

Backwell Environment Trust

Bulletin 27 - Autumn 2013

www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org



A very warm welcome to our latest autumn bulletin

The BET volunteers have been working hard over the summer months and have made an excellent start on the creation of a spectacular new trail through Badgers Wood. The scything season is also in full 'swing' now, and our annual grass cutting is well underway. The Cabin restoration project is also now well advanced and hopefully be on target for completion later this year.

To help you find your way around our action-packed bulletin the contents are listed below:

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Cabin Update

Well, it's that time of year again when BET holds its Annual General Meeting, this time on **November 9th, 2pm in the Parish Hall**. We hope you will be able to come along if you possibly can as we need at least 10% of our fairly large membership to be present to make the AGM 'quorate'. Also, if you would like to stand for election as a BET trustee, then please let any of the existing BET trustees know. Our long-serving chairman, Bill Charnock, stood down at the last AGM, and despite our best efforts, no volunteers have come forward, prepared to take on this very important role on a permanent basis for our group. So, if there is anyone out there who might be interested, the trustees would be very happy to talk to you!

BET Annual General Meeting

Saturday November 9th 2013

Backwell Parish Hall

Your trustees will be on hand to serve refreshments and to answer any questions you may have about BET and its activities past, present or future.

The AGM will start at 2pm, and after the short official business there will be a break for tea, coffee and cakes, followed by an illustrated talk by Pete Dawson from the fabulous North Somerset Butterfly House.



Agenda



- ❖ Minutes of the AGM held on November 17th 2012
- ❖ Treasurer's Report
- ❖ Election of officers and trustees
- ❖ Any other business

The minutes of our last AGM and the annual accounts will be available at the meeting.

Volunteer Activity Mornings - on EVERY MONDAY and the FOURTH SATURDAY of every month starting at 10 am on both days and continuing for about 2 hours or as long as your energy lasts.

The tasks will change as the year progresses and can vary according to your strength and interests. Please wear stout footwear and suitable old clothes.

We always break at about 11am for large amounts of chat, tea and biscuits.

Meet at the lower entrance to Jubilee Stone Wood outside No17 Church Town just before 10am, or telephone in advance to find out where we shall be working (01275 463315).

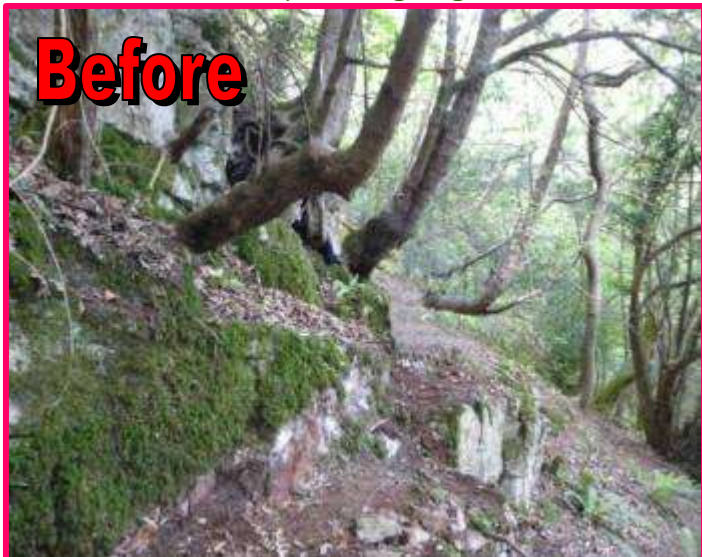
Woodland Report

Well, I know I probably say this every year, but it's been another funny year weather-wise. It seems no matter how well we manage the landscape for wildlife, the one thing we can't control is the good old British weather, and it's always going to have a massive influence on how our wildlife reserves develop. This year, the long, cold winter together with the pretty decent summer has suited some creatures but not others. The real winners this year appear to have been our butterflies, which have been in profusion in our wildflower meadows, but it looks like our dormouse population may have taken a bit of a battering.

Spring/Summer Tasks

Cliff Trail

After much discussion about the possibility of a high-level path in Badgers Wood, work finally started in the spring of this year. Now, this was never going to be an easy project, and for this reason its exact location must still be shrouded in mystery. In total, the new trail will be around 350 metres long and will run along the base of the fantastic limestone cliffs to be found in this part of the woodland. The first and last sections will be relatively straightforward, but it was the bit in the middle, close to the cliff faces, that have required the full engineering skills of the trusty BET volunteers. We decided to start the trail in the middle, so if we ever felt we couldn't overcome some of the more challenging technical problems, we could always simply walk away and no one would be the wiser. However, with much huffing and puffing and scratching of heads, the trail has been slowly coming together and will hopefully be opened in the summer of 2014.



Ponds

A few years ago, after two very dry springs, the BET volunteers installed a water-storage facility in Jubilee Stone Wood using unwanted plastic dustbins to top up the ponds, should they ever become dangerously low. Needless to say, the last two years have been somewhat damp, and it hasn't been needed, but this year the hot summer weather lowered the water levels in the two ponds to such a level that we decided to top them up. We utilised the full storage capacity of 1200 litres to put into the ponds, and it has made a real difference to the wildlife living in both of the ponds.

Plant Pulling

Strange as it may seem, there are laws prohibiting certain native plants from spreading their seeds onto adjacent agricultural land, and the big two for BET are **Common Ragwort** and **Creeping Thistle**. Both of these plants are native to the UK and will be alive with insects in the summer, but they do have the drawback of producing thousands of air-borne seeds that will easily colonise agricultural land given half the chance. So both these plants have been pulled from our wildflower meadows each autumn as well as some encroaching bracken. As part of our wildflower meadow management we will always need to keep these plants in check as they can quickly dominate any meadow by crowding out all other plants by simple weight of numbers.



Wildflower Meadow Scything

Every year at the end of the summer, BET's wildflower meadows are cut by our volunteers, mainly using traditional hand scythes. In the short term, the annual grass cut removes invading brambles and tree seedlings which would quickly swamp the grassland if left unchecked. Over the long term, the removal of the cut material from the meadows will slowly reduce the soil's fertility. Lower fertility soils are good news for wildflowers because they can survive quite happily in them



whilst the less welcome plants often struggle so, over time, the native wildflowers begin to multiply and dominate once more. To date, BET has restored something like $1\frac{1}{2}$ acres of wildflower meadows, which now all have to be cut, so we are especially grateful to our loyal band of volunteers, who have been busy swinging their hips scything our fledgling wildflower grasslands.

Dormouse Surveys

Dormouse surveys have continued throughout the year, now mainly being carried out by Gill Brown - a BET member and licensed dormouse handler. Since we discovered we had dormice on the reserve some years ago, their numbers have been steadily increasing year on year in line with the BET volunteers' efforts to increase and improve the habitat for these elusive creatures. Whilst all the records for this year are still incomplete, I'm sad to say it's probably looking like their numbers may have taken a serious knock this year. I suspect the unusually cold March weather (colder than

January!) added almost five weeks to their usual hibernation period which just may have been a bit too long for any dormice that didn't manage to lay down enough fat for the winter. I also suspect BET's nature reserves will not be alone in this decline, when all the data for the UK is finally processed, as I'm told the Avon Wildlife Trust reserve at Goblin Combe, which only a few years ago recorded the UK's highest number of dormice, has also seen a serious decline this year. However, nature is usually pretty resilient, and populations can bounce back quickly given favourable conditions, so fingers crossed for the future.

Butterflies

On a more positive note, you may be aware naturalists have been extremely worried over the past few years, as our recent dubious summers have resulted in serious declines in the numbers of butterflies recorded. However, this year seems finally to have been a good one, and on BET's reserves, butterflies have been out in profusion - as well as in your gardens, as a recent survey discovered. One of my personal favourites is the Silver-washed Fritillary butterfly, which has had a superb year. In fact, when we were on BET's archaeological walk in July, I spotted nine whilst simply walking through the reserves without really looking for them!

Silver-Washed Fritillary Butterfly

This fast-flying butterfly is best seen in the many sunny glades of Jubilee Stone Wood (especially in the pond coppiced area) and Badgers Wood. It is one of the UK's largest butterflies, and its size and vivid orange colour make it fairly unmistakable. The upper wings are orange with black markings whilst the undersides have the silver streaks which give it its name. Winter is passed as a tiny caterpillar.

Size : 60 - 70mm

Fight : June to September

Caterpillar food-plant : Violets



YACWAG Hedgelaying

Another of North Somerset's many environmental groups, YACWAG (Yatton and Congresbury Wildlife Action Group) are proposing to hold a hedge laying training day over the coming winter. BET has close ties with YACWAG and was wondering if the trusty BET volunteers would be interested in taking part. When BET held a simulate event in 2011, 47 people turned up, so keeping these country crafts alive is important to us. No date was fixed when we went to press, but I'll let you know the details nearer the time.

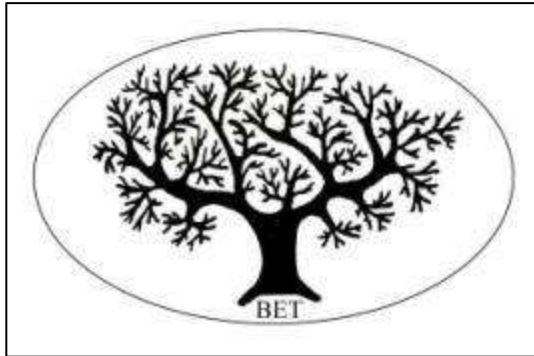
Volunteer Hours

Every year, the BET volunteers freely put in a staggering amount of time, both in the day to day running of the trust, as well as the huge amount of practical reserve work we do on our reserves. Over the last twelve months, the fantastic figure of **2160 volunteer hours** were recorded - so a BIG BET thank you to you all.

Jan Chambers

BET's New Logo

The eagle-eyed amongst you may have noticed that BET has recently changed its logo. Andy Smith, BET's membership secretary and one of our very active volunteers, has done some clever computer re-designing to give it a more modern feel. We hope you like the change as much as we do.



2006 - 2013



2013

BET's Archaeological Walk

BET held an archaeological walk through our two woods on Saturday, July 20th as part of the CBA (Council for British Archaeology) Festival Fortnight, one of over 1,200 events around the country. We met by St Andrews Church, with its magnificent 4-storeyed tower dating from the mid 15th century, and after a brief introduction by Ian Chambers, we headed off up the hill via Church Town to the Jubilee Stone Nature Reserve.

Signs of lead and iron mining are all around there, mostly from the 17th and 18th centuries, as a seam of lead ran down the hillside, with mine shafts, piles of waste (now grown over) and plenty of 'humps and bumps'. As the Roman settlement at Gatcombe lay below in the valley, it is likely they also exploited the woods for lead, although signs of their workings have long since been obliterated.

We then walked up to the Jubilee Stone itself, a granite obelisk built in 1897 to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria, and paused in the sunshine to admire views across the valley. Immediately in the field below us were traces of four Bronze Age barrows, from 4,000-2,800 years old, which have *almost* been ploughed away over the centuries. The largest one was 30 ft in diameter, and we all stood on it whilst it was explained that Reverend George Masters from Flax Bourton dug into the middle of it in 1898, probably looking for treasure, but found nothing of importance. However, recent geophysics revealed that several burials still remain there deep down below, and which of course must remain undisturbed.



After a while, we moved along the bridleway to the Warrener's Cottage, though nothing much can be seen there either, apart from low wall foundations now hidden under brambles and wild flowers. There is written reference to it being repaired after a severe storm in the 1780s, and it was lived in until 1843, after which it fell derelict. Warreners looked after the 'pillow mounds' or 'rabbit bury', where rabbits bred, and were kept safe from predators as they were very important for food and fur, being introduced by the Normans nearly 1,000 years ago.

Then we visited the limekiln, which was in use from at least 1843-1884, and has been excavated and partially restored by BET. It was one of literally hundreds in use at the time (and, in fact, there are remains of two others in the woods), built to convert limestone (calcium carbonate) to quick lime (calcium oxide), its uses including mortar, lime-wash for walls and to improve and sweeten the soil. After this, we crossed Cheston Combe Road (dodging the seemingly constant



traffic) to the peace and quiet of Badgers Wood, and we paused by the look-out point for a drink and food whilst admiring the panoramic views out over the old quarry and across the Estuary to distant Wales. Then we headed down the path, passing the many ferns growing in profusion on the hillside, and the tall ancient trees with gnarled trunks with their branches disappearing into the sky.

At the bottom of the hill is a small cave tucked away amongst these trees, which was probably formed by a stream once flowing down over it. Some of our group

had never seen it - or knew of its existence, so it was explained that it had been a sacred site to those ancient people, a meeting place for gods of the Earth, Sky and the Underworld, and approximately 18-30 people had been buried there, from 5,000 years ago (Neolithic period) to 2,000 years ago (Roman period). When excavated in 1936, most of the remains were put in the UBSS (University of Bristol Speleological Museum), and subsequently lost when it was bombed in the war. However, a lot of valuable information could still be obtained from soil samples, which would reveal what the environment was like during that period.

This, then, was the end of our walk, and everyone seemed to go away satisfied to have learned a little more about BET's woods and the people who had lived, worked and even been buried there on the hillside at Backwell all those years ago.

Jenny Greenslade



Wildings – Eileen Soper's Garden

The name of Eileen Alice Soper, born in North London in 1905, is not well known, but if it is pointed out that she illustrated many of Enid Blyton's books, including the Famous Five, it may be more familiar to one or two of us! Her father, George was also an artist, and drew pictures for 'Alice in Wonderland', 'Water Babies' and 'Grimm's Fairy Tales'. Eileen (seen here on right hand side), lived with her parents and elder sister, Eva, in a house called Wildings, set in 4 acres at

Harmer Green, Welwyn, in the wilds of Hertfordshire - a perfect, unspoilt place for two young girls to grow up in.

George was a great believer in conservation and wanted to make the garden as natural as possible to attract birds and animals. He had a great interest in ferns, and imported many exotic species, ending up with 90 varieties, which, along with clematis and wild roses, created a colourful, luxuriant wilderness. Eileen later described it as a '...wide landscape of fields and woodland, open to the south wind, sunlight and changing skies...never entirely tamed'.



She loved to go out sketching with her father (whose passion was for watching horses at work), and to her, the 1930s were a golden age, the countryside still reflecting the peace and serenity everywhere, before mechanisation changed it forever. Age-old rituals of farming meant heavy horses did all the work, pulling ploughs, harrows, rollers and they also hauled timber. The fields were full of meadow flowers - wild mint, thyme, scabious, helianthus and many varieties of orchids - a wonderful sight in summer. Eileen commented that shepherds tending their sheep in these fields embodied 'the true essence of peace...timeless figures whose way of life is symbolic of ease and contentment'.

Sadly this peace did not last much longer, because only 3 miles away the building of Welwyn Garden City was gaining speed, with new houses and factories suddenly appearing all over the place, and this made George even more determined to make their garden a sanctuary, a place of refuge for those homeless creatures. When war broke out in 1939, the family remained at Wildings. Although being only 25 miles north of London, they were within range of German bombs and the terrifying V1s - 'Doodlebugs', and later on, V2 rockets. There were food shortages too, but Eileen's new friends in America, who had bought her drawings, sent her parcels of food, including fruit juice, tinned peaches, biscuits, jam, raisins, chocolate - and stockings - all greatly appreciated!



In 1941, she began a partnership with Enid Blyton, which lasted 20 years, with Eileen illustrating many of her books, including six of the Famous Five stories. The following year in 1942, George, by then a widower, died of heart failure and left Wildings equally between the two sisters. Whilst Eva did all the cooking, Eileen looked after the garden, which had been neglected during the war. However, because she was so kind to the wildlife living there, they ate the fruit and vegetables destined for their own dinner table - voles and mice ate the peas, birds the raspberries and cherries, and squirrels the walnuts.

The birds also came indoors. On her studio desk was a tin of nuts, and if the window was open, they tried to push open the tin and steal these nuts, whilst inquisitive great



tits pecked quilts and soft chairs, pulling out bits of stuffing. A yellow-necked field mouse once chewed the telephone wire, ate a hole in her coat pocket, then made a nest in her old skirt, lining it with lamb's wool from her snow boots. She carefully caught it and took it into the field, but it was soon back, so she had to drive some distance away in her car then release it again. It did not return!

One evening in April, 1951, the first badger appeared in the garden. Eileen was captivated and spent the next 3 years sketching them and noting their behaviour. Dressed in layers of warm clothing in winter, usually frozen or soaking wet, or in summer being bothered by mosquitoes, midges and stung by nettles, she sat without moving and watched them for hours, so they got used to her presence. Sometimes they followed her scent trail in the hope of eating the peanuts she always carried, and she was thrilled to finally see the cubs at play '...a



clean and dapper appearance...irresistible, perfect small editions of the adults'. They even took food from her hands, their tongues exploring her fingers, and with all the pictures she drew of them, eventually published her '**When Badgers Wake**' book in 1955, which began her career as an amateur naturalist-author.

Soon more animal visitors arrived in the garden in 1961 and, of course, moved in immediately! These were tiny muntjac deer, 20 inches tall, which were originally imported from the Far East by Duke of Bedford at Woburn Abbey in the early 1900s, and had duly escaped and colonised the south of England. Like all the other wildlife, they also grew used to Eileen watching and drawing them, and in the harsh winter of 1962-63, when it was frozen everywhere for 5 weeks, she put out copious amounts of brown bread and apples for them. The male buck deer had a preference for Cox's orange pippins, despite the fact that Eileen sprinkled the Bramleys with sugar! She built several shelters for them made out of stakes, which she covered with a thick layer of bracken, and inside made a comfy bed of hay for them to lie on, which they really enjoyed.

In later years Eileen became '...as shy and retiring as the creatures amongst which she lived, welcoming the mice that nestled in her slippers, and preferring their company to that of humans'. In 1989, because of ill health, sadly



she and Eva moved to a nursing home, and Eileen died the following year in March 1990, aged 84. However she and her father left behind a treasure trove of drawings, sketches and watercolours in boxes piled high on top of each other. It was their enthusiasm, knowledge, and above all, sympathy for all wildlife - badgers, deer, foxes, stoats, squirrels, hedgehogs and birds - that made Wildings such a wonderful place to live for over 80 years.

Jenny Greenslade



Greening Backwell Parish Hall

In 2010, Backwell Parish Hall celebrated its centenary. It has served the community well, but with rising energy and other costs the hall has become increasingly expensive to run. Accordingly the

Hall trustees have put together a plan of improvements to make the hall an environmental exemplar and a renewable energy hub to minimize running costs and establish a high degree of sustainability.

Until recently, the hall was completely un-insulated but now, conventional loft insulation has been laid in all the attic cavities. Unfortunately most heat is lost through the steeply sloping ceilings in the main hall where no cavity exists. All expert advice is that the solution is to apply thick solid insulation to the internal surface. This is quite a complicated and expensive operation, requiring full internal scaffolding. However, while the scaffolding is in place a low energy lighting system can also be installed. The present lighting arrangements require ~8kW to run, which is clearly grossly inefficient.



Having insulated the hall so that it is as heat-tight as possible, it becomes worthwhile to replace the worn out, and expensive to run, oil heating system with a state of the art biomass boiler to drastically reduce heating costs. Next, it is intended to fit solar panels. Both these investments, as well as supplying energy, will also provide the hall with an income.

The final step in the greening process is the replacement of the flat roof area of the hall with a green wildflower roof.

All the above requires considerable expenditure and grant applications of various kinds are being prepared. To support this process, the hall trustees are launching a massive appeal to the village for funding and support and we urge members to help in any way they can.

**Please direct any enquiries on improving the Parish Hall to Bill Charnock, 462083,
bill.chnock@btinternet.com**



Volunteering with BET

This could have been a very long article because there are so many reasons why I turn up for a couple of hours whenever I can on a Monday morning to help with the array of tasks that BET volunteers undertake. But don't worry, I'll try to keep it brief!

The first point is that it's really worthwhile. We have all had formative wildlife experiences. Mine came when I was out for a walk when I was about 6 years old and saw what must have been a grass snake at the edge of a field in Kent. But there have been many others over the years - ranging from tigers in India to condors in Chile and, equally satisfying, otters near Nailsea. I'm sure you'll have had many experiences of your own. And of course, we've all seen the brilliant BBC Natural History Unit programmes on television. But you don't need me to tell you of the threats that wildlife faces - it's a constant battle, and of course we feel pretty powerless individually to do

much about the big issues, like ivory poaching and rainforest destruction. But by helping to conserve wildlife locally, we can all make a small contribution.

But it's not just altruistic. It's simply great to be out in the fresh air. It certainly beats going in to the office on a Monday morning, as I did for 35 years until I stopped work last year. And it helps you keep fit. I do go to the gym, and pound the streets, for exercise during the week but it's just as sapping to do a couple of hours scything on the BET reserves - it certainly makes you



swing your hips around! And you learn new skills. The scything is one example, but there have been plenty of others : dry-stone walling, coppicing and path-building, for example. And you learn a lot more about nature, what needs doing at what time of year and why; and just identifying things - I never learned much about trees when I was young, so it is really satisfying to improve my knowledge on that front too.

Next there's the shared satisfaction from being part of a successful team. Several times this year we've set about a seemingly daunting task - scything a meadow, clearing ragwort - and found that we've managed to do all that we planned, and more, within the time available.

But don't get the impression that it's all hard work. It's actually very sociable, both while we're working and at the legendary coffee breaks, which have been known to extend for 45 minutes within the allotted two hours. Excellent biscuits invariably turn up (I must remember to bring some myself!), and there is good conversation (not obligatory though - some prefer to keep working!).

And finally it doesn't matter (much) if you make mistakes. Two of us did just that in a fit of enthusiasm in the summer when we removed the wrong type of thistle. I don't think that the Reserve Manager was exactly pleased but he is very philosophical on the basis that things always grow back....

So, all in all, what is there not to like? If you haven't come before, do come and join us - a weekly email will tell you when and where. Just let Ian (463315) or Peter (851416) know that you might be interested, and they can add you to the mailing list.

And if you can't make it on a Monday because work or other commitments rule that out, there's always the fourth Saturday of each month, where the same arrangements, and satisfaction levels, apply. Oh, and it doesn't need to be for the full two hours - I'm notorious for arriving late or leaving early (or both) but the important thing, like the Olympics, is the taking part (though not necessarily every week!).

We look forward to seeing you whenever you can make it!

Martin Brasher

Cabin Update

Looking at the Cabin, as I write this report on the last day of September, outwardly, there does not seem to have been much progress to show for a busy summer's work. The old roof, thick with ivy and other plant growth, has been partially replaced by one of black plastic sheeting and that would appear to be about it!

However, beneath the plastic, a strip of the old roof along each side of the building has been removed, whilst the remainder is now being supported by steel props. This has exposed the tops of the side walls and has enabled us to complete the necessary strengthening work to ensure the walls will take the weight of the new roof. Similarly, at each end of the Cabin, more sections of the old roof have been removed to enable the end walls to be prepared to receive the five timber beams that will support the new roof sheeting. As I write, these beams are currently being manufactured and the new, green coloured, corrugated steel sheeting is also on order.



STOP PRESS!

On Monday 7th October, the five wooden beams were delivered - very early at 8am (which caused just a bit of panic!) – but it allowed some of the trusty BET volunteers to be diverted off the planned wildflower

meadow scything task, to carry the beams up to the Cabin and raise them into the prepared sections of the end walls.

The next task will be to secure the five beams into the walls which will then enable the new roof to be fitted.



So hopefully, by the time our next bulletin comes out in the spring, the new roof will be in place and the Cabin will be finally up & running!

Gerry Wilcox