

SOUTH OF ENGLAND HEDGE LAYING SOCIETY

Reg Charity No 1046124



August 2016



“All that hard work has paid off!”

Laughton Ploughing match Hedge Laying Competition approximately 3 years ago , the day that everyone decided to enter the Axe part of competition & only one or two people finished on time, some of you & myself included will remember it well. We went back to the hedge after the excellent food at the Forge in Halland and finished it off our sections.

The hedge is now looking remarkably well, very consistent re-growth, a pleasure to see. Congratulations to everyone that took part.

Phil Hart

Message from the Chairman

Welcome to members new & continuing, if you are coming on any of the training days please arrive early, please keep us updated on your attendance as it helps us allocate the sections (Cants) for training & for people who wish to practice / lay for pleasure. If we know you are coming we can get the allocation of cants sorted easily. Please keep Phil Piddell informed. Some of you will already know this but it's worth a mention, sharp tools slice, blunt tools bounce: energy & enthusiasm do not make blunt tools sharp. We have moved the sharpening course to December now as the calendar was getting too crowded in September. If you are purchasing new tools please do not assume they will be sharp. In terms of a grit number that refers to the fineness / coarseness of the sharpening stone I find a Gransfors Bruks circular stone very good, as it has a coarse side of 300 grit for removing chips, burrs & thinning the blade plus a fine side of 600 grit for putting on the razor sharp edge. I use it with water. Wear gloves when you use these stones as cut finger tips are a good indicator sharpness, but always a bit too late.

I look forward to meeting you at any of the other events we have planned this season,

Best Wishes,

Phil Hart

Chairman & Training Officer

Editor's message

We are reminiscing a bit in this issue with some details of the early days of our Society with an interview from Bob Hunt and some historical comments received from John Wilson. Some repetition is apparent but none the worse for that, I think.

Please note that some of the dates in the diary were incorrect in the previous newsletter. Please check you do have the correct dates.

BOB HUNT INTERVIEW

Early Career

Bob is Sussex born and bred and originally came from Seaford. He started his working life on his wife's grandfather's farm in Ringmer doing a bit of everything including pigs. He was taught hedge laying by his father in law. He was soon called up for National Service and spent three years in the Army Service Corps, driving vehicles and became an army driving instructor. He was never posted outside of England.

Following this he worked for Harper and Eede on their farm. There was not much hedge laying. In fact, he spent more time grubbing up hedges, to enlarge the fields. He moved on the forestry work for English Woodland, mainly working in East Sussex, producing sweet chestnut fencing etc. In 1969 he set up his own business, cutting wood for paper pulp and ended up with his own saw mill, employing 13 people. Eventually he sold the mill and now describes himself as semi retired. He has not done much laying over the last couple of years but he now has a new hip and a commission to get down a challenging hedge this winter. Whilst waiting for his op he did, however, lay a small line of 30 foot hornbeam, next to his huge barn-like shed (which he built himself) and produced a very neat, almost delicate-looking hedge from such coarse material.



Style

He describes the style used at the time of his farming days as 'Sussex Hedge'. He is loathe to accept the term 'Sussex Bullock' as the stock was mostly sheep. Stakes and binders were not always available. They would utilise the cut material from the hedge and leave the occasional live stake (crop) to strengthen the hedge. It was hand tools only in those early days but he states that he would have unhesitatingly have used a chainsaw, if one was available, being more interested in the function

of the hedge than any ideas of purity. The hedges were stock barriers and little else. He recounts, more recently, seeing a group getting a line of large trees down using chainsaws and a bulldozer. He has no problem with this, as he saw the hedge 5 years later and it was fine. The need for preservation of the craft came later and it was only 10-12 years ago that the use of hedges for conservation became evident.

It was in the 70s that Gordon Fowlin of Harper Eede farm who, for a bit of fun, set up a hedge laying group with the first meeting at Plumpton College. Other members included John Blake, Les French and Ralph Walters. Peter Tunks was the first President. He was replaced by John Wilson, then Principal of the College, who remained President for 25 years. Bob was chairman but most of the work involved in recruitment, training and organising competitions was done by John Blake.

Subsequent meetings were held at people's houses and the SOE style was defined at these meetings, mainly using a template suggested by Ralph Walters, who suggested the style should be suitable for both sheep and cattle and for competitions.

He describes John Blake as "never really a great hedge layer" and remembers a competition that JB took part in. JB went up to one of the judges, Tony Russell, and asked him how he rated his hedge. Tony said "Well, within the field of 13, I'd rate you as 14th. JB was devastated but, in fact, when the results came out, he was 3rd. He rates JB as a good and fair judge.

This was all before the National Society was set up and the burgeoning SOE group were approached by a group of mainly Northerners, wishing to set up a national group and John Blake became very involved in this. Bob, however, states that he became well known for disliking everything that the National Society did. He did not go into details but described the national group as "unhelpful" and cited the fact that their sponsors, Tarmacadam, soon dropped out having become disillusioned with the way things were run. He was however 'over the moon' that Paul Mathews won the last National Competition utilising the SOE style. (on a personal note, I feel that the national committee is now a more open organisation and the recognition of a SOE hedge as the winner is representative of this change - Ed).

The first competition was held at a hedge near Eastbourne with approximately ten competitors, four were youngsters. Sadly Bob can't remember who won: perhaps it was the taking part that mattered. The hedge unfortunately no longer exists. Bob is a hedging judge and retains his farming heritage by being more interested in a properly functioning hedge rather than a pretty one. For instance, he is more interested in strongly held stakes than straight ones. He had the honour of judging at Prince Charles's annual hedging event and has the certificate to prove it. He disqualified Prince Charles who arrived late at a previously cleaned up cant with all the debris

removed. Our National President cited important matters of State but Bob told him that “If he wanted his hedge laying judged, he would have to get up earlier.” HRH took it with good grace and Bob respects him as having the preservation of the countryside at heart. The first female hedge layers appeared in the 90s. Many trainees have passed through his hands but he remembers Messrs Turner and Whittaker as being natural hedge layers who took to the craft immediately.

He looks after the Society's caravan and frequently supplies and transports the stakes and binders for the society's events He became a life member in 1997 and, earlier this year, became the first recipient of the society's Distinguished Services trophy.

Tools of the trade 2: Loppers



Compound Bypass Lopping Shears



Anvil Lopping Shears

Loppers don't quite make as good a conversation piece as billhooks but hedge layers use them a lot. There are two basic types: bypass loppers, which have a stainless steel blade which works with a scissors action, passing alongside rather than hitting the 'hook', which is designed to hold the branch while the cutting blade shears it. The Anvil type has a blade designed to come down onto a soft metal or hard plastic surface called the anvil.

The by pass loppers produce a cleaner and more easily healed cut and are usually preferred to the more traumatic anvil type which uses a crushing action and may be best reserved for dead wood although they do produce a stronger cut against fibrous material. By pass loppers can slide and twist when faced with hard or fibrous branches and careless use can result in the blades

being levered apart. All loppers should be limited to branches not much bigger than a man's thumb. Anything larger is for the pruning saw.

Various handle materials and designs are available including telescopic handles and a cord pull closing device for high work. Ratchets and various forms of gearing are available for less effortful closing but don't really allow for use with larger branches.

Loppers can be sharpened with a file and the bevel should be maintained. Usually it is only the blade on the by pass type that is sharpened and the anvil never is. There are You tube videos on how to go about it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6u1qS8q4xIM>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7u1SrU6B2oY>

Tools of the trade 1: Billhooks follow up

Comment from
Derrick Hale:

Dear Editor,
I read with interest
the article
concerning Billhooks.
I saw your
newsletter shortly
after I had

completed an article on the same
topic for the National Hedge laying
Society (NHLS) newsletter.

The usefulness of a billhook will
depend on the composition of the
steel, the manufacturing process it
goes through and the heat treatment
which will give its final hardness and
temper (resilience).

With regard to modern billhooks, I
have found that those by one maker
to be quite soft, even to the point
that the edge "rolls" rather than
chips and this could be hammered
out cold, the edge honed again and
the billhook put back to work with
little damage to show. Perhaps
surprisingly, this seemingly soft steel
held an edge well and the bill hook
would "sing" as it is used. Morris
billhooks tended to be rather too
hard and prone to chipping but are
ground to a reasonable angle and
very serviceable. I understand that
Morris experienced some heat
treatment problems and that there
have been other changes in recent
years; let us hope that this company
is now back on track and producing
good tools.

I had the pleasure several years ago
to talk with a man who had served



his apprenticeship with
Elwell (later Spearwell,
later a part of the Spear
and Jackson company). I
learned from him that a
skilled Blacksmith could
produce a strapped
Yorkshire billhook from a
3lb piece of steel in
approximately 30
minutes. This is from one

piece of steel, with no welding, the
straps being drawn out (hammered)
on an anvil with scale and emery
between them in order that they did
not stick (weld) together. The
hardening and tempering process
would include ten minutes in Lead
and ten minutes in Brine, the
resulting blade being hardened right
through and right across its width.

This man also told me about some
changes that have taken place. Steel
was changed, problems with scale
appeared after the change from the
coke hearth to using gas. There were
also changes due to attempts to
reduce cost per item – a semi-
socketed fastening instead of the
strapped fitting, paper labels instead
of stamping the blade with the
manufacturer's name. Forging and
other manufacturing methods
changed, from forging on the anvil to
rolling and other design factors which
I am sure many hedge layers will be
aware of.

The NHLS newsletter article has a
photograph of Sam Spooner, a highly
respected Elwell blacksmith who
spent all his working life with that
company. He is pictured using a 12lb

hammer and is making a 7lb axe head.

A final short note on Steel. No longer is this a simply Iron with a calculated percentage of Carbon but it contains various other elements to give it specific properties for its intended use. It can be made from the raw materials or from scrap. There were days, long ago, when it was possible, not only select the place of origin of the Iron Ore by country, but even by quarry! Another interest of mine lies in Concertinas, playing and restoring them. Those instruments made between the mid-1890s and the outbreak of WW1 were outstanding and this has been put down to the quality of the Steel used for the reeds (which produce the musical notes). Each instrument would use, after wastage, the equivalent of a couple of post card sized pieces of Steel. One the present day manufacturers (one of only a couple of man businesses) found the specification of this Steel and an approach to British Steel (as was it was then) resulted in "we have sold the last piece but can make you some more – minimum order 5000 tons". For those who regret the passing of old tools and believe that Steel was better in the past, please note – things may never be the same again.

PS

Something to ponder on and investigate further. I showed my Elwell Yorkshire Billhook to a blacksmith last weekend and he immediately said "high carbon steel". I had a similar experience some years ago with an engineer - both instantly identified the steel used and the hardening processes used from the surface appearance. I had always thought that billhooks were made from high carbon steel and were not "soft" (the hardening and tempering process can result in a brittle tool or one which is relatively soft but we are looking at "tool steel" to start with). I have a few more lines of enquiry to follow before saying any more on this matter.

The individual knife makers in Sardinia, where my son-in-law comes from, like to find lorry springs from which to make their knives - high carbon again. Sardinia has a knife making tradition which I could see being made more commercial on my last visit though still a subject of much pride. The proper, good knives were still stored literally under the counter and were not cheap!

Regards,
Derrick

For Sale

4 person Canvas Bell tent, Good Condition,
please call Gary Moore on 077 67 894 961
for more details.

Memories or What Used to Happen

by John Wilson, 25 yrs SOEHS President

As one gets older it is quite normal to think back to one's youth and compare the changes. Before I recount my early Hedge laying life let's go back to the 1930s. On Sept 3rd 1939 I was in Stockton on Tees buying clothes for school when war was declared. I remember seeing biplanes flying from the local RAF airfield: petrol engined with tiny propellers and open cockpits. There could be many stories about 39-45 but the blackout was one of my most vivid memories: no lights anywhere outside. Perfectly safe to ride my bike on any road as it was very rare to see a car.

Moving on to 1950, I started working as a farm apprentice ("Lad" to most people). There was 27 staff and 26 horses on 1400 acres. On a 5 and half day week, this 'lad' walked miles each day leading a horse and cart. Frank, one of the older men, was the farm's hedge layer during the winter. One of my first jobs was to dig Elderberry plants out of the hedge before Frank arrived. "Don't leave any roots lad or it will regrow". Sometimes I helped Frank with big hedges on windy days- all hand tools, no chainsaws. I had to learn just by watching Frank as he was very deaf and there was little conversation. I went to Notts Farm Institute in 1951-2 and was glad to have had Frank's advice. We students had to lay a very neglected hawthorn hedge in a sort of Midland style without stakes and binders. Frank must have passed on some skills because on March 1952 I won the hedge laying competition.

Moving on to 1984, I arrived as Principal of Plumpton College, whereupon a group of hedge-layers, who were competitors at the local ploughing matches came to see if I would help to form the SOEHS and "Will

you be our President?" So began a very memorable 25 years amongst such a friendly co operative groups of people. There is no other comparable hedge laying group in the country, where member enjoy the society and its varied activities so much. Sadly for me those opportunities don't exist any more and, to be honest, the muscles don't co operate so readily.

Enjoy your hedge laying. Get involved and you will enjoy it even more.

John Wilson (JW)

Further comments on our history from JW

John Blake was an early member of the National society and was their chairman for 9 years.

John Savings was one of 'the originals' and oftaught Prince Charles. It was he who got the Highgrove Estate involved with a National competition.

The Bentley Woodfair used a contractor to lay a hedge for their first event.

Subsequently the SEHLS started a rolling programme , laying 20-30 yards each year.

In 2000 Neil Sands and J W produced an action commentary explaining the SOE style, which can be seen on the internet:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Andv7a0NPEc>

Two Dutch Layers first came over and worked with JB and JW and this relationship has developed in many ways

South of England Hedge Laying Society

Promoting the craft of hedge laying, training, competitions and countryside management Reg Charity N0 1046124



South of England Hedge Laying Society, Style description & scoring system update, as agreed by the committee of the South of England Hedge Laying Society on the 5th May 2016.

Please can all Judges, Stewards, Competitors & Competition Organisers note the following:

Scoring system for use from 1st September 2016.

Cut and pleach 35 points

Stakes and binders 35 points

General Appearance 30 points

Description of the South of England Style.

The following description was agreed as the style for a South of England Hedge.

The objective is to create a stock proof hedge with brush at both sides extending from the top of the hedge to ground level.

Pleachers are laid down the centre of the hedge and are to be of sufficient cross section to allow sap growth. Sufficient 'heel' is left to allow ground level growth.

Stakes are placed two to the yard along the centre of the hedge and finished to protrude four inches above the top of the binders. Stakes are to be driven in as grown, i.e. smallest diameter uppermost.

The stakes should be cut at an angle in the same direction as the pleachers.

Binders The side to start or "face" of the hedge would be determined on the day by the judge/steward or the person running the day.

Start binders with the first commencing in front of the first stake then successively woven behind and in front of the following stakes. Start the second behind the first stake then continue with the third in front of the first stake until three binders have been fully woven.

Continue by inserting a binder at each stake starting at the second (inserted under the two previous ones) passing the binder in front of the next stake then alternately behind and in front of successive stakes to create a single twist effect. The top of the binders will be four feet from ground level.

Height – The actual height to be 4 foot to the height of the top of the binders unless otherwise stated by the judge/steward or person running the day.

Dead Wood is limited to that required to block a gap which would otherwise not be stock proof.

Frith is cleared away from the newly laid hedge as directed.

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Training in Hedge Laying

The following events are scheduled, but maybe subject to change.

	Event	Venue	date
	Coppicing	Benenden, Kent	17 th September 2016
Day 1	Hedge Laying	Scotney Castle, Kent	15 th October 2016
Day 2	Hedge Laying	Byfleet	12 th November 2016
	Coppicing	Leith Hill, Dorking	26 th November 2016
	Tool Sharpening	Plumpton College, Sussex	3 rd December 2016
Day 3	Hedge Laying	Crowborough, Sussex	10 th December 2016
Day 4	Hedge Laying Improvers Day	Forest Green	7 th January 2017
	Presidents verses Chairman'	Magham Down, Sussex	21 st January 2017
	Coppicing day	TBC	28 th January 2017
	Annual Competition	Magham Down, Sussex	SUNDAY 19 th February 2017
	Fun Day	Fletching	18 th March 2017

Fees

Hedge Laying the course (days 1 to 4 below) is £150. 1 "taster day" is £60

Tool Sharpening is £10

Coppicing days are FREE to all Members

If you are unable to attend a training event please let us know, re-booking fees apply as follows

Over 1 week – no fee

Between 2 days and 1 week - £10

Less than 2 days – £20

No show / the night before / on the day - £30

Experienced current members

A section of hedge will be allocated for experienced current members wishing to lay hedge, please contact The Training Co-ordinator Phill Piddell for more details.

More details for all events will be published nearer the time.

Please note to take part in any of these events you need to join the society so you are covered by the Society's insurance. Membership is £15 per annum. Please bring your membership cards to events.

To get booking information for these events, send a completed membership application form to Phill Piddell.

The Membership Secretary, Phill Piddell.

1 Hope House Farm Cottage, Crouch Lane, Sandhurst, Cranbrook, TN18 5PD 01580 850768

phill.piddell@bt.com



Copping – Benenden. Site is between post codes TN17 4LE and TN17 4LD OS. Grid reference of the entrance is TQ792323



DIRECTIONS

From Benenden Crossroads take the B2086 west towards Cranbrook, Hartley, Goudhurst and Tunbridge Wells. After a mile take a left turn into Babbs Lane. This is the only left turn for 3 miles and is shortly after Crandons Factory and a small garage. Decend down Babbs Lane ignoring two right turns. At the bottom of the hill cross a small stream in a narrow section of wood. This is the northern end of White Chimney Wood. Continue up the lane (now Coldharbour Road), past a small grassed triangle , track and Scullsgate House on the left. Turn immediately right into Hinksden Road. After 15 yards pass the entrance to Scullsgate Cottage (big oak tree in the centre of a circular drive) then past entrance to Upper Scullsgate Cottage and continue south up the lane for 50 yards. The field entrance will be marked and is on the right. If you reach the brow of the hill you have gone too far.

South of England Hedge-Laying Society



MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION (or RENEWAL) April 2016 to March 2017

PRESIDENT:

Peter Tunks
The Coach House
Waltersville Way
Horley
RH6 9EP

Tel: 01293 784826 / 07836 757570

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY:

Phill Piddell
1 Hope House Farm Cottage
Crouch Lane
Sandhurst
Cranbrook
Kent TN18 5PD
Tel: 01580 850768

Annual membership of the Society	£15 per person	
Lapel Badge	£5 per badge	
Total		
Please treat my membership as a Gift Aid donation (YES / NO)		

I confirm I have paid or will pay an amount of Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax for the current tax year (6 April to 5 April) that is at least equal to the amount of tax that all the charities and Community Amateur Sports Clubs (CASCs) that I donate to will reclaim on my gifts for the current tax year. I understand that other taxes such as VAT and Council Tax do not qualify. I understand the charity will reclaim 25p of tax on every £1 that I have given.

PLEASE USE CLEAR BLOCK CAPITALS

Name: _____

Address: _____

_____ Post Code: _____

Tel: _____ Mobile: _____

Emergency Contact (Name and Number) _____

Email: _____

Age (if under 18): _____ Occupation: _____

It is your responsibility to ensure that the Society is informed of any changes in your communication details.

Please return the completed form to Phill Piddell You will receive a Membership Card in the post. Alternatively please email the above details to phill.piddell@bt.com and transfer the money directly to our bank account: SORT CODE **20-49-76** Account **90867381** (South of England Hedge Laying Soc)

Renew on online - www.sehls.co.uk

FOR YOUR DIARY

Date	Event
10 th Sept	Laughton and District Competition
17 th Sept	West Grinstead competition, Aglands Farm, Cowfold, W Sussex
23,24,25 th Sept	Bentley Woodfair
17 th Sept.	Beneden, Kent
1 st Oct	Hurstpierpoint Comp. Bowders Farm, Balcombe RH17 9QJ
8, 9 th Oct	Autumn Countryside show, Singleton
15 th Oct	Hedge Laying 1, Scotney Castle, Kent
12 th Nov	Hedge Laying 2, Byfleet
26 th Nov.	Coppicing, Leith Hill, Dorset
3 rd Dec	Tool Sharpening, Plumpton College, Sussex
10 th dec	Crowborough, Sussex
7 th Jan 2017	Hedge layers Improvers Day (Day 4), Forest Green
21 th Jan	President's verses Chairman's teams, Magham Down, Sussx
28 th Jan	Coppicing day , TBA
19 th Feb (Sunday)	Annual Competition, Magham Down, Sussex
18 th March	Fun Day, Fletching

Hurspierpoint Ploughing Match Hedge Laying Competition, there are still spaces available, please contact Gary Moore on 077 67 894 961 for more details.

Keeping You Informed.

Everyone gets regular newsletters which are packed full of useful information, please do let us know if you are happy to receive them by email (you get them about a week earlier than the post!), however things change.

It's really useful for the society to update you with event information during the year by email – it's fast and free. We will never sell your email, and will not junk-mail you with adverts. So if you do have an email please let me know, it's a great way to get the latest information.

If you really don't have email but want to be kept up-to-date please let me know your mobile phone number and I will send you details by text.

We also have a website www.sehls.co.uk which has a blog (a sort of on-line diary) which contains event reports, and pictures, along with useful information. You can access this by using the computers at the local library, and you don't need to sign up to anything.

Phill Piddell



Chainsaw Training

I have negotiated a significant discount for formal Chainsaw training (NPTC certified) for society members.

The basic "maintenance and crosscutting" course and certification will be around £250 per person. This will require us filling a whole course (4 people) and each person paying in advance. If you are interested please let me know and I will contact you over the coming months.

The training is 2 days where you learn to maintain your saw and perform some basic cuts. This is followed by a day of assessment. Subject to meeting the required standard you will be awarded the qualification. I have just completed the course and it was great value for money. Everyone on the course had already been using saws yet we all learnt a huge amount, especially around chain identification and sharpening.

I am currently working on a discounted felling course.

For the avoidance of doubt if you do not have a formal qualification (LANTRA or NPTC) you will not be allowed to use a chainsaw at ANY society events.

You are of course welcome to use hand-tools and call on the chainsaw steward for assistance.

Phill Piddell



WINNER Caption Competition
Derek Foulgar with
"I'll get him moving. Someone's
nicking his van!"



Trainers wanted

Are you willing to help the Society train the next generation of hedge layers? We are looking for volunteers who can come along to the training days and pass on your skills? If you can help with one event per season it would make a big difference. Please let Phill Piddell know which event(s) you can help with.



Save the SOEHS Money

We would like to encourage members to receive this newsletter by e mail, please let Phil Piddell know if you would prefer this: phill.piddell@bt.com



Progressing your Hedge Laying Skills on a day out in Sussex (or somewhere else in the Great British Countryside near you)

Ploughing Match Competitions, if you are new to laying hedges or you are looking to improve your hedge laying skills, you can get some good ideas by watching the more experienced layers in the Society battle it out at the forth coming Ploughing Match Competitions. These hedges tend to be on the large / wild side of easy, so it's a good place to watch the experts tackle the hedge. They all start at about 08 30 am, with cutters arriving up to an hour beforehand to "meet & greet" & swop plenty of happy banter before the draw for cants (section to be cut) takes place. Everyone will then jump into their cars and park up on their cant, get tools out, make the last few checks before things get serious for the next 4 or 5 hours. Unless your name is Bob Whitaker or Peter Tunks, who seem to have all the time in the world. It's an excellent opportunity to observe & think, what I would do with this stem, and see how someone else deals with the situation. One of the big things facing someone who is learning & making progress, / gaining experience is trying to decide what is the best way to deal with a situation, a lot of time can be spent (wasted) on this. One thing to remember here is "Action conquers Fear" so once a decision has been made, stick with it. Every hedge is different, you have to work with what you have got. As the saying goes it's the "Luck of the Draw". After the competition, all the cutters go to the marquee or local pub for a well earned meal & cups of tea / beer. The prizes will get announced either before the ploughing results (if you lucky) or afterwards. If you are competing and have not finished your section, its good manners to go back & finish it off, you then wish you had finished off before that big lunch. But you have to attend the prize giving even if you have not finished as you may have a regrowth prize to collect from your efforts last year s , its happened to me before now.

Ploughing match dates in Sussex with Hedge Laying Competitions are:

Laughton The 2016 LDAS Hedge Laying competition will be held at Primrose Farm Arlington, East Sussex on Saturday 10th September 2016 by kind permission of Peter & Jackie Appleton.

West Grinstead, Saturday 17th September 2016 Aglands Farm, Cowfold, By kind permission of South Lodge Estate, Hurspierpoint, Saturday 1st October 2016 at Bowders Farm. Balcombe, West Sussex. RH17 9QJ. By kind invitation of Mrs P Greenwood, Balcombe Estate, Haywards Heath, West Sussex

Phil Hart chairman and Training Officer

July 2016

Last month I wrote about the breeding season of birds like Blue tits that have one chance of reproducing each year because they feed their young on defoliating caterpillars that are only available in large numbers during May and early June. They therefore lay large clutches of eggs hoping that a large number of offspring will result.

Not everything goes to plan and this year has been difficult for them. With the advent of cameras attached to nest boxes people have had the opportunity to see the real truth about the outcome of nests and many have not been as they expected or hoped for. With rain and low temperatures at the end of May, many caterpillars died or were washed from the leaves of the trees on to the ground diminishing the food supply and several nests failed entirely. The result was that nest success this year has been reduced. In the boxes we study, normal numbers of eggs, ten to twelve, were laid but I ringed just one brood with ten young. Many had started with double figure numbers of eggs but reared only four, five or six young. Very few unhatched eggs were still in the nests so most had hatched and died at the chick stage. Only the dominant and most demanding nestlings get food when it is short supply which ensures that some do fledge and the species survives.



Often predators such as Wood Mice get in and eat the eggs. Great Spotted Woodpeckers, with powerful beaks can easily break through the wall of the box and devour the chicks. Even when the young are full grown, Jays or Magpies wait in ambush for the freshly fledged and unwary young. Despite all these natural hazards and woes, we should see plenty of Blue and Great tits in the gardens next winter as the adults can survive for five or six years.

Swallows this year have been erratic. They arrived from Africa over a protracted period thus at different stages in the nesting cycle. At one farm where both adults arrived in early April, they immediately repaired the nest, laid their eggs and had four young actually flying on 28th. May. Others at this time were incubating eggs or brooding small

nestlings and another pair had only just started to carry nesting material. This does not have the same effect as with Blue tits because Swallows, feed them on flying insects that are available all through. They always seem to produce at least one family in the season. Their difficulties come later with hazardous migrations, when to get the wintering areas and return they must cross the Sahara in both directions. An amazing statistic is that one individual lived for nearly twelve years so the miles it travelled are incredible for a creature weighing less than an ounce.

August 2016

One of the biggest disappointments of this summer for me has been the lack of Swallows in the area. Only a few years ago, on the college estate at least a dozen pairs would nest in the stables or low farm buildings. This year just one pair built on a new site in a stable in a paddock. Having laid four eggs and seen regularly at the nest, the female went missing and the nest failed. The buildings and surrounding habitat are no different. The nests from previous years are still in place but no Swallows returned to them.

In other local stables some have returned and have successfully fledged young but each colony, if that is not overstating the numbers, has dwindled from three to one in two places and from five to three at the other. I can see no difference from previous years but that is the situation. Swallows use low and often quite dark buildings in which to nest, replacing the caves they, in years gone by would have used.

A brighter and more encouraging picture is the number of House Martins using the college building as they have done for many years. Originally they would have been cliff dwellers, making their nests of mud under the overhang of the cliffs so under the eaves of buildings are an ideal substitute. At the first count we found fifty-two certainly occupied nests and four others to check later. It is interesting how many are on the newest part of the college around the new quadrangles, sheltered from the south-west prevailing wind. These numbers are a good average over recent years when between forty-eight and seventy-two were recorded. The highest number was last year.

What is the difference between these two closely allied species? Why is one doing well locally but not the other? I certainly do not know. Each feeds their young on flying insects. Each migrates to Africa crossing the Sahara, though we know British Swallows go right down into South Africa. I have had one I ringed in Streat recovered in Durban. The wintering areas of House Martins are less certain. Ringing will reveal the truth in good time. I know many local people are involved with Surveys of these species and all contributions are valuable.

Having had a year off with no Barn Owl chicks hatched at all in 2015, I am happy to report that there are young and in early July still eggs in some of the local boxes. We caught up an adult female at one of the sites that had been ringed four years ago in Falmer, ten kilometres away

It must be a good year for voles as many birds of prey depend on them as food. Kestrels are also breeding locally. I have ringed broods of four and two.

Sept 2016

I have a more cheerful update on the outcome of some of the local Swallows after last month's sad report. A brood of four fully feathered young birds flew out over the door of the stable in Streat as I went to check their progress and by their confidence they had no doubt been out before. Swallows are among the few birds that return to the safety of the nest after fledging.

In Plumpton Green a late nest, very close to the underside of a stable building roof, was not built until early July. A brood of four strong nestlings was being reared but suffered from the very hot weather. They were found on the floor having apparently bailed out to escape the heat. Some of the nest was damaged but the astute owner fixed up a suitable substitute nest and replaced the young. The parent birds soon returned to feed them. This happened again but with care and attention they eventually fledged successfully and since I ringed them at the correct stage of growth, can be identified wherever they go in the world and I think having nearly been lost twice, we deserve to hear their full life story!

In the donkey shed in the Hospice grounds, two broods have been raised this year. Four flew the nest in June and five were ringed in early August. What is unusual and I have never come across before is that three adult birds are apparently feeding this brood. Earlier in the year we did see two pairs around the shed but only one nest was made. The fourth bird departed or came to grief leaving what was most likely a spare female with a strong mothering instinct to fulfil. No wonder the chicks are growing well.

A species that does regularly get help feeding later broods is the Moorhen. It is well known that the young of the first brood, as teenagers, look after their younger brothers and sisters thus ensuring success in the species. In recent years it has been noted that Moorhens are not producing such a large number of eggs as in years gone by. The reason for this is not clear but information like this comes to light when the Nest Record Scheme is analysed and comparisons made. I can remember as a boy finding Moorhen's nests with twelve eggs and many others with eight or more. Six is the sort of number now expected.

As I have mentioned before, close study of any Nature and reporting results so that they can be useful for analysis later, adds to the knowledge of the subject even in many years to come.

Reg Lanaway

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Committee dates: 15th Sept, 17 Nov, 12th Jan 2017 & 24th Feb.

Items for next Newsletter to Ian by mid November please

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