

HADRIAN COOK'S REPORT

Dear Friends,

Following my busy summer of speaking engagements, blending into an autumn/winter season of engagement with volunteer parties, I am writing this in pouring rain that should find its way into groundwater to bring up the river level. This should mean the 10% or so of our meadows that can be regularly irrigated between December and March, can so be watered. I remain in touch with the Environment Agency about raising water levels, so that, who knows, our stated objectives increasing this to about 20% can be reached! To help us achieve better irrigation on Seven Acres, we have been awarded a grant of £2k from Salisbury District Council (South Wilts Area Grants Scheme) that will mostly pay for a new sluice near to the Town Path. I am hoping to be able to do winter demonstrations of 'drowning', once this is operational.

Reading the Wessex Chalk Stream Project newsletter for this Autumn it is pleasing to learn that the consortium it represents (Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, Natural England, the Environment Agency, Wiltshire Fishery Association and Wessex Water) are working at the low flow problem in the afflicted rivers and streams. This translates into low river level problems for us, in the Nadder at Harnham. Although the wet summer was not suitable for pump trials at times of low flow, Wessex Water is to publish its plans for tackling the low flow problem in 2009, following a protracted period of consultation, of which I have been a part (some may style me the Moaning Minnie of the watermeadows, but I don't care!). Once problems with the groundwater model are ironed out, and once pump-testing of groundwater can be resumed, one expects solutions will be forthcoming.

Our Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreement kicked in during August, and we anticipate this will secure us funding to maintain the meadows in good order over a 10 year period. This will include improvements in grazing regime, new hatches and restoration of historic boundaries. Our sheep flock is in a state of transition and many have observed a growing number of brown and white, horned 'woollies' on the meadows. These are a flock of Jacob Sheep belonging to Butch Joint, an attractive rare breed that caused interest - and some consternation. Their presence will unlock some extra HLS funding next year for grazing a rare breed. Seeing them at a distance, someone even asked me if we had cows among the sheep!

You will have heard much from this 'old drowner' about water, soil and grass...now, enthused by Tim and his encyclopaedic knowledge of landscape, informed by John Vickerman who has completed his systematic bird survey of the meadows, we contemplate the phased restoration of historic boundaries including berry-bearing bushes, new saplings, regular pollarding. It is a fundamental point in landscape conservation that restoring historic boundaries not only restores authenticity, but it also provides opportunities for ecological gain, typically of food sources for birds and corridors whereby creatures can nest, slither, hop or otherwise move across the site. Our urban location makes this even more significant for conservation at Harnham.

My next job is to congratulate and thank our volunteers. Friends volunteers have worked hard to keep the main carriages free from vegetation and keep Rose Cottage garden in order. The British Trust for Nature Conservation, Friends Provident team building parties and, of course, our long-standing links with Sparsholt College mean that we are getting serious infrastructural repairs completed. These will all enhance the watering efficiency, and hence irrigation opportunities during winter. We are now obliged to irrigate designated areas, three weeks each in four winter months, in order to qualify for Higher Level Stewardship payments from Natural England. It is gratifying to attend meetings where we begin to see the implementation of appropriate measure through our winter works programme. Furthermore, meadow management for the future is moving decisively from notions of 'you know that sounds like a good idea' to more concrete questions such as 'now, just how can we get this into our programme'? Volunteers make so much of this possible on the ground. In our outreach, it is pleasing to have assistance from Jan Fitzjohn and Lesley Wright with school visits. Jan also continues her work on archiving information for the Trust and furthermore is planning better use of internal space within Rose Cottage.

We are working closely with the Museum, as with other local organisations. Unfortunately, funding did not permit us to develop the 'Big Draw' idea much further, but there will be opportunities in future.

On the publicity side, we have achieved local coverage for the Open day 14 September, and devotees of *Countryfile* may have seen me briefly on the telly during October. Can I cope with the fame?

Hadrian Cook