From the Chairman

Peter Wakeham

Welcome to our Autumn Newsletter. Another busy summer for the Trust has now passed and this one in particular will be remembered for the impact that climate change is having upon our weather, nationally and locally. Numerous long-standing records for high temperatures and low rainfall have been broken over a period of 3 months or so, unrelieved by any intervening spells of 'normal' weather.

The impact of these weather extremes on our countryside has been significant, in some cases obvious, in others not so. Chalk downland plants are among the most drought-resistant in Britain, having evolved on thin, lime-rich soils that dry out very quickly in summer. However, this year's weather has stress-tested them beyond anything previously experienced but, pleasingly, none appear to have permanently succumbed. Chalk loving plants have evolved a number of adaptations to enhance their drought resistance. Many are physical such as narrow, hairy or waxy leaves and deep and extensive root systems, while others have low and compact growth forms. This year's extreme conditions have prompted additional survival responses. Many plants flowered early, were of smaller stature or produced less nectar than usual. Exceptionally, a few species appeared unaffected and flourished throughout, notably Wild Carrot and Ragwort.

Extensive areas of parched grassland were a very obvious visual indicator of the stress that our downlands were under, but with one notable exception. Tor Grass is native but in recent years has spread to the exclusion of more delicate grasses and chalk plants. This year it revealed its presence in the form of patches of bright green, thriving by virtue of a dense network of thick underground rhizomes, inward rolling leaves and an ability to close its stomata in time of drought. This year's advantage may prove to be at the expense of other more desirable downland species.

The fortunes of our flora have a direct impact on those of invertebrates that are in some way dependent upon it. Heatwaves and dry weather forced many wildflowers to bloom ahead of schedule this year and to produce less nectar and foliage. This creates a double squeeze on insect populations: a timing disconnect and an energy shortage. The warm, sunny weather of 2026 resulted in it being an excellent year for butterflies on the wing, with numbers enhanced by a large influx of continental migrants such as Clouded Yellows and Painted Ladies. However, caterpillars need fresh green foliage on which to feed and during the prolonged drought many of their food plants produced much less foliage. In some cases this was ahead of the hatching of butterfly eggs and for some species next year's generation of butterflies may be noticeably reduced.

Other creatures have been significantly affected this summer. Blackbirds, hedgehogs and moles have struggled to break through the hardened dry ground to feed on earthworms and other invertebrates. Bumblebees have evolved to stay warm in cold weather and have been particularly affected as a result of overheating and this has caused unusually high mortality rates. Many of our ponds that normally hold water throughout the year dried up completely and those inhabitants that rely upon year-round water, such as snails, leeches, fish, some species of dragonfly larvae and numerous small invertebrates will not have survived.

A single hot dry summer is rarely disastrous and, if not regularly repeated, nature will quickly recover. However, this is becoming increasingly less likely given that Europe is warming at twice the global average. Climate change is nothing new, what is exceptional now is the speed at which it is happening, giving many plants and animals little opportunity to adapt, and plants in particular insufficient time to colonise areas better suited to their environmental requirements.

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Changing our Constitution

Peter Wakeham

The Downlands Trust was founded in 2008 and our constitution is set out in two documents, the Memorandum of Association and the Articles of Association. We are registered as a charitable trust with the Charity Commission and as a charitable company with Companies House. Charitable company status protects both Trustees and Members from any significant personal liability for contracts, debts, or legal claims. We are therefore governed by a mixture of charity law and company law and administratively there is a significant amount of duplication in dealing with these two regulatory bodies. Companies House has recently introduced a number of measures aimed at stopping economic crime and preventing fraud and these have increased our workload as a charitable company.

In 2013 a constitutional framework more suited to the needs of charities became available, that of the Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO), specifically designed for the voluntary sector. The Trust has the option to convert to a CIO and this would offer several distinct advantages, primarily centred around simplifying compliance, reducing costs, and streamlining governance. A CIO is regulated only by the Charity Commission and provides the same legal protection that we currently enjoy as a charitable company under Companies House.

The Trustees have considered the merits of converting the Trust to a CIO and have concluded that this course of action offers a number of advantages and presents no identifiable disadvantages. They are therefore recommending conversion to our Members and a new CIO constitution has been drafted that closely follows the model constitution provided by the Charity Commission. The CIO constitution incorporates all relevant Objects, protections and procedures provided by the Memorandum of Association and the Articles of Association, and there will be no difference to the way in which the Trust operates.

The Trustees have formally approved the conversion of the Trust to a CIO and the proposal will now be put to our Members at the AGM for their agreement. Following Members' approval, we will formally request the Charity Commission to commence the conversion process. Our status as a charitable company with Companies House will be dissolved as will our position as a charitable trust with the Charity Commission. In their place we will become a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) regulated and controlled solely by the Charity Commission.

Junior Corner

Can you find the **ten** words related to Autumn?

Answers at the bottom of page 4!

R S S N R N U D U S
B C S Q U I R R E L
L O I E S D X L H W
E N N T T B K P A U
A K A F L W B U R M
V E C M I N U M V A
E R O A N R U P E P
S K R R G A E K S L
O C N T A R H I T E
A U T U M N G N I O

Autumn Fun Facts

The **Autumn Equinox** marks the start of Autumn. This is when day and night are almost equal in length.

The **Harvest Moon is the full moon closest to the Autumnal Equinox**, historically helping farmers work longer hours.

People near the equator don't experience autumn, as they have equal length of day and night and temperatures stay consistently warm.

Leaves change colour because chlorophyll which colours the leaf green breaks down, revealing carotenoids (yellow/orange) and anthocyanins (red).

Autumn is peak migration season for many birds, including the Arctic tern, which travels about 11,000 miles each way.

Squirrels don't hibernate in autumn; they build nests and dig up stored food throughout winter. They can store up to 3000 nuts each at a time, and their brains get a little bigger to help them remember where they hid them!

Grant Report

Pam Mascall

Since the last newsletter and the end of August, the Trust has awarded 20 grants for a total of £31,200. These include:

A Water Bowser for the Grazing Team

A second 2,000 litre agricultural water bowser with trough has been funded for use by the grazing team. This enables them to transport clean drinking water to livestock in more areas which are difficult to access and where no mains water supply is available. The bowser has proved to be particularly valuable over this long hot summer when providing the animals with water has been a priority.

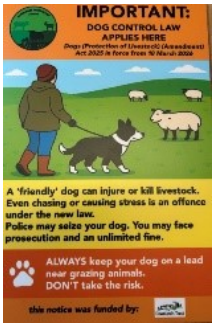
Fence posts and fire platforms for Banstead Common Conservators (BCC)

Over recent years, BCC have worked with the Downlands Partnership Grazing Team to extend their conservation grazing programme. As a result, the Trust gave a grant to cover the cost of 200 more fencing posts to create another enclosure. The grant also covered the purchase of thick galvanised recycled sheets of corrugated steel to support fires during BCC volunteer work parties on the Commons. Raising fires off the ground by using a platform helps to protect the soil chemistry of sensitive sites.

***Note** - whilst the Trust does not generally support fires to burn brash on site, there are circumstances where fires are required such as on these large areas of BCC land.*

Sheep Grazing Ahead Signs

The Grazing Team also received a grant for 50 permanent information signs warning dog walkers that the recent Dogs (Protection of Livestock) legislation applies on sites where sheep are grazing. The signage clearly explains the legal requirement to keep dogs under control to the extent that the safest thing to do is to keep them on leads near grazing animals.



Gates at Dene Farm Chipstead & a catching pen at Nork Park

This grant to the Downlands Partnership was to repair the fence, catching pen and kissing gates at Dene Farm, which is adjacent to the Chipstead Downs SSSI. This work enabled cattle grazing to continue in the field, thus managing the chalk grassland. The grant also covered new clipex fence posts at Nork Park in Banstead to replace broken wooden posts so that cattle can continue grazing on this site.

Marketing materials for Friends of Farthing Downs (FOFD&HV)

FOFD&HV received a grant for a banner, table cover, and branded hats for use with their gazebo and Pop-Up stalls at events where they aim to:

- **Promote** awareness and interest and the value of Farthing Downs and Happy Valley, to help people treasure and appreciate their nature reserve.
- **Protect** the integrity of the Downs by working with the Rangers and Warden to engender a wider sense of ownership, and use of the reserve with knowledge, care and respect.
- **Enhance** the heritage and sustainable leisure value of Farthing Downs and Happy Valley through fundraising.

Other grants that have been awarded recently include:

Defibrillators for the Partnership and Grazing Team; faecal egg equipment and microscope for use at Old Lodge Farm which will reduce the use of wormers and other medication for the livestock and also benefit dung-dwelling invertebrates and support wider ecological health across chalk grassland sites; information boards for Revesby Wood and Warren Park in Sutton; a first aid course for a volunteer with the Woodchips; and hedge laying materials and feed bins for Old Lodge Farm.

Round up of Summer Events

Elspeth Pringle

The Downlands Trust along with the Downlands Partnership Grazing Team have enjoyed a busy and successful show season this year. Between the beginning of July to the end of August we have attended Old Coulsdon Fair, Poulter Park Summer Fete, Tice's Meadow Welcome Day, the Edenbridge and Oxted Show, Carshalton Eco Fair and the Sheep Parade at Denbies Vineyard.

Each event has given us a valuable opportunity to spread the word about the work of the Trust and the projects it supports, including many projects undertaken by the Downlands Partnership. Growing outreach and support is vital to securing the Trust's future and ensuring that its important conservation work continues for generations to come.

The events have also allowed us to sell our wonderful merchandise and the amazing plants, many of which are chalk loving, that have been grown and nurtured by the volunteers at Old Lodge Farm. The funds raised from these sales help fund the work of the Trust.

Dibby and Lenny, the Downlands Partnership show sheep, have also had the time of their lives meeting their adoring public at these events, gaining an ever-growing number of fans, adults and children alike! They have led to many conversations about managing chalk grassland through conservation grazing, and the issues that the lack of rainfall this summer has caused. It's amazing to hear many of the younger generation speak knowledgably about the issues of climate change and the impact it has locally and globally.

Dates for Your Diary

The information below was correct at the time it went to press but please check on each organisation's website beforehand to make sure that the day and time have not changed.

- **6 June 2027** Cowpie Country Show. Blue Anchor Farm, Blindley Heath. From 10:00am.
- **13 June 2027** Bug Hunt, Teddy Bears Picnic. Nonsuch Park, Cheam 12-4pm
- **29/30 August 2027** Edenbridge & Oxted Agricultural Show. Ardenrun Showground, Lingfield. From 8:00am.
- **30 August 2027** Carshalton EcoFair. Carshalton Park, Carshalton. From 10:30am.
- **September 2027** Surrey Hills Wood Fair (*exact date to be confirmed*)

Wordsearch answers: Autumn, Maple, Leaves, Pumpkin, Bonfire, Harvest, Squirrel, Acorn, Conker, Rustling

Time to Hang up my Boots!

Helen Cocker

After 36 years working within the Surrey Countryside Partnerships team I have hung up my boots! Back in the mid-1980s it never occurred to me that I would end up on the fringes of London. I had always lived in Devon, including studying geography at Plymouth Polytechnic, which convinced me that I wanted to work in nature conservation (my parents enthusiasm for walking and birds in particular may have played a part too!). After my degree I first volunteered full time for BTCV Devon supporting local volunteer groups and leading working holidays, until I secured my first paid role working for Torbay Borough Council on a joint project at Berry Head over the summer with the RSPB, 'Showing People Birds' to celebrate the RSPB's centenary, in this case it was the 'Brixham Penguins'.

In the meantime I had met my future husband, Stewart, who helped run South Devon Conservation Volunteers and worked for the South Devon Small Woodlands Project. In the autumn of 1989 he landed a job as Countryside Ranger at Epsom and Ewell Borough Council. As my job was coming to an end I decided to move up here with him and by chance got an interview for Ashtead Common Project Officer with the Lower Mole Countryside Management Project, however I didn't get that role (Dave Page did, who has also recently retired after over 30 years at Elmbridge Borough Council). But it did introduce me to the Moles so I started volunteering and after a couple of months was offered a temporary role (those were the days!).

Then in May 1990 I was offered a permanent role as Assistant Project Officer at the Moles. A role I loved primarily due to the amazing volunteers and their unwavering commitment whatever the weather, plus the unexpected (to me coming from Devon) countryside and range of habitats on the edge of London, with most of my days spent working out on site.

I continued with the Moles, including part time, whilst our two daughters were pre-teen, until 2010 when the Lower Mole Project Manager left and I firstly acted up into, then secured the role. Then, in 2014, the whole Countryside Management team, including Downlands and Heathlands, went through a major restructure. An unpleasant experience which saw some team members lose their jobs or be downgraded. At the end of this process I became Operations Manager for the Surrey Countryside Partnerships, managing the Moles, Downlands and Heathlands, a daunting prospect!

This introduced me to a whole new area of work, conservation grazing and expanded my knowledge of chalk downland management. There had always been friendly banter between Moles and Downlands, that the Moles had rivers but the Downlands had chalk grassland, but my love of chalk plants, butterflies (and even sheep, goats and cattle!) started from that point. There isn't really any chalk grassland in Devon, the closest is Berry Head which is made of limestone, so I had briefly experienced very small plants in short grass.

It also introduced me to the joys of making budgets balance, keeping multiple local authority officers and members from the partners informed and happy with our work, and being ultimately responsible for the health and safety of the staff and volunteers, but the occasional chance to see stunning sites and cute lambs helped make up for this, plus the knowledge that management of important rare habitats on the fringes of London has improved vastly.

However again, it was the people that made the job, the dedicated staff and volunteers, making the Surrey Countryside Partnerships come up as a major regional group for conservation volunteering in south east England on a google search. A fantastic achievement which we should all be proud of.

I know I said it was time to hang up my boots, but actually I have been primarily office bound since 2014 so I'm looking forward to volunteering in my retirement, so may well appear on future task days, although we are moving away so I won't be bothering you too much!

My Volunteering Journey

Jamie Bullard

I have been interested in the natural world all my life and have worked within the horticultural industry as a grower for 31 years. Fourteen years ago, I was looking for a way to put the skills and knowledge I had gained through my career to good use in my local countryside. That's when I came across the Downlands Grazing Project — and the rest, as they say, is history!

Over the years, I have learnt a great deal and greatly increased my knowledge of Downland plants and my understanding of Downland habitats. It is amazing to see how these plant species are able to compete and tolerate some incredibly tough and extreme conditions, and how dependent they are on careful management — most importantly, grazing — to truly flourish. One of the great achievements of man has been the creation of these wonderful habitats, often without fully realising what was being created at the time.

I have found it fascinating to see how livestock grazing has shaped and moulded the landscape, and just how selective sheep can be. Their behaviour can vary depending on the sites they have previously grazed, and this can be used as an important tool to help manage the different sites across the area. Before I became involved with the project, I simply thought sheep ate grass and flowers. It turns out it is far more technical than that!

The project is a perfect fit for me. As I am still working, it can be difficult to find volunteering opportunities, as many are organised during the working week. Downlands gives me the opportunity to volunteer at weekends and during my holidays. I am also fortunate enough to be able to take the occasional day off to help at the corporate volunteer days held at the farm.

I have been lucky enough to see the farm develop over the past 14 years, and there have been many changes. It is now almost unrecognisable compared with the place I arrived at on my first day. I have been able to play a small part in that development, bringing some of the knowledge from my horticultural career to help create the plant nursery and polytunnel. This is something I was particularly proud to be involved in. Building the polytunnel alongside the other volunteers was great fun, and it has provided a vital protected environment for overwintering plants and propagation. It is also a very nice place to work on a cold, wet and windy day!

One of the best projects so far has to be the new pond. It has been a real learning curve and great fun to work on alongside Peter, the Trust's Chairman, the farm volunteers and Fidelity International, who certainly did a lot of the digging!

Through the project, I also learnt about the Downlands Trust and the work they do to fund many projects across the area for a wide range of groups. I subsequently started helping at shows to raise awareness of the Trust and its work, which has been incredibly rewarding. It is great to meet local families and explain the importance of the Downs and the work that goes into protecting them. Many people have walked these areas for years without necessarily knowing what is beneath their feet — which isn't surprising sometimes, given that some of the plants are so small!

The farm volunteers are a great bunch of people, and I have enjoyed every minute of my time there. I look forward to another 14 years of great fun, learning and getting my hands dirty.

Finally, I would like to thank Sean and Damien for the incredible work they do in organising the grazing, managing the animals in all weathers, and somehow still finding the time to make sure the biscuit tin is full for the volunteers when we arrive!

Hazel (Corylus avellana)

Peter Wakeham

Hazel is found throughout Surrey on most soil types but it does particularly well on the calcareous soils in the Trust's area. It is found in hedgerows and in ancient woodlands such as Banstead Woods where it can form a key part of the understorey. It contributes to the structural and ecological diversity of woodlands in the following ways:

- Hazel nuts provide food for Jays, woodpeckers, voles and squirrels and are especially important in the autumn for Hazel Dormice preparing for hibernation.
- Catkins are among the first flowers of the year and the pollen provides a crucial, high-protein source of food for early emerging insects.
- Fallen Hazel leaves break down relatively quickly compared with tough leaves such as Beech or Oak, forming a loose friable litter layer that earthworms and fungi can easily incorporate into the soil.
- The leaves provide food for many kinds of insect, including aphids and the caterpillars of various moths, which in turn provide food for several species of bird.
- When coppiced, periodic flushes of light result, encouraging woodland ground flora such as Primrose, Bluebell, Dog's Mercury and Wood Anemone to flourish.

Hazel was traditionally coppiced because it responds exceptionally well to being cut back almost to ground level, producing many straight, flexible stems from the base or stool. Coppicing keeps the plant healthy, productive, and valuable for both people and wildlife and it also significantly extends the life of the stools which can live for many hundreds of years, whereas Hazel that is not coppiced has an average lifespan of under 100 years. Coppicing was typically carried out every 7 to 10 years depending upon the use to which the stems were to be put.

Hazel coppicing. Photographs: Martin DeFreitas

Traditional coppicing declined in the late 19th and 20th centuries because products such as hurdles, thatching spars, pea sticks, charcoal, etc. were no longer economically viable. As a result, most coppice woodlands fell out of rotation, leading to over-shading and loss of biodiversity. Today, coppicing is primarily carried out for conservation purposes in order to restore habitat structure and to benefit species such as Hazel Dormice and the woodland flora in general.

Our woodlands still hold plenty of Hazel but the next generation can be scarce in areas with high deer populations, browsing by deer being one of the main factors in the failure of hazel to regenerate. In the absence of natural predators, the deer population in the UK has increased from about 450,000 in the mid-1970s to the current estimate of around 2 million. Deer readily browse the new shoots of freshly coppiced Hazel, leading to weakening of the stool and the eventual dieback of parts of it. Deer fencing is an effective, albeit expensive, method of protecting Hazel stools from browsing and an alternative is to pile brash over and around stools.

Grey Squirrels also contribute to the problem. Their numbers continue to increase steadily and they have a digestive system that allows them to eat unripe hazelnuts while they are still on the tree. In contrast, Red Squirrels are unable to digest unripe hazelnuts due to their lower tolerance of tannins which are at their highest in unripe nuts. The result is that many fewer ripe hazelnuts fall to the ground and in some woodlands this method of regeneration is now all but absent. Although mature hazel remains reasonably abundant, the current population will age and decline without an adequate younger generation to replace it, underscoring the need for targeted management to restore natural recruitment in some areas.

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