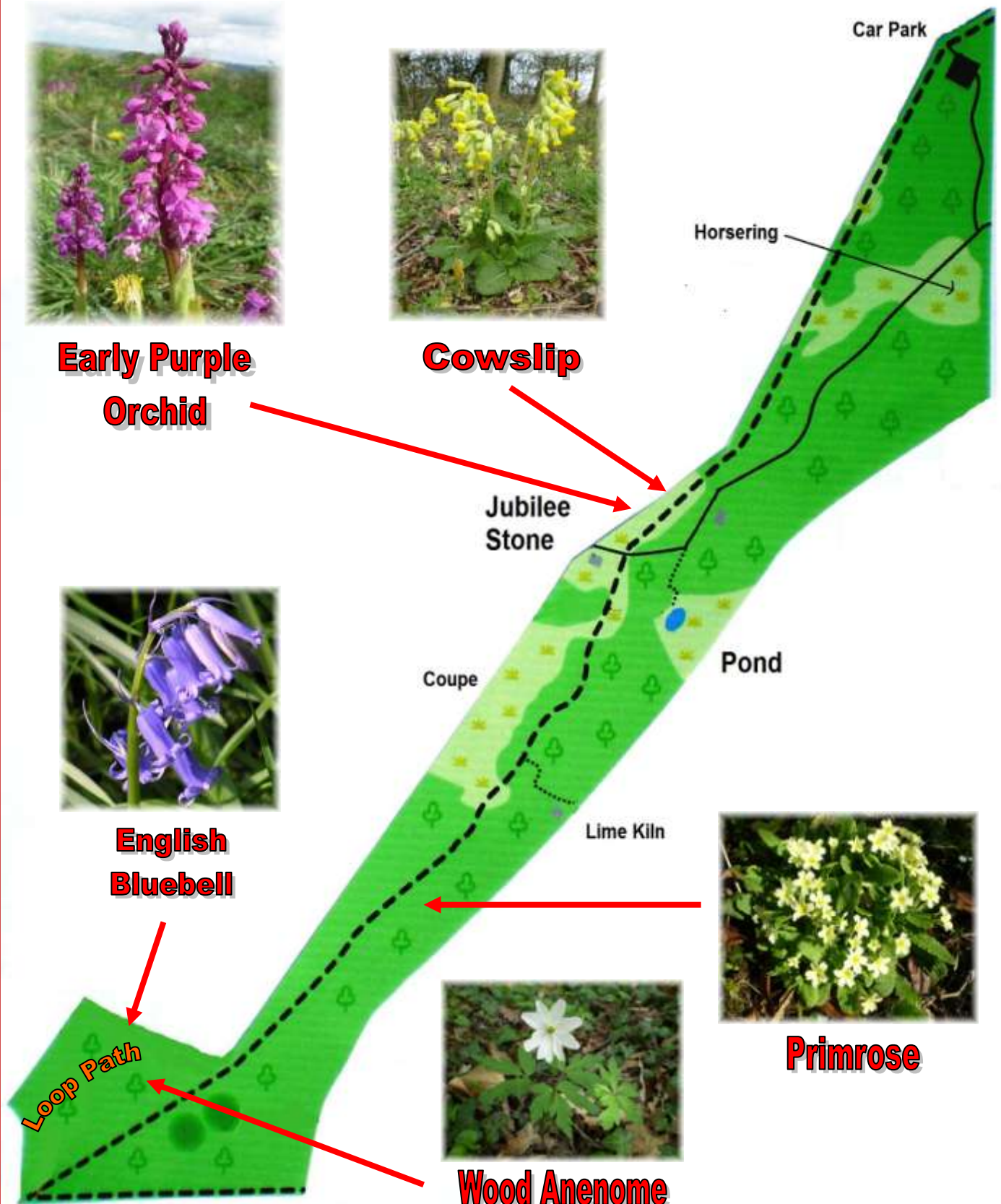
**English  
Bluebell**



**Primrose**



**Wood Anemone**



The woodland flowers are at their best in the spring before the trees come into leaf and start to shade out the sunlight. Some of the finest can be seen by taking the small loop path on the left (see map), just beyond the lower gate and the large common limes with their multiple shoots at the base of their trunks. The cheerful yellow celandines, Wordsworth's favourite flower, may well have been in flower since the end of January. They spread widely through small bulbils attached to their roots and continue to flower for several months often into early summer.

### Early Purple Orchid (*Orchis mascula*)

When Ophelia drowned in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, among the flowers draped over her body were 'long purples' - early purple orchids. These exotic spring flowers have a three-lobed lip on which insects land and a blunt-ended spur which holds the nectar. Even before the flowers arrive this orchid can be readily identified by the purplish blotches on the upper surface of their narrow green leaves. The plant sprouts from a creamy-white bulb, typically grow 15cm-40cm tall and flower between April and June.



The dog's mercury flower also appears very early with their small green flowers growing on spikes and they can also be a good indicator of ancient woodland. Early dog violets and purple ground ivy along with primroses are all found in this area and are increasing noticeably since BET thinned much of the weedy tree growth, allowing more light to reach the woodland floor. The piles of logs from this partial clearance have been left as habitats for small animals and invertebrates such as insects, snails and woodlice - whose recycling efforts are essential for woodland health. Incidentally, some of the wood removed from here and the coupe further up the bridle path, was used for our traditional charcoal burn last summer. Flowers of the beautiful early purple orchid can be seen growing on either side of the path up to the Jubilee Stone. They have dark spots on their leaves similar to the common spotted orchid which will

### Cowslip (*Primula veris*)

According to legend, Saint Peter dropped the keys to Heaven and the first cowslip grew from where they fell. Like the primrose, the cowslip has both male and female flower-heads designed to inhibit self pollination and ensure pollination is achieved by insects. Each stem can carry up to 30 deep yellow drooping flowers with the petals spread less widely than the primrose. They typically grow 10cm-30cm tall and flower between April and May.



produce pale pink flowers later in the season and tend to be found in the more open areas of the reserve. The strange creamy flower spikes of the toothwort, a leafless parasitic plant mainly found growing on the roots of hazel, can usually be seen to the left of the steep path leading up from Church Town shortly before the gate to the reserve. Just in from the gate there are the peculiar yellow flowers of the goldilocks buttercup which have incomplete or



missing petals in each flower. The patches of the beautiful wood anemone can be seen mainly to the left of the loop path and is another ancient woodland indicator which, unfortunately, spreads very slowly. Bluebells are increasing steadily though not yet in the profusion found in some local woodlands. Continuing up the bridle path, the opened up area of the coupe on the left has many re-colonising plants, such as several species of violet and some fine cowslips which will be followed by more rarities later in the year. The laid hedge is doing well here and this year a second section of hedge has been created beyond the Jubilee Stone. These allow more light to the woodland edge whilst retaining a flight path for the many bats that use the reserve. Occasionally you may be lucky enough to see the false oxslip, which sometimes flowers in this area. It is a hybrid between the primrose and the cowslip with the paler flowers of the former and bunched heads of the latter, but having larger individual flowers on strong stems so making a striking plant (later developed into the polyanthus).

### **Bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scriptus*)**

Bluebells can be found in several countries fringing the northern Atlantic Ocean but it is only in Britain where they grow in the great profusion we see in our woodlands. The brightly coloured blue (or sometimes white) bell-shaped flowers hang from the lower side of a tall, drooping stem. The long, narrow leaves sprout from a white bulb and appear before the flowers come into bud. They typically grow 20cm-50cm tall and flower between April and June.



Continuing to the end of the bridle path and turning back towards Cheston Combe using the permissive path to return to the Jubilee Stone, you will see some exceptionally large silver birch trees together with many shrubs and trees which will flower and fruit later in the season. In the grassy areas, during warm and sunny weather, keep a look out for the brimstone and peacock butterflies, which regularly use this area of the reserve. The textures and colours of the different tree barks are really noticeable here - smooth beech, rough oak, shiny cherry, silver birch, green on spindle, red on dogwood. If you look closely you will see that many of the trees are in flower with small catkins, not at all showy as they are mainly wind pollinated so don't need to attract insects with colours or scents.

**Jean Glasson**



## **The Warrener's Cottage**

**T**he largest known dwelling in Jubilee Stone Wood was a cottage and garden referred to on ancient maps as either 'Warren House' or simply 'The Lodge'. The first written references to the cottage date from the 1780s when the building was repaired after a

severe storm. The ruins visible today suggest that the cottage would have originally covered an area of about 40sq metres with the adjacent walled garden (located to the left of the cottage when viewed from the path) about 1200sq metres.

### **Rabbit Warrens**

Rabbits (or 'coney') were introduced into England by the Normans and were highly valued for their meat and fur during the Middle Ages and have remained so almost up to the present day. It is believed that rabbits originally came from south-western Europe so to ensure they would thrive in our cooler climate, artificial warrens were built consisting of low, flat topped mounds varying in size from a few metres to over a kilometre in length. These mounds were often referred to as 'pillow mounds' and were once quite a common sight in the English countryside. Warreners were appointed to protect and harvest the rabbits and it was not unusual for the Lord of the Manor to allocate them suitable accommodation as part of their position. As rabbits were officially classified as 'game', no warrens could be established during the period without the express permission of the King.



### **Backwell Hill's Warren**

The warren in what is now Jubilee Stone Wood was granted to Sir Richard Rodney on the 10<sup>th</sup> June 1318 by order of King Edward II. References from a survey of the Manor of Backwell in 1709 record that the warren at that time covered an area of 3 furlongs by 1½ furlongs (600 x 300 metres) and would consequently have had the potential to produce many thousands of rabbits per year. The warren appears to have been in continual use until about 1812 when the introduction of the Enclosure Act divided the area of the warren into fields which were subsequently allocated to Court Farm. After this date, the fields were most likely used for other agricultural purposes and the warren was almost certainly commercially abandoned. (Whilst the majority of the old warren has long since disappeared, one last trace can probably still be seen in the dense hawthorn woodland at the bottom of the 'coupe').

### **The Cottage & Garden**

The warreners who cared for and eventually killed and processed the rabbits were often provided with purpose built accommodation. This was often of a higher standard than was usual for the period and illustrates the importance of rabbits at the time. The cottage would have been a two-storey structure built of shaped limestone blocks extracted from the local bedrock and made watertight with a thatched roof. The warrener would have used the ground floor as a workshop to process the rabbits whilst using the upper storey as his living accommodation. When not working this arrangement would have enabled him to keep a watchful eye out for both predators and poachers approaching the warren. The large adjacent garden would





have also allowed the warrener to grow his own produce enabling him to be relatively self-sufficient.

After the warren was abandoned, the records show the cottage was still lived in up until 1843, however it eventually fell derelict sometime between 1843 and 1882. During the spring of

2008 the cottage remains were surveyed with the help of Vince Russett, the County Archaeologist. A site plan of the site is now being compiled which should help us interpret what remains today with a greater degree of accuracy.

Ian Chambers

BET is very grateful to Norma Knight for all her research on the archaeological features of Jubilee Stone Wood.



## The Holly Tree

Our Christmas decorations can hardly be complete without some reference to Holly, which has close associations with the winter since it is at that time that the bright red berries brighten up our hedgerows.

There seems to be no evidence that the name holly is derived from the word 'holy'. The earliest reference to the name appears in c1150 when it is cited as 'holi', and the connection is probably with 'Ilex' the Latin name for the Holm Oak, *Quercus ilex*, that has leaves reminiscent of Holly. This is a native of North Africa and Southern Europe, having been introduced to England in about 1500, and widely planted by the Victorians, to be seen especially in Clevedon Court. To my knowledge Holm Oak does not occur in Jubilee Stone Wood, but a single specimen in Nailsea may be seen on the Somerfield car park behind the tatooing shop. By contrast, Holly is a native plant and it

occurs widely throughout Europe and around the Mediterranean.

The species name *aquifolium* refers to the the sharpness of the leaves (from 'acus' a needle, hence the English word 'acute') and it has no connection with Latin 'aqua' meaning water. Place names beginning 'holm' are probably derived from Holly and many surnames like Holmes probably also refer to Holly.

Like Yew, Holly is dioecious, that is, when single plants can be either male or female but not both. It is not easy



to determine the sex of the bushes from the flowers appearing in May, which are quite inconspicuous, and it is only when the plant produces berries that we can be certain that it is female. Needless to say, in order to form berries, there must be a male plant within bee reach.

Very often in this area, the leaves appear to have brownish marks about 1 cm in diameter (see photograph previous page). These are formed by the leaf mining fly named *Phytomyza ilicis*.

The Holly Blue butterfly (*Celastrina argiolus*) is quite common in this area, the larvae feeding on Holly or Ivy during the summer and on Ivy in the autumn. In 1955 It was said to be uncommon, so this butterfly now seems to be making a comeback. It is thought that the fluctuations in population may be more closely related to the occurrence of the parasitic wasps than to changes in climate.

Holly makes an excellent hedge as may be seen in the road between Wraxall and Cambridge Batch, forming part of the Tyntesfield Estate where (apart from the gaps caused by aberrant cars!) it is apparently the longest holly hedge in the world. Holly is evergreen, impenetrable and hardy, characteristics that can be advantageous in this function. Some of the many varieties of *Ilex* can be seen growing at Tyntesfield.

The berries can be toxic to humans causing vomiting and diarrhoea. *Ilex* leaves, however, are apparently not toxic and are used in drinks across the Americas, as many species contain caffeine. In fact, one species, *Ilex guayusa*, has the highest caffeine content of any plant. *Ilex paraguariensis* Yerba Mate is the most common daily beverage in much of South America. This is in such demand that the tree is under threat in the wild as it is drunk much like tea in this country.

**Terry Smith**



## The Stone by the Stone....

On a cold and sunny morning between Christmas and New Year, six hardy BET volunteers



turned out to try to solve a mystery that had been intriguing the amateur archaeologists in the Trust for the past couple of years. Hidden in the hedge-line was what appeared to be an ancient shaped stone about 1 metre long by  $\frac{1}{2}$  metre wide located approximately 10m downhill from the Jubilee Stone. A stone such as this could have had many uses in the past. The possibilities were that it was a boundary marker stone, part of a long lost wall, an unused foundation stone for the Jubilee Stone or part of one of the Bronze Age barrows to be found on Backwell Hill.

## Well, there was only one way to find out

The stone itself was far too heavy to lift manually so a winch was attached to do at least some of the hard work for us. After a strenuous two hours of pushing, pulling and serious tea drinking we had finally manoeuvred the stone into the more prominent position you will find it in today.

## So what did we discover?



**Boundary Marker Stone?** Boundary stones are often inscribed with the landowner's initials and are usually fairly well shaped. As our stone was fairly rough in appearance with no obvious inscriptions we ruled it out as being an ancient boundary marker.

**Part of a Wall?** Scrutiny of eighteenth century maps show Backwell Hill was crossed by many unfenced tracks up to that time and only started to become divided up with the introduction of the Enclosure Act of 1812. When Backwell Hill was separated into individual fields after this date, hedges were initially planted as they were much quicker and cheaper than constructing long lengths of wall. Old walls do still exist on the edges of the reserve but there is no evidence that they were present close to where the stone now rests.

**Unused Foundation Stone?** There are roughly shaped stones under the Jubilee Stone granite plinth but they appear to be relatively small in size and sourced from the surrounding area. If the stonemasons had struggled up Cheston Combe's steep hill with 'our' stone by horse & cart I suspect they would have done their very best to use it in some way or take it back with them to be used elsewhere.

**So what was left?** Well the fact remains that the stone is still the single largest rock specimen we have found on the reserve and has the attractive feature of being quite red in colour over much of its surface. So I would like to suggest that these features would have made it irresistible to the ancient Bronze Age (~ 2000BC to 650BC) barrow builders of Backwell Hill and so could have once formed part of a group of such slabs used to construct the inner chamber. The barrows have probably been excavated more than once in the past but on the last occasion in 1898 the report stated *"...a pavement of flat stones at a depth of two feet was found to cover a layer of moist and unctuous earth, which yielded bones of pigs and smaller animals..."* which sounds quite promising to me.

We'll probably never know for sure its purpose but what is certain is that it will make an excellent shady seat during the long hot summer to come (!) where you can sit and ponder the remarkable history of Jubilee Stone Wood.

Ian Chambers



## Fairtrade cafe and shop



2nd Saturday of the month  
10am - 12 noon Backwell Parish Hall

Why don't you pop in for a great  
tasting cup of tea or coffee  
and stock up on Fairtrade goods?



This has now become a regular monthly event and a lively meeting place. As well as supporting Fair Trade, the cafe invites local groups to run stalls to promote their activities and develops initiatives to encourage sustainable living. The latest of these is the Ecover refill service

(washing-up, laundry, multi-surface liquids etc) and an opportunity to borrow a 'Smart Meter' for a month to check your electricity consumption.

**So why not call in**

**sometime?**



***Should you ever need help in locating either Jubilee Stone Wood, Badgers Wood, the permissive car park or simply the meeting point for our twice-monthly activity sessions then we hope you will find this map useful.***



## **Woodland Report**

**W**ith the arrival of the cooler weather, the trees and plants of the woodland finally stop growing to settle down into their dormant winter phase. This is always the busiest time of year for woodland management when any necessary changes and improvements can be safely made without damaging the sensitive plants and animals of the reserve.

So over the chilly winter season the ever-eager BET volunteers have been busy working on two main woodland projects both designed to increase the biodiversity of the reserve:



- The creation of a wildlife corridor along part of the southern boundary of the woodland by coppicing.
- The creation of a section of living hedgerow next to the upper bridleway.

### Wildlife Corridor

One of the slight *negative* aspects of most dense woodlands is that almost all of the valuable food sources they contain are to be found high up in the tree canopy. Additionally, the dense cover of leaves often results in the woodland floor being heavily shaded which can severely limit the ability of lower growing plants to produce food at ground level. This of course is no problem if you can either fly or are a good enough climber to reach the high canopy but not very helpful if you happen to be a small, ground-based creature. So to make some parts of the woodland better suited especially for small mammals and amphibians, a 5m x 100m linear section of woodland has now been coppiced adjacent to Cheston Combe Road. This will then be left alone to infill with bramble scrub which will let small animals move safely through the



**Adder in Bramble**

reserve, offer protection from predators, provide nectar rich flowers in both spring and summer and finally blackberries in autumn. We have also created a wide 'dead-hedge' to act both as an *instant* wildlife corridor and also to reinforce and secure our boundary with the road. In areas where the existing bramble scrub was a bit thin we have inter-planted with hazel seedlings which should hopefully start producing hazel nuts for our dormice in about six or seven years time.

The 'corridor' was created by '*coppicing*' most of the more common trees in our selected area.



**Coppice**

Coppicing is an ancient woodland technique where the tree is cut down close to ground level and allowed to re-grow. The subsequent re-growth can then be harvested every few years or so for an indefinite period. The fast re-growth (up to 2metres/year) had many uses in the past such as 'wattle' for timber-framed buildings, fencing and firewood. The technique has long been associated with the woodlands above Backwell, for example in 1791, our village was recorded as having "*Coppice wood one mile long, and two furlongs broad and is worth eight pounds*". The

technique, as valid today as in the past, has many advantages for our woodland. Firstly a large proportion of the trees in Jubilee Stone Wood are roughly the same age (~45 years) so

coppicing helps to increase the overall age range of the trees in the woodland. The sunny glade coppicing creates then attracts a wider range of plants and wildlife onto the reserve helping to increase its biodiversity. Finally coppicing is also very beneficial to the tree itself as it has the effect of significantly increasing the overall lifespan of the tree.

### Hedgelaying

It has been estimated that the UK loses over 4000 miles of hedgerow every year which has resulted in the loss of almost half of all our hedgerows since the 1940s. Hedges not only make superb and safe wildlife corridors but also provide a good range of food throughout the year



and are therefore highly prized by a wide variety of wildlife. Hawthorn is by far one of the most useful hedging plants and was probably one of the first trees to be used by our ancestors to construct secure, living hedges. Hawthorn in Old English ('haga') actually means 'hedge' and was revered as a magical plant in Celtic mythology and then later in medieval times, the blossom was used to decorate maypoles and May Queens.

This year we have laid just over 40 metres of hedgerow next to the upper section of the bridleway whilst still retaining many of the

larger trees within the hedge-line to benefit both bats and birds. The hedge is comprised mainly of hawthorn but also contains specimens of ash, dog rose, gorse and wayfaring tree. The mix of species will provide plenty of nectar in both spring and summer followed by a rich crop of berries in the autumn. This section of the bridleway now receives considerably more sunlight than before which will result in the path edges once again becoming mini-wildflower meadows, nicely setting off the newly exposed views of the Failand Ridge and the Welsh mountains beyond.

**Ian Chambers**



## **Community Owls Project**

**Calling all owls - 14 desirable residences now available with vacant possession!**

**J**uly and the first meeting for the Community Owls Project. Hawk and Owl Trust Conservation Officer Chris Sperring explained the project's objectives and, in September, took us on an owl prowl to learn survey techniques. Our survey area was selected, volunteers 'listened out' in their chosen patches, then all the findings were plotted. The information that we had tawny, little and barn owls in our area was relayed to Lin and Keith Hall who said we could have fourteen owl nest boxes plus a bundle of small bird nest boxes - but we would have





to assemble them ourselves! In November an enthusiastic team gathered at the Parish Hall and, under the watchful eyes of Lin and Keith, had the owl boxes done in no time at all before the BET AGM in the afternoon. The Halls came again to help Mike Marks and the Thursday cubs make the 14 small bird boxes. On a very cold morning the owl boxes were painted and then all that remained to be done was to get the boxes erected. In December Keith and Lin put up the six tawny boxes, mainly along the wooded slopes between the BET wood and Breakneck Hill. Since January some of you may have noticed pairs of barn owl boxes in the new woodland on Backwell Common and near the fuel depot at Flax Bourton. Four little owl boxes are also in those areas.

## SO OWLS OVER TO YOU !

Many thanks to all who have helped in so many ways, to the land owners, and to Chris who will be coming back to check the boxes in the spring. Particular thanks go to Keith and Linda of Specialised Nestboxes who, over two days, trundled the ladder and tools across soggy fields and rough woodland paths, braving brambles and biting winds, with unflagging enthusiasm and good humour, even when faced with Breakneck Hill!

I would still be pleased to have any information about owl sightings etc, and hope to be able to report on any occupancy of the boxes in the next bulletin.

Carrie Riches



### Nestboxes in Badgers Wood

On Sunday, 1st February, Mike Marks and I spent two and a half hours in Badgers Wood erecting nestboxes. Fourteen of these had been built by the enthusiastic 1st Backwell Cub Scouts with which Mike has long been very involved.



Nestboxes vary in shape and size, being designed for different types of bird. For example, Robins, Dunnocks, Spotted Flycatchers, etc need boxes with half-open fronts that better mimic natural rock crevices or hedges. The classic bird box of everybody's imagination, with the sloping roof and small round hole, is best for tit species, the most common being of course Blue and Great Tits. Coal and Long-Tailed tits do not take so well to nestboxes. The bird boxes we put up were all of this type, and are spread along the length of the footpath. Some are visible from the path so that visitors might (hopefully!) catch glimpses of the

nesting tits, and some are in deeper cover. We were not able to spread the boxes too widely over the wood as we have in the Jubilee Stone Wood, as the steep slopes of Badgers Wood mean that surveying and cleaning boxes on these slopes would be impractical.

Larger boxes attract larger species: tall ones with square holes for Tawny Owls, open-sided ones for Kestrels, and bigger versions of the tit box for Jays and Jackdaws. There are hanging pouches for Goldcrests and Wrens, and communal multi-hole boxes for House Sparrows. You can even purchase artificial versions of the cup-shaped mud nests built by Swallows and House Martins.

**So why do birds actually use nestboxes?** The obvious answer is for nesting, but this is an over-simplification. There are great differences in the nesting habits of species and the way they use an artificial nest. Some birds like Barn Owls will not bother to line a box, and will lay directly onto the floor. However, many of our songbirds build a full nest in the box, with moss, twigs and feather lining. Most species' chicks quickly leave the nest, but some fledglings come back to roost at night for some weeks after (Swallows, for example) Roosting is also not just confined to recent young. Many of our smallest species like the Wren can enter a sort of semi-hibernation in harsh winters, in which birds of all ages tend to roost communally in nestboxes. This obviously helps keep the birds warm by sharing heat, but also keeps them safe from predators and perhaps has a social role. The maximum number of wrens found roosting in a standard size box *at once* was over 50!



Siting nestboxes requires care, as chicks need protection from predators and adverse weather, and parents need suitable cover in which to visit the nest, as well as a ready supply of food. Therefore, if you want to provide a nestbox it is important to remember these few points:

1. Put a nestbox on a wall or tree facing between north-west and south-east. This avoids the southerly summer sun, which can overheat the chicks, and the prevailing southwesterly winds, which can drive rain and cold into the nest.
2. Put it at least 1.5 metres above the ground. This keeps it out of the reach of cats.
3. If using a tit box, try attaching a metal plate around the hole. This stops woodpeckers and squirrels enlarging it and predating eggs or chicks.
4. Try to have a little cover and shade over the box or nearby, like a tree or some dense shrubs. This will keep chicks cooler, provide insect food and enable the adults to attend to the nest under cover.
5. Pay attention to the needs of your species! A Treecreeper box needs to be put in the fork of a tree in deciduous woodland. A House Martin box needs the eaves of a house. Specialised species will not nest if the habitat is wrong!
6. Don't be disheartened if the birds do not take to the nestbox immediately or even for several years. The birds can judge better than us whether a site is suitable, and some, like the tit box in my garden, just never get used!

Nestboxes are vital to provide nesting habitat for many of our garden species, and can provide much enjoyment and satisfaction if birds are raised in the garden.



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