

# Backwell Environment Trust Bulletin 46 - Spring 2023

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## A Very Warm Welcome to our Latest Spring Bulletin



The BET volunteers have been working extremely hard over the autumn and winter months with our two main tasks being the annual scything of our fabulous wildflower meadows and coppicing ash trees with advanced ash dieback disease. We've also had tree surgeons working on our reserves once again to remove some of the larger diseased trees close to houses and footpaths, and there's been the magnificent sight of heavy horses extracting the felled timber.

**Ash Dieback Disease**  
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# Ash Dieback Disease

During the winter of 2021/22, and after 15 months of intense planning, detailed assessments, surveys and approvals, the first phase of the removal of our ash dieback infected trees bordering roads and houses commenced. In all, about 150 of our most dangerous ash trees were felled using a combination of very experienced tree surgeons and the BET volunteers.

During the winter of 2022/23, we moved on to the second phase of the project to make safe diseased ash trees bordering our extensive



## Internal Decay



network of footpaths. As in 2021/22, a further 150 diseased trees were made safe using a combination of BET's tree surgeon (Nuthatch Arboriculture) and the BET volunteers.

The work was carried out very successfully and most importantly, without any injuries as felling diseased ash trees does come with an enhanced level of risk.

One of the most obvious visual characteristics of ash dieback is when the uppermost leaves and branches start to 'dieback'. Up to a few years ago, it was presumed that the extent of this dieback was a good indicator to how far the disease had spread through the tree. However, recent fatalities of tree surgeons have highlighted that this is not always the case as a percentage of infected trees can exhibit quite marked internal fungal decay whilst only showing moderate levels of leaf loss. This hidden, internal decay can have very serious, or even



fatal consequences for tree surgeons as the tree can split or fracture violently and unexpectedly whilst being felled.

Of the ash trees removed during 2021/22, approximately 5 - 10% of the trees exhibited this dangerous, internal fungal decay. This year, due to the rapid spread of the disease through our woodlands, that figure has increased dramatically to approximately 20 - 30% of the felled trees exhibiting internal decay.



## Moving Forward

With the most heavily infected ash trees (whose canopies have thinned by 50 - 100%) removed, there is a real hope that the worst is now behind us. We are *fairly* confident that next winter will see far fewer ash trees removed for safety reasons and the hope is that we may only have to call on the services of BET's tree surgeon every other year from now on.

Since our ash dieback felling programme commenced, around 300 tree saplings have been planted both to fill in the gaps left by the ash and to increase the biodiversity of the woodland. Additionally, with the extra sunlight that is now able to reach the woodland floor, large numbers of tree seedlings have germinated adding to the rapidly occurring natural regeneration process. With the opening up of our footpaths and the creation of sunny woodland glades, many new opportunities for wildlife have now been created.



# Timber Extraction

Dealing with the consequences of ash dieback disease over the past few years has undeniably lead to a very substantial drain on BET's finances and so we are very pleased that our partnership with Backwell Logs has worked out to be very beneficial to both organisations. Backwell Logs will remove the timber from our nature reserves and process it for sale locally whilst BET receives a very generous contribution for the timber.

During 2021/22, when ash trees were being removed from either side of the road, timber extraction was very straightforward. However, last winter with the felled timber being located in numerous areas scattered around our nature reserves, extraction presented a considerable problem. The solution we came up with was to use heavy horses to



move the timber to near the roadside where it could be moved easily by tractor and trailer.

The original plan was to remove the timber during the winter months, but the heavy rainfall in March meant the horses were not able to work in the slippery conditions. However, the short spell of dry weather over Easter allowed two working horses to start work in Jubilee Stone Wood.

Two magnificent French Percheron heavy horses, Marcel and Jurgen from Oakfield Farm near Wotton-under-Edge, made a great start in extracting felled ash trees, in partnership with Backwell Logs.



The Horsering meadow (rather fittingly) was used as their base and for stacking the logs. The horses and their drivers John and Ryan made repeated trips along the permissive path leading to the Warrener's Cottage and steadily reduced the jumble of felled timber on both sides.



It was wonderful to see how the horses negotiated all the scattered logs, fallen stones - and holly - with complete trust in their drivers. Once hitched to a massive log they used their immense power to get the log moving with no hesitation and then drag it along at a very fast walking pace. A relay working pattern evolved with Jurgen using his more explosive power to extricate big logs from the tangled piles and then Marcel using his

steady power to haul them all the way to the meadow. Once there, Katie loaded the timber onto Backwell Logs' trailer for transporting to their farm for processing. We are very pleased that the timber is being collected, cut and seasoned and then sold by a local business - a working partnership that benefits us both.

It is great to be able to use this very traditional approach to extracting timber from the woodlands with its difficult terrain and narrow paths. There is still a large amount of timber to remove and we hope to see Marcel and Jurgen back soon, possibly with more of their team.



## Heavy Horses

Horses are magnificent creatures and large draught ones have been used for thousands of years for ploughing fields and for pulling heavy loads. The original superior domestic horse closely resembled the modern Exmoor and Shetland ponies, who are very different to the standard, streamlined horses of today.

It was the Romans who originally brought these larger horses into Britain, usually about 16 - 19 hands (1.6 - 2 metres) and there have been countless finds of old horse equipment in many areas to prove it. Some of today's horses, like the Percheron, are descendants of the Medieval war horses. Many of our modern breeds were developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when more powerful breeds were needed to pull the new, heavier industrial machinery. Even Jethro Tull (1674 - 1741) wanted his newly-invented seed drill pulled by horses and not by oxen which were more commonly used at the time. His new seed drill was a real benefit to farming as it planted



seeds in straight lines in the fields and it automatically covered them with soil, which protected them from being eaten by the birds.



In England the most popular breed of horse was the Shire, also the largest, and the biggest horse on record was a huge Shire called Sampson, who weighed over 1.5 tons and was over 21.6 hands (2.2 metres) high. Back in the early Bronze Age, most of the traffic was still done on foot, but by late Bronze Age (1300 B.C.), the use of horses was more

common. It was Francis Pryor who has worked in Flag Fen, Peterborough - the wetland landscape of eastern England - for many years who found, amongst many other pieces of horse harness, the earliest wheel ever made in Britain from the late Bronze Age.

We imagine that early vehicles were simple cart-like affairs, but the wheels were very sophisticated, with different woods used for different parts of them. The body of the Flag Fen wheel was alder, which resists rot and doesn't split easily. The main braces holding the three parts of the body together were made of oak, which is strong and flexible, and the locating pegs and dowels were ash, as often used today.



The village of Shapwick, Somerset, was studied by Mick Aston for his book 'Interpreting the English Village' in 2013, who found that in Roman times, much of it was open grassland. Bones were found of pony-sized animals, like Exmoor ponies, 13 - 15 hands, who were used for rounding up cattle and for carrying goods around the area. In the late Medieval period (1100 - 1539) by the church of St Andrew, spurs and a bridle bit were uncovered from the plough soil. Horse meat was distributed as 'kennel food' and dogs made off with any available bones. Sadly, when they themselves died, they were fed to their 'kennel mates' too!

Large areas of the village in the post-Medieval period (1539 - 1750) were filled with orchards and vegetable plots. There was a lot of livestock around and oxen and horses were a common sight, whether they were ploughing the fields or carrying sacks of wheat. Many old horseshoes have been uncovered in the nearby fields.

Horses are beautiful, intelligent animals and they have always been very much part of our lives, pulling heavily laden carts or ploughing fields like in the olden days. Today horses are popular for

activities such as horse racing, hunting or just riding out in the countryside where a rider and his 'best friend' can enjoy the sights, sounds and smells of nature at its very best - a brief escape from the modern world!

Jenny Greenslade



# Charity Walk or Run

The NAILSEA CHARITY WALKS & RUNS 2023 (organised by Rotary Nailsea & Backwell) will take place on Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> June. If that date doesn't suit you then you can do it at any time up to the end of July.

Each year over £20,000 is raised for local organisations and BET is pleased to support the event.

There are three routes to choose from - 5km, 10km and 20km. The day is a great opportunity for people to get together, enjoy the local countryside and raise money for deserving causes.

Full details, registration and sponsorship forms can be found on the Rotary website (see links in the picture).

We would be pleased if you nominate BET as your charity of choice on the registration form.

**NAILSEA CHARITY WALKS & RUNS 2023**

Raise money for  
**Backwell Environment Trust**

Sunday, 11th June 2023  
or any day of your choice up to 31st July

Full details at  
[bit.ly/NailseaWalks](https://bit.ly/NailseaWalks)

Walk or Run 5k, 10k or 20k

**Rotary**  
Nailsea & Backwell

# New Species Found on the Reserves

## Common Wave Moth

The wings of this species are white but heavily spotted with yellowish dots which gives the wings a buffish appearance. The wings are marked with narrow brown lines; three on the forewing, two on the hindwing. The wingspan is between 30 - 35mm. The eggs of this species are green and oval which hatch into larva which can be variable in colour from brown to green. They feed on alder, aspen, birch or willow. One or two broods are produced each year and the adults can be seen flying between May and August although the species is nocturnal.



## Wood Forget-me-not

The Wood forget-me-not is an attractive plant growing to 50 cms high with bright blue flowers. It can be found along woodland edges and rides and prefers ancient or damp woodlands. The plant can be identified from its hairy stems and narrow, oval leaves. Clusters of five petalled, azure-blue flowers with white or orange centres appear at the top of the stems from April to June. It is fairly widespread throughout the UK but most common in the south and east.



## Clay Triple-lines Moth

This species was first identified in the UK in 1799 and occurs mainly in the southern half of the UK but can extend its northern range as far as Cheshire. It can be locally common in the south of England with a wingspan of 26 - 33mm and flies between May and July. They can be found in well-wooded areas where beech trees are present. There can be a second (or even a third) brood in the autumn although these later moths can be quite different in colour to the first brood and can easily be confused with other species. The larva feed on beech leaves.





# Woodland Report

Our volunteers have once again been very busy on our nature reserves during the last six months hand scything our two acres of wildflower meadows and removing some of the smaller ash trees close to the footpaths with ash dieback disease. We've also been repairing sections of the permissive path in Jubilee Stone Wood ready for its refurbishment later this year, creating hedges along the footpaths and keeping them free of encroaching vegetation whilst putting down woodchip on some of the muddier sections.

So just what have those hard-working BET volunteers been up to over the past six months?



## Annual Wildflower Meadow Scything

### Meadow Scything

Every year, starting in the early autumn, BET's wildflower meadows are cut by hand by our volunteers, using traditional Austrian scythes. There's no denying that it's a big task, but without this annual hay cut, our meadows would quickly decline and would ultimately be lost to scrub encroachment. This year the whole 1.9 acres of restored grassland were cut on Monday mornings in just 3½ months.



## Tree Coppicing & Pollarding

This winter, our volunteers have continued to coppice and pollard ash trees in an advanced state of decline within striking distance of our footpaths. The timber produced is being sold to offset the costs of the professional tree surgeons we have had to employ. The volunteers have also done a



fantastic job of removing the felled material from the meadows and separating out all the potential saleable timber from the smaller branches which have either been burnt or made into hedges.



## Bird Box Cleaning & Refurbishment

Every winter, a dedicated group of BET volunteers survey the considerable number of bird boxes in our woodlands, recording usage and any other observations. At the same time, the opportunity is taken to clean out any old nesting material from boxes. Removing the old nest is an essential task as it removes any possible parasites and/or fungal spores which could have a detrimental effect on the chicks of the coming season. All nest boxes that are in need of repair are also dealt with before the nesting season starts in the spring.

## Rotary Grant

BET has been awarded a grant from the Nailsea & Backwell Rotary to refurbish our wheelchair-friendly trail in Jubilee Stone Wood. The money will be used to top-dress the path surface with fine gravel and stone dust which will level up the trail and make safe the sections of path that have become slippery since it was installed over ten years ago. Any money left over will be used to replace some of our ageing wooden dormouse nest boxes.



# Springtime in Jubilee Stone Wood

The woodland flowers are at their best in the spring before the trees come into leaf and start to shade out the sunlight. The cheerful yellow celandines are one of the first to appear and 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 in the year 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 areas where the woodland has been thinned of much of the dense canopy 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.

## 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.



Bluebells are increasing steadily, though not yet in the profusion found in some local woodlands. The newly opened up areas of woodland has created areas for colonising plants, such as several species of violet and cowslips - and occasionally you may be lucky enough to see the false oxslip, a

hybrid between a primrose and 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 very striking plant.

### **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.



In the newly created woodland glades during warm and sunny spring weather, brimstone and peacock butterflies can often be seen feeding and basking in the sun. In the spring, the textures and colours of the different tree barks are really noticeable - 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.

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.

### **Toothwort (*Lathraea squamaria*)**

The apothecaries of the Middle Ages saw this plant's resemblance to teeth as a clear sign that it could be used for the treatment of tooth disorders and toothache - hence its common name. The whole of the plant is either cream or pale pink in colour with no green leaves at all. It is a fairly uncommon parasitic plant that survives by attaching itself to the roots of either hazel or elm. The plants typically grow 10cm - 30cm tall and flower between April and June.



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 also be seen in the upper areas of the reserve and is another ancient woodland indicator.

