

Backwell Environment Trust

Bulletin 21 - Summer 2011

www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org



A Very Warm Welcome to our Latest Summer Bulletin

It's a very exciting time on the BET nature reserves right now as the summer rain has finally encouraged our fledgling wildflower meadows to burst into life. We have also created a stunning new woodland trail in Badgers Wood and big decisions lie ahead for the whole of Backwell following proposals to infill the old quarry at the back of the recycling centre.

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

The View from the Chair

Crab Spiders

Woodland Report

The 'Fern Way'

Fungi Discovery

Roman Plants

Bugs Count!

Dormouse Survey

Connecting with Local Schools



The View From The Chair



Membership 1 (Renewing)

Most of our members are longstanding and renew each year. Of course it's not compulsory to join and we understand if your interests and commitments have gone in other directions. However, in case this is just an oversight and you would like to re-join we have delivered a form with this Bulletin. If you don't receive a form, either by hand delivery or by e-mail, it means you are already a member. If there is no change in your circumstances you don't need to fill out the whole form; simply write in "No Change" (also see page 2).

Membership 2 (Standing Orders and Direct Debits)

A couple of members have asked about paying by Direct Debit or Standing Order and our treasurer, John Tarkanyi has investigated. DD seems to be a complete non-starter because the bank wants £400 to set up and operate a system and they also want to charge 18p per transaction for standing orders. After some discussion, it was decided that the best solution was to publish our sort code and account number here (HSBC, 40-34-39, 00005682) and on future membership forms, so that members could set up their own standing orders if they so wished and this would be free for both parties. It also allows electronic payment by those who would prefer to pay directly in this way.

This still leaves the problem that we would not have a membership form and hence no information for example on a change of email address or gift aid status etc. In these cases we would have to rely on members to tell us directly.

Membership 3 (Life)

We have also considered offering life membership at a cost of £75 for an individual member and £125 for family membership (two voting adults). We would like to know what members think about both the concept and of course the price level. If you have any views or ideas please let me know on 462083 or bill.charnock@btinternet.com.

Backwell Lake

On arriving at Backwell Lake in April, trustee Andrew Town, who has been studying the flora and fauna there for decades, was horrified to find that the meadow replete with orchids was being mowed. It had been agreed between the site owners, Wessex Water, and a loose association of Backwell biodiversity groups including BET, that mowing would not take place until the autumn. Andrew immediately contacted Wessex who investigated and discovered that their contractors had read 'end of August' as 'end of April' in the work plan. They have given an assurance that this will not happen next year. Andrew has since met with the contractors prior to the July cut to ensure that the cutting regime is back on track in line with the plan originally agreed with Wessex some years ago.

The Backwell Access Group (of wheelchair users, BAG) has asked BET to make clear that this error has nothing to do with the construction of a wheelchair/push chair access surface on the path around the lake.

Backwell Cave and some VERY Big Decisions

Regular readers know that for some time we have been attempting to buy the woodland containing the Backwell Cave from the owners, the directors of the building company Lancer Scott, who also own Coles Quarry and some adjacent fields.

They have told us that they were only interested in the commercial buildings in the quarry and that in due course we would get our chance. They have now made good on that promise. Their intentions are to create an industrial estate for light industry on the site of the existing buildings and to infill and landscape the lower parts of the quarry (picture opposite) with excavated material from their building sites, so as to completely screen the new units from the village.



The infilling and landscaping will allow them to create a three acre secure enclosed level playing field to donate to a local school along with a communications mast which generates an income to maintain the facility. The rest of the quarry, the cave woodland and some adjoining fields, which also generate an income, they will donate to BET and we are in the process of assessing our ability to manage this large extra area both financially and in terms of liabilities and manpower.

The downside to the proposals is that there will be a need for considerable extra traffic in the village, particularly on Dark Lane while the demolition of existing buildings, the infilling and landscaping of the

quarry and the construction of the new buildings takes place. This might take up to two years. Thereafter there will be regular traffic to the new industrial estate.

All these proposals of course have to be negotiated with local councils and the planning authorities before they are implemented and in the nature of things, may well change, but from a narrow BET point of view are full of exciting prospect.

WANTED : Plastic Tubs

The ponds near to the Jubilee Stone are extremely productive in terms of plants and wildlife but have suffered badly in the recent droughts. Our chief of volunteers, Ian Chambers, has been nobly transporting water to top them up from a distant cattle trough. He has a plan to create an inconspicuous reservoir so that the ponds can be easily replenished at will. To this end, we need about a dozen plastic dustbin sized containers. If you have any that are surplus to requirements please contact Ian on 463315 or chimpychambs@yahoo.co.uk.

Chain Sawing Help

We try very hard to avoid the use of chainsaws in the woods but sometimes it is unavoidable. In these cases we have relied on the magnificent efforts of member Malcolm Dowling and we are very grateful for all the work he has done for BET. However, Malcolm is getting increasingly busy with his own small business and so we have started looking round just to see if there are any other additional sources of help in this highly skilled area. Can you assist, or do you know of someone who can? They need to be nationally qualified with a current NPTC certificate, but if they are not already insured, BET can supply the necessary cover. Again, please contact Ian on 463315.

Archaeology

Trustee Jenny Greenslade has been exploring and surveying the nature reserves from an archaeological perspective for some time. She is particularly interested in the Cave which of course we hope to acquire. She is also intrigued by the barrows in the large field adjacent to the Jubilee Stone, which people thought may have been golf tees, or mounds from mining. Recently Jenny organised, with the tenant farmer's permission, several geophysical surveys by CLEAT (Clevedon Environs Archaeological Team) under Bob Smisson, which confirmed that there are ancient barrows in this field. Putting all the evidence together, it is beginning to look as though Backwell Hill was a significant centre of population and activity in prehistoric times.



Thanks

Antony Clark of Bristol has audited (technical term 'independently examined') our accounts as required by the Charity Commission and has approved them. These have now been submitted to the CC well in advance of the deadline. We are very grateful to Antony for this essential and valuable service.

The Monday, Thursday and Saturday volunteer group are very active and productive and the trustees are grateful to all who have turned up and helped us make really tangible progress and improvement on our nature reserves. I believe members Don Steadman and Gerald Wilcox deserve particular recognition for their Stakhanovite efforts in this regard (*look it up!*).

Under the supervision of trustee Michael Marks, Backwell cubs have made 18 nest boxes for us to erect in Badgers Wood. Many thanks lads, and many thanks too to Alan Speight of Yatton who has made the metal plates we need to fit to the boxes. These prevent woodpeckers and suchlike from attacking the eggs and fledglings of the blue tits, great tits, marsh tits and nuthatches which we hope will use the boxes.

Member Gill Brown is a licensed dormouse handler and every month, assisted by trustee Ian Chambers, inspects the numerous nest boxes in Jubilee Stone and Badgers Wood. Many thanks Jill for undertaking this highly skilled and time consuming task.

And finally, thanks to all those numerous members who have made donations along with their membership renewals. Once again, income from this source has exceeded that from membership subscriptions and we are very grateful, especially given our ambitions for the cave area and the potential expansion of the reserves.

Happy holidays to all our members, supporters and readers.

Bill Charnock



CRAB SPIDERS

If you're out and about strolling through BET's nature reserves this summer, you can't help but notice the great variety of plants and animals that are all around you. However, if you take the



time to look that little bit closer, often there is another world of unseen animals just waiting to be discovered.

One of the great masters of disguise is the Common Crab Spider (*Misumena vatia*). This species of spider doesn't go to the bother of spinning webs to trap their prey, instead they simply sit and wait on flower heads, fruit or leaves, ambushing any unsuspecting insect by grasping them with their long, crab-like front legs. They are so

successful in this unusual hunting technique only because they have the amazing ability to completely change the colour of their body over the course of a few days. By closely mimicking the colour of the petals or



leaves they sit on, they can attain a high level of camouflage which usually catches most visiting insects unaware. Their body colour can be white, yellow, green or even pink, or any other colour variation in-between. They are completely harmless to humans but they can inflict a highly venomous bite to their insect prey which safely paralyzes it before it ends up as lunch. The female has a fatter body (about 10mm long) than the male who is often smaller and darker in colour. They are quite common in southern England and are best seen between May and August. Your best chance of spotting them on BET's nature reserves are on the yellow/white flowers of ox-eye daisies in Badgers Wood but don't forget to have a good, close look in your own garden - you might be surprised what you might discover!

Ian Chambers



Woodland Report

As has been the case over the last couple of years, the lack of rainfall this springtime has once again broken all meteorological records - in fact this April had less than 10% of the usual monthly rainfall with temperatures around 4°C higher than average. As ever, this has caused us some problems, especially with the high water evaporation from our ponds which, once again, have had to be topped up with extra water - a very laborious and long winded process I can assure you! To fix this problem, this year we are hoping to install around 12 plastic dustbins (now mostly obsolete after the introduction of the 'wheelie-bins') hidden in the woodland to collect water over the winter, which should give us well over a tonne of quality 'aged' rainwater always available to top up the ponds in the future.



The lack of spring rainfall has also meant that the regeneration of our wildflower meadows in Badgers Wood has naturally got off to a slow start. Luckily, the rainfall returned again at the end of May, which has encouraged the first long dormant seedlings to finally start appearing.



Volunteers

Since the beginning of 2011, those trusty BET volunteers have now started working on BET's nature reserves every Monday morning, *in addition* to the regular second Thursday and fourth Saturday of every month. This extra man (and woman!) power has enabled us to start on some quite ambitious projects this season including coppicing and access improvements, but the highlight of all must be the construction of a beautiful new woodland trail through the shaded northern slopes of Badgers Wood.



Restoring/Landscaping the 'Pond' (BW)

Strange to think now that just over a year ago the old livestock drinking cistern in Badgers Wood was completely lost in the undergrowth and completely full up with a huge amount of smelly black mud. Today however it's a different story - the 'pond' is now full of life including hundreds of tadpoles, water beetles and pond skaters. At the moment the water is around 12" deep but hopefully at the end of this summer, we'll dive into the gooey mud once more to

excavate it a little deeper. The mud extracted from the pond in 2010 was piled up into a small mound close by and this year, it has now been planted up with various wildflowers and ferns relocated from the route of the woodland trail. So now you can sit awhile and enjoy the beautiful surroundings; a large fallen ash tree, very conveniently, just happens to make the perfect seat.

April 2010



May 2011



Step & Bench Construction in 'The Layers' (BW)

The restoration of The Layers meadow was finally completed last winter and already it is looking stunning with a wide selection of wildflowers in bloom. However, the access to it was very steep and slippery so this season, the BET volunteers have put in a flight of 26 gracefully curving steps to lessen the gradient and to make access much safer. The view from the top of the meadow is pretty spectacular, so a rustic oak bench has now been installed from which you can see as far as the Welsh coast as well as being able to look down onto the 'hustle & bustle' of Backwell. Another bench has also been installed overlooking Coles Quarry about half way through Badgers Wood, next to the public footpath. This bench was also going to be made of oak, but unfortunately in the three days between getting it up to the bench site and it being installed, it was stolen. Considering it took three of us to manhandle the eight foot long heavy oak beam up to the top of the hill, the thieves must have been quite determined and well organised.

The Layers Bench



Bracken Control (BW & JSW)

Regular readers will know that we have been aiming to reduce the bracken on the open areas of our reserves by about 90% so that our wildflower meadows can thrive once more. Four years down the line and after hundreds of back-breaking volunteer hours, we have now pulled and





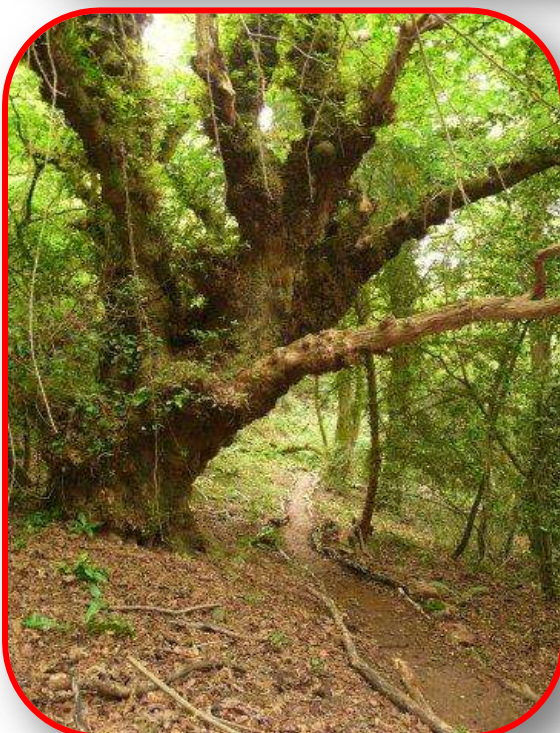
removed the bracken a total of 13 times in Jubilee Stone Wood and finally, I think, we have (almost) won the war!

Bracken in Jubilee Stone Wood is fast disappearing now and last month, it only took us an hour or so to remove some of the remaining, somewhat more tenacious plants. Luckily, Badgers Wood has nothing like the bracken problem of Jubilee Stone Wood so although we have only just started removing it, we won't have nightmares about it this time!

🌿🌿🌿 The New Badgers Wood Trail - The 'Fern Way' 🌿🌿🌿

The footpaths and trails on BET's nature reserves, high up on Backwell Hill, can give you a great sense of space and openness with fantastic views and wide expanses of sky all around you.

However, there is another side to the reserves which, until now, was



completely inaccessible to all but the *most* intrepid visitor. Badgers Wood has a hidden, magical woodland world just waiting to be discovered which you can now do on our **brand new 500 metre long** trail. The trail starts close to the public footpath off Church Town (see map) and winds its way through stunning broadleaf woodland, gently gaining height to emerge at two locations in a small valley path opposite the bridleway in Jubilee Stone Wood. It also has the advantage of creating a circular walk as well as bypassing the steep steps down from the upper parts of the reserve. Along the way you'll pass large yew trees apparently growing on the top of huge boulders, our newly restored pond,

literally *thousands* of intensely green ferns, dramatic exposed limestone cliff faces and veteran oak and yew trees to name just a few of the many highlights. It seems strange to say, but parts of this trail look more like the Amazon rainforest than sunny Backwell and, if you do nothing else this summer (!), you simply must walk this trail - I guarantee that you will be amazed!

Church Town
Entrance



Directions

Enter Badgers Wood from the lower, Church Town, entrance. Walk up the public footpath for 20 metres and you will see the BET 'clubhouse' in front of you. Take the minor path off to the left in front of it. You will pass the new steps to The Layers meadow after 15 metres and as the

path starts to descend, the new woodland trail is on your right, initially lined with stones.

New Fungi Discovery in Badgers Wood

The Common Morel (*Morchella esculenta*) grows in spring, often in woodland clearings. They have a very distinctive appearance, their caps being criss-crossed with irregular pale brown ridges between which are darker brown hollows in which the spores are produced. Morels produce *ascospores* meaning the spores are enclosed within the tissue and an internal force propels them out. The spores must therefore be produced near to the surface requiring a large surface area - hence the honeycomb design. Ridges and pits increase the surface area creating a sponge like appearance. The stalk is whitish, becoming creamy yellow when old. Trees commonly associated with morels include ash, sycamore, dead and dying elms and old apple trees, which are often the remnants of old orchards.





ROMAN PLANTS, PETS & OTHER PECULIARITIES



When Roman gardens are mentioned, people think of the formal ones around large villas, with fountains, statues and tidy flower beds. Less well-known however are the kitchen gardens (*hortus*), usually next to the house, which played an essential part in providing fruit and vegetables for the dinner-table, herbs for flavouring as well as medicinal plants. The 'matron', mistress of the house looked after these gardens, dividing her time between working there, looking after her children, and doing chores indoors. Vegetables generally planted for food included asparagus, beans, peas, onions, leeks and carrots - which unlike today were white, not orange and finger-thick. The most popular vegetable was cabbage, both for eating and medicines, and Pliny the Elder recorded 87 ways it could be used! Herbs like lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*) and thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*) were planted near beehives to attract the bees, as honey was the only sweetener available.



For medicinal purposes, nettles (*Urtica dioica*) could cure anything from dandruff to gout. They also relieved arthritis and rheumatism when rubbed in (aaah!) and were made into soup, beer, and tea. The cure for ailing trees however was to pour oil or wine around the roots in the belief that it acted as a tonic, which is why Roman Senator Quintus Hortensius left work early each day to give his plane trees their customary tipple! Another popular plant was woad (*Isatis tinctoria*) which when fermented (traditionally using stale urine), made a blue dye but also had antiseptic properties, possibly why Britons wore woad-dyed clothes into battle. Purple dye came from murex, a snail-like gastropod which was not only edible, but harvested in millions to produce this expensive dye for clothes for the upper class to wear at their extravagant banquets.

Menus included wild boar, pig, goat, deer, geese, lobsters and clams, along with a selection of vegetables. A recipe book by Apicius contained such unusual delicacies as camel heels, flamingo tongues and roast ostrich, but one of the most popular meals was edible dormouse (*Glis glis*) rolled in poppy seeds and honey. Other foods included edible snails (*Helix pomatia*), bred in a moated enclosure surrounded by water, and also



eels, as Gaius Hirrius, alleged inventor of fish ponds, supplied over 6,000 for Julius Caesar's banquets. Emperor Claudius' mother Antonia fastened gold earrings on her pet conger eel, (they have ear-like pectoral fins) possibly to stop it also ending up on the dinner table! All kinds of fish were popular, especially when made into Garum the strong fish sauce, added to nearly every dish.

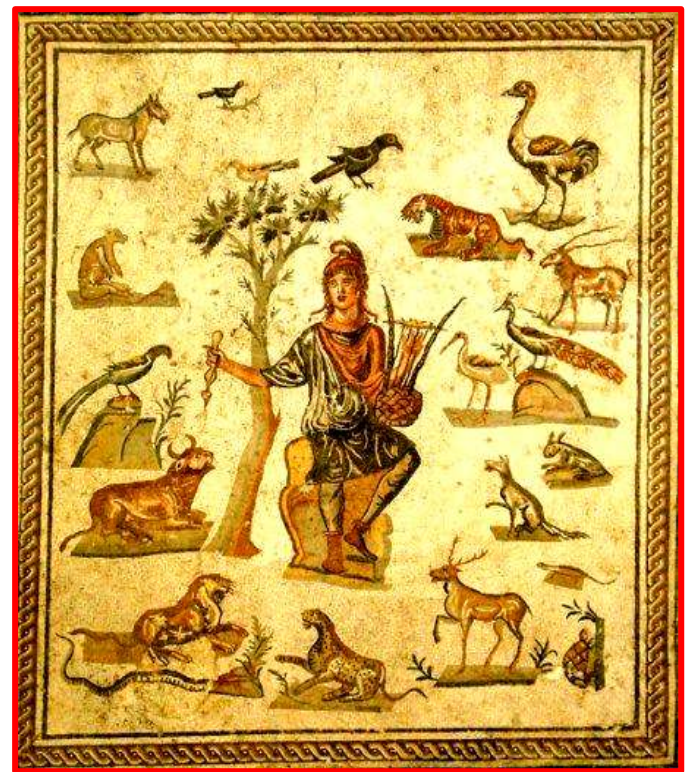
Roman menus sadly included small birds, produced in large commercial aviaries, but many people had them as pets for the simple pleasure of hearing them sing. A tiny aviary complete with water bowls and perches was even made on a balcony overlooking a busy road in Pompeii, Italy. Dogs also were very popular pets, kept for company, hunting, or as guard dogs, the advice being to buy a black one as it could not be seen in the dark until it was too late! Interestingly, dogs were kept for healing purposes in sanctuaries, for example the one at Lydney, Gloucester, next to the Roman Temple for Nodens,

God of Healing. They lived with the patients, possibly licking their wounds to help them heal. A bronze statue of a wolfhound was found there.

Some more unusual 'pets' were the semi-wild animals who were taught to react to music in a certain way. A cruel streak in the Romans meant that they liked to see the killing of imported exotic live animals by gladiators for entertainment in the amphitheatres. A musician dressed as the God Orpheus who played the lyre and charmed wild animals, was part of the grand opening of the amphitheatre in Rome, with a landscape of cliffs, rocks and trees recreated in the arena. All the animals moved in time to the music except for one stubborn bear, who attacked poor Orpheus and killed him, showing that wild animals could be partly tamed, but even a docile bear could revert to its natural wild self.

On a lighter note, Hortensius had his own private game reserve, and one day gave a banquet in the grounds of his villa outside Rome. Another Orpheus appeared, playing his lyre, and suddenly out of the woods came a slow-moving crowd of stags, boars and other wild animals (all tamed and much-rehearsed!). The visual impact must have been stunning, as the reserve was turned into a temporary theatre for everyone's entertainment.

We must thank the many prolific Roman writers of the period for their books and essays, and most importantly of all, their personal correspondence in which they commented upon people's pets and other peculiarities, which we can read about and enjoy today, over 1,500 years later.



Jenny Greenslade





Bugs Count!



If you have an hour to spare and you are not able to get up to the reserves or would just like something to do around your house, then you may like to take part in an OPAL survey called the '*Bugs Count*'. By taking part in the survey and sending your results to OPAL, you will help discover more about the incredible variety of invertebrates in the built environment. It is an activity that is suitable for all ages and you don't need to be an expert, as clear identification guides and full step by step, downloadable instructions are provided. All this can be found on the OPAL website, along with details of other surveys, on www.OPALexplorenature.org.

Carrie Riches



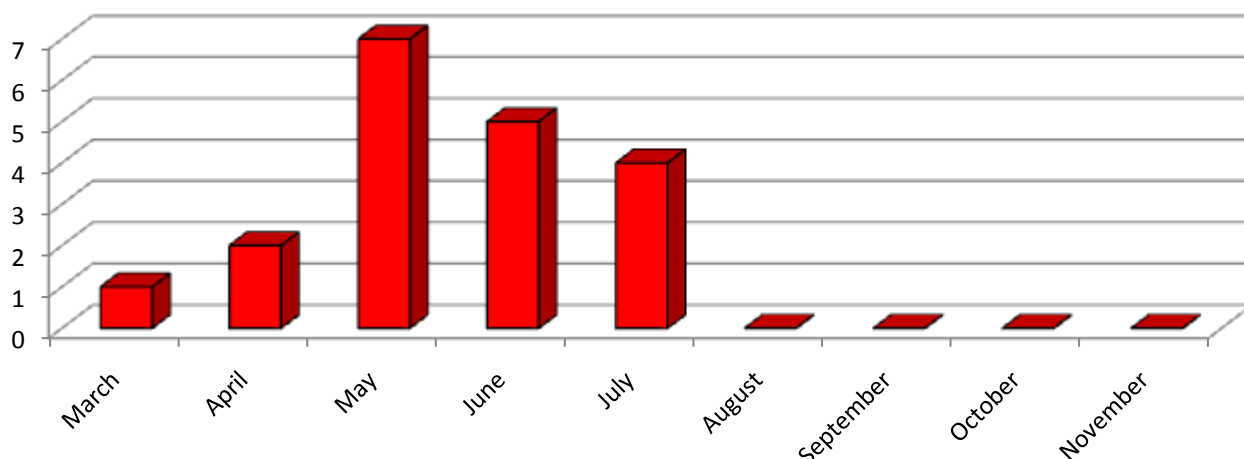
BET Dormouse Survey 2011

BET's nature reserves are really quite a special place for wildlife - one of the rarest of which is the Hazel Dormouse. Dormouse numbers have declined significantly over the last hundred years mainly due to the loss and fragmentation of their preferred habitat as well as the dramatic reduction in the coppicing of woodlands. Luckily for us though, the south-west of England is a 'hot-spot' for dormice and Jubilee Stone Wood especially, has some excellent dormouse-friendly areas which have led to us to record high numbers of this beautiful nocturnal mammal this year. BET's nature reserves' dormice statistics will be entered into the National Dormouse Monitoring Programme for the first time this year, so we will be able to easily compare our numbers year on year, as well as how we fare compared to the rest of the UK.



The Story So Far.....

Number of Dormice Recorded March - July 2011



Dormice breed during the summer months and we are hoping to hear the patter of tiny paws in the summer/autumn surveys - fingers crossed!



Connecting With Local Schools



On the morning of Friday 17th June, five BET trustees led eight young men and three teachers from Backwell School up into Jubilee Stone Wood nature reserve as part of their Enrichment Week. We explained how we manage the nature reserve and quickly set to work pulling up bracken to provide more light in certain areas for the regeneration of the wildflower meadows. We then moved on to den building allowing the students to choose materials for the construction of their shelters and to build them in any style they wanted. The pulled bracken was added as roofing and wall material and the final dens, in their varying styles, were so impressive that we would gladly have used them as shelters on some of our wetter working parties!

Well done boys!

Whilst the above was in progress, a brazier was lit.

The day was rather mixed weather-wise, but the fire provided a warm focal point and also a cookery area. Chef of the day, Amanda Swannell, had made a dough mixture with sultanas which we wound around sticks and cooked over the fire - the results were surprisingly edible and amazed us all. The weather was a little cloudy but when the sun did venture out, so did some beautiful butterflies. One of the students even found a toad, and another, an insect which we were completely unable to identify! We very much appreciated the help the students had given us in restoring the meadows and wish them well.

Three weeks later, we accompanied two separate parties of excited Junior School children and helpers up to the Jubilee Stone as part of their Year 6 Church Day. The weather was rather mixed (again!). When the sun shone, the wildflowers looked beautiful and we saw marbled white and meadow brown butterflies. The second group had a lot of summer rain to contend with but were as cheery and attentive as the first group had been and were a pleasure to accompany.

Caroline Hoult

