



Downlands Trust Newsletter

SPRING 2026

From the Chairman

Peter Wakeham

Welcome to our Spring Newsletter. At the October AGM I was able to report another year of solid achievements and thank the members who attended and contributed to an enjoyable evening. It was confirmed that Roger Findlay has decided to retire as treasurer and we are delighted that he has accepted the role of Honorary President. Roger founded the Trust in 2008 and has been our treasurer since that time, a remarkable achievement for which we are immensely grateful. Many thanks also to Geof Haseler who has taken over as treasurer and Elspeth Pringle who is now our newsletter editor.

Also at the AGM, we were able to inform members that Fidelity International has agreed to sponsor the Trust for another two years, making a remarkable total of 9 years of sponsorship since January 2019. For this news we would like to thank the Downlands Partnership who organise numerous events and activities for Fidelity staff, at Old Lodge Farm and at various chalk grassland sites, which are clearly very much appreciated.

Several different natural habitats are found within the [Trust's area](#), chalk grassland being the most prominent and the one that continues to receive the majority of our funding for conservation and improvement. There are other habitats, albeit more restricted in extent, for which the Trust is also able to provide funding for their management. These include ancient woodland, of which there are several examples in the area including Selsdon Wood and Banstead Woods, most being situated on the clay cap that overlays parts of the chalk. In a few places, such as at Addington Hills and Banstead Heath, the surface geology consists of sands and gravels and this gives rise to heathland, characterised by its typical flora and fauna. Again, we have provided funding to support conservation activities at these sites.

The Trustees



(from left to right) Elspeth Pringle (Newsletter), Pam Mascall (Grants), Peter Wakeham (Chairman), Geof Haseler (Treasurer), Sarah Milan (Membership), Roger Findlay (Hon. President), Noreen Siba (Marketing)

Chalk underlies most of this area and this means that open water is scarce, but there are a number of semi-natural ponds that exist by virtue of the impermeable clay cap upon which they are situated. Ponds are exceptionally important for biodiversity, and amphibians, aquatic insects and birds all use them for feeding, breeding and drinking. However, they are also prone to silting and invasion by coarse vegetation. This is a process of natural succession, and periodic maintenance is required in order to maintain their ecological value, a task supported by the Trust. In the autumn we funded the de-silting and removal of invasive reeds and rushes from Elmore Pond in Chipstead and funding has been approved for clearing invasive bulrushes from the pond in the Banstead Wildlife Field.

We now look forward to an active summer during which we will be sharing a stand with the Downlands Partnership at several events, providing the opportunity to promote the Trust and to meet some of our members.

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.

- **1st Sunday (monthly)** Guided Tree and History Trail. Oaks Park, Banstead. 2.00pm.
- **Sunday 10 May** Cannons Farm Guided Bird Walk. Cannons Farm, Banstead. 9.30am.
- **Sunday 17 May** Banstead Arts Festival. Flowers and Butterflies on Park Downs, a 2 hour walk led by Jill Hall and Peter Wakeham. Meet 10.30am at the Holly Lane car park.
- **Sunday 7 June** Teddy Bear Picnic. Nonsuch Park, Cheam. 12.00pm – 4.00pm (in aid of Padel for Poverty, NCT, and Downlands Trust).
- **Saturday 13 June** Summer Flowers and Skylarks. Guided walk on Farthing Downs led by the Trust. Meet 10.00am at the Ditches Lane car park. Approximately 2 hours.
- **Saturday 27 June** Summer Flowers and Skylarks. Guided walk on Riddlesdown led by the Trust. Meet 10.00am at the public car park. Approximately 2 hours.
- **Saturday 4 July** *** Old Coulsdon Rotary Fair. Grange Park, Old Coulsdon.
- **Sunday 30 & Monday 31 August** *** Edenbridge and Oxted Agricultural Show. Ardenrun Showground, Lingfield.
- **Monday 31 August** *** Carshalton Eco Fair. Carshalton Park, Carshalton. From 10.30am.
- **Tuesday 13 October** Downlands Trust AGM. The Banstead Centre, The Horseshoe, Banstead SM7 2BQ at 7.00pm, doors open 6.45pm.

For **Oaks Park** activities [click here](#) to check meeting times and location.

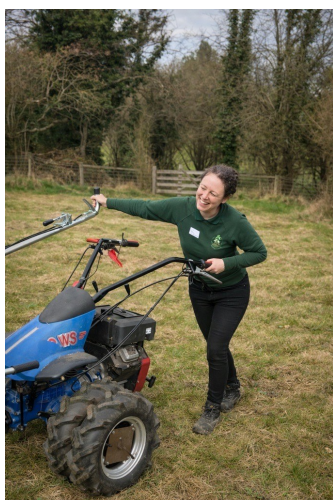
*** **Downlands Trust will have a stall at these events.**

Spotlight on Downlands Partnership Personnel

Joanne Porter

When I started my job with the Downlands Partnership (DP) in July 2023 it was a real full circle moment for me as it was exactly 23 years since I had started my first paid job in the countryside with the Downlands Project (as the partnership was previously called). At the time in 2000 my role as Project Assistant was my dream job, and in 2023 the role of Senior Partnership Officer was my dream job.

Back in 2000 in my early twenties working with the Downlands Project felt like going out to play with my friends every day because I enjoyed it so much. I learned a huge amount – leading volunteer tasks, helping look after the sheep and goats used for conservation grazing, carrying out chalk grassland restoration work as well as other habitat management work such as woodland and heathland management, and working on the promoted routes.



I left after a couple of years to work for the City of London City Commons and over the subsequent years worked for the London Borough of Sutton and Surrey County Council. At Surrey County Council I worked first in the Biodiversity team and then the Countryside Access Team. In addition to all these organisations, working with the Downlands Project in one way or the other, my husband Hendryk spent a couple of years working for the Project which meant I was able to stay in touch with what was going on.



After 11 years working in Surrey's Countryside Access team and with my daughter starting secondary school, I felt the time was right for me to get back into doing what I really loved full time, and I was lucky that this role opened up and to actually get it!

Returning to the Downlands Partnership was quite surreal – so much hadn't changed, but at the same time a lot had. Going to the depot in Caterham was like stepping back in time with how much it hadn't changed in 23 years! A lot of the sites we help manage had changed a lot in the subsequent years – areas that I remember being covered in scrub were really good or recovering chalk grassland, showing the fantastic work that the staff, volunteers and animals at the DP have done over the years.

Spotlight on Downlands Partnership Personnel (cont.)

Joanne Porter

My role this time around involves being responsible for organising the volunteer task programme, making sure all our work including that on the Sanderstead to Whyteleafe Countryside Area is done in a safe way. I also liaise with partners including our funding partners, the Downlands Trust and our colleagues in the Downlands Grazing team. I still get to go out with the volunteers on tasks and on those days I realise how lucky I am to work in such beautiful locations with great volunteers and to feel like I'm able to really make a difference in the world by helping to improve our chalk grasslands.

Volunteering with the Downlands Partnership Task Team

Jerome Wright

Volunteering with the Downlands Partnership has brought me joy, fun, and a wealth of knowledge. I've always loved walking the paths of the Surrey Hills, but volunteering has allowed me to explore and learn about the local area and how the landscape is managed

Together with my colleagues, we clear scrub using brush cutters, build and repair fences, gates, and styles, not to mention the many steps we've rebuilt. However, my favourite project was constructing a boardwalk in Staffhurst Woods. In the summer, we return to the sites we've been working on to monitor the wildflowers, which I've been told are the fruits of our labour. I highly recommend visiting the bottom of Caterham View Point and Park Ham by Spring Bottom Lane, where you'll find a stunning array of flowers and butterflies.

In addition to helping the ecology, I've made friends while enjoying picnic lunches deep in the woods or atop the North Downs, gazing out over Surrey towards the South Coast, hoping to catch a glimpse of a red kite or kestrel if fortune smiles upon us.

After a career spent behind a computer, I find that volunteering with the Downlands Partnership offers new opportunities and makes life much more interesting. I suggest you come along for lunch on one of our task days, grab a cup of tea and a biscuit, and enjoy the banter!

If you would like to get involved with the Downlands Partnership Task Team, you can find further details [here](#).



Pasture Lambing at Old Lodge Farm

Sean Grufferty

Pasture Lambing at Old Lodge Farm

For the past decade, the grazing team has carried out pasture lambing at Old Lodge Farm, meaning our ewes give birth outdoors rather than in a barn. Like most systems in farming and conservation, there are pros and cons, and the right approach depends on the needs of the long-term vision for both the flock and the habitats they are tasked to create and maintain.

For us, lambing our own sheep is about more than producing lambs. It is about breeding hardy, long lived working animals capable of managing chalk grassland across the North Downs. Our ewes are carefully selected over time for calm temperaments and strong mothering ability. We also place importance on disease and parasite resistance, and the ability to hold condition on poorer grazing. Many of our lineages now stretch back eight generations. What you see quietly grazing on the Downs belies their true value as the result of years of thoughtful selection.



Welfare in a Natural Setting

Pasture lambing supports strong health outcomes because it allows ewes to behave naturally throughout late pregnancy and birth. Outdoors, they continue to move across the site and graze according to their needs. That steady movement helps maintain strength through late pregnancy and keeps them settled as lambing approaches.

When the time comes, a ewe can separate herself from the flock and choose a quiet spot. This reduces the chance of mis-mothering, which can be an extremely stressful experience for all involved. With space around her, she is able to reposition herself during labour more easily, which can help reduce complications.

Pasture Lambing at Old Lodge Farm (cont.)

Sean Grufferty

Once the lamb is born, she is undisturbed, allowing instinct to take over as she begins cleaning and bonding. It can seem counter-intuitive but with years of experience we know that often the biggest problem is people's instincts to try and take over the care for the animals whereas the best thing to do is just observe from the fence line!

We have extremely low rates of ewes that fail to mother well, which is a credit to our hard-working girls.

Hardier Lambs, Healthier Land

One major factor in the lamb's welfare is that, once born, they are out in a clean and open environment rather than a closed shed. Much like a plant grown outside rather than under glass, they develop resilience from the outset. Incidents of new-born diseases such as joint ill and watery mouth have appeared only as single isolated cases across many years.

As lambs grow and begin grazing, parasite levels are carefully monitored. We now treat only when required rather than as routine practice. This reduction in chemical use benefits the wider biodiversity around the farm. Dung invertebrates in particular respond positively, and that knock on effect travels up the food chain. The breeding population of Hornet Robber Fly discovered at Old Lodge Farm last year is one small but powerful indicator of a healthy system.



Commitment Behind the Scenes

There are, of course, challenges to pasture lambing. Weaker lambs can be vulnerable if the weather turns and occasionally a ewe may become cast (stuck on its back). The system requires vigilance and when caring for animals there's no such thing as clocking off.

During lambing, the grazing team lives on site. Most of the time intervention is minimal, but preparation is essential. Thanks to the Downlands Trust, we have the equipment needed to step in when required - feeding stations for warm milk for a struggling lamb, a milking machine to draw colostrum from a ewe that needs assistance, mothering crates that allow bonding time, heat lamps, sterile mats,

hurdles for temporary indoor monitoring, and red light head torches for late night checks.

We are also grateful to Mid Down Vets, who keep us up to date with research and guide us with best practice through each lambing period.

Sheep as Conservation Partners

Ultimately, the purpose of pasture lambing here is to produce resilient conservation grazers that can work chalk grassland landscapes for many years. These sheep shape the sward, maintain open conditions and support the rich plant and invertebrate communities that depend on well managed downland across Surrey and South London.

Pasture lambing is one part of that bigger ecological picture, building a flock that supports biodiversity not just this season, but long into the future.



Junior Corner

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

Can you find the 12 words related to Spring hidden in the wordsearch?

Answers at the bottom of page 7

Did You Know?

Over 50 bird species migrate back to the UK from Africa and Southern Europe in Spring

During Spring, queen bees can lay 2,000+ eggs per day

Lots of baby animals are born during Spring as food is easier to find

Between the last newsletter and the end of February the Downlands Trust has awarded 28 grants for a total of almost £46,000. These include:

Chainsaw Training and PPE for Woodchip Volunteer

The major task over the winter months for the Woodchips who volunteer in Banstead Woods is the coppicing of Hazel Trees. This not only prolongs the life of these trees but also produces timber and useful stakes which are used to create dead hedges and thus enhance the bio-diversity of the area. For safety reasons the hazel stems are cut at waist level. Then, the thick stems at the base of the trees need to be sawn off by the volunteers. This can be very hard work and time consuming. Now, coppicing is much easier following a grant from the Trust to allow volunteer Bill to attend a chainsaw course and provide him with the necessary protective clothing to chainsaw around the stumps.



Robomower for the Grazing Team

The Countryside Partnerships team have recently taken possession of a robomower which has been funded jointly by the Trust (40%) and Farming in the Protected Landscapes (60%). This remotely controlled mower will allow slopes, banks and other awkward areas to be easily mowed. The sites managed include some of the most ecologically significant chalk grasslands in South London and Surrey, supporting rare and threatened species such as Man Orchids and the Silver Spotted Skipper Butterfly. Tasks that normally take several days with brush cutters can now be completed in hours. The photo shows Senior Grazing Officer Sean and volunteer Jamie taking possession of the mower.

Tree poppers for the Downlands Partnership

Whilst tree poppers have been used in the past to remove small scrub from chalk grassland, they have often been found cumbersome to use. Recently the small tree poppers have been redesigned and are now much more effective and easier to use. So, thanks to the Trust, the Downlands Partnership now have five new tree poppers which the volunteers are using to clear small scrub from rich chalk grassland which should enable threatened species of chalk loving plants to survive.



Hand Tools for the Banstead Commons Conservators

Following the successful launch of the Banstead Commons Conservators practical volunteering in 2022 a grant has been given to fund the cost of additional hand tools and associated PPE. These will not only help to increase volunteer support but will also enable the group to accommodate more corporate, group and youth volunteers and so improve the bio-diversity on the Commons.

New Sign for Old Lodge Farm

When approaching Old Lodge Farm visitors will now be greeted by a new sign funded by the Trust. The new sign is modern, eye-catching and features the Downlands Grazing Partnership's updated branding, providing a clear, welcoming and professional entrance point for visitors.



Other grants that have been awarded recently include:

Scrub clearance and glade management by the Downlands Partnership at Hawkfirst, Addington Hills and Happy Valley, fencing around grazing paddocks, a new Beulah ram, tools for use at the Sanderstead to Whyteleafe Countryside Area, clearance of Elmore Pond in Chipstead, heat lamps for lambing, more sheep and cattle collars plus a new trailer to replace the old unsafe trailer that had previously been used by the grazing team to transport livestock.

A Day in King's Wood with TCV's 'Action for Croydon's Environment' Volunteers

It's 9:50am on a gloriously sunny Wednesday. I've just arrived in King's Wood and am waiting for the volunteers. I'm expecting a good turnout today as it's the first fine task day we've had this year. Not that wet, windy, miserable weather tends to put people off. There's always a solid group of hardy volunteers who'll cheerfully cope with whatever the skies decide to throw at us. It's pretty rare for us to cancel a task day because of the weather. In fact, it usually has to be something serious such as one of those named storms, with the Met Office issuing red warnings and telling everyone to stay indoors, before we even consider it.

That said, and I'll admit this quietly, on the very worst weather days, there's a small part of me hoping for a general no-show so I can retreat to the office and catch up on admin. It never happens, of course. And more often than not, once we get started I'm glad of it; the conditions are rarely as brutal as I'd imagined.

I never quite know how many volunteers to expect, as we don't use a booking system. People value the flexibility of simply turning up when it suits them, whether that's when the weather's right, when they have a spare few hours, or even later in the morning to avoid peak travel costs.

We're here in King's Wood today to coppice Hazel, something we come back to every winter for about eight days or so between October and March. It's a bit of a seasonal rhythm now, and one everyone looks forward to.

We spend a similar amount of time coppicing Hazel over in Happy Valley, and also in South Norwood Country Park, where we coppice Willow in one of the lakeside coupes. It's proper winter work; hands-on, a bit muddy, and usually with a small fire going nearby to burn off the twiggy bits and anything else we can't use. That bit of warmth is always welcome on the colder days.



Final visit to the 2025-26 coupe, King's Wood

At lunchtime we wander over to the pond. It's small, only about three metres across and often looks more like a murky puddle, thanks to the dogs that love to splash about in it. We've talked about surrounding it with a dead hedge to give the wildlife a bit more seclusion. The concern, though, is that it might simply be pulled apart and thrown in the water. We spend plenty of time clearing dumped logs out of ponds across the borough as it is. A longer-term idea might be to plant saplings and eventually create a laid hedge; but it's just an idea and we'll speak to the council's woodland adviser before doing anything.

At the moment the pond is full of frogspawn. It's encouraging to see, and I hope at least some will make it to adulthood, though it's not without its hazards, between the dogs, the three newts we spotted today and the chance of a late frost, it's a precarious start to life.

This winter we've also been working across a few City of London sites. As always, we've spent four days at Ashted Common, helping restore woodland pasture by opening up the dense areas and basically creating cow-sized paths and clearings through the trees. Most of what we're cutting back here is Birch. Smaller stuff gets burned, while anything thicker than about a pint glass is kept aside for firewood, or added to habitat piles. We make a point of leaving the Oaks and thorns and any other natives that are less common on the site, as they provide useful shade, fodder, and scratching posts.

On top of that, thanks to a new contract, we've been able to work across four of its City Commons. It's been great getting onto new sites. We all really enjoy the change of scenery and the variety it brings. I love the winter work, but by the time April comes around I'm always ready to shift into spring jobs. The focus changes quite a bit as we're working lower to the ground, where there's less risk of disturbing nesting birds.

We'll be heading back to Addington Hills to manage the heathland. That means cutting back the fresh growth of the stunted Oaks, often laden in oak galls. We cut down to the ground last spring, and the spring before that. We also tackle Birch, Rowan, and anything else that might start to shade out the heather. Heathland is such a lovely place to be working at this time of year. The colours really pop; so many different greens from the heathers, mosses, and fresh new leaves, with the pale mauvy-pink Foxgloves dotted through it all, and the brilliance of the Gorse flowers round the edges. If we're lucky, we'll also spot the odd lizard, slow worm, or toad going about their day.

The Conservation Volunteers (cont.)

Jane Hymas

It's much the same kind of work out in the meadows too, especially the chalk grasslands of Happy Valley. The Dog Rose there is often covered in Robin's Pincushion Galls, the little nurseries for the Gall Wasp (*Diplolepis rosae*). I've always wondered if the sheer number of galls you see in both habitats is down to how vigorous the new growth is and whether that's stimulated by grazing animals or, in our case, all the regular cutting back we do as volunteers.

By about half three the sun's starting to sit lower in the sky, though it's still got a bit of strength in it. You can feel the day winding down, and we begin to pack up. Tools are counted back in, one by one, and carried back to the van in small armfuls. Today's been dry, so there's no need to wipe everything down, which is always a bonus.

There's that familiar end-of-day feeling; everyone a bit tired, a bit muddy, but in good spirits. It's the kind of tired that comes from a solid day's work, and there's always a bit of chat and laughter as we finish up and take a last look at what's been achieved.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the Downlands Trust for its generous grant towards our tools. It's made a real difference to the way we work. The silky pruning saws, in particular, are brilliant—they make it so much easier to cut coppice stools right down to the ground. And the rag-forks have been a game changer too, saving our backs when it comes to pulling ragwort. It's support like this that really helps keep things running smoothly out on site.

Spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*)

Peter Wakeham

Spindle is a native British deciduous shrub or small tree, typically growing 3-6m tall. It is particularly common on chalk soils in our area and grows in hedgerows, woodland edges and scrub. The flowers are in small, yellowish-green clusters, but it is best known for its spectacular autumn display when the leaves turn orange-red and the unmistakable pink, four-lobed fruits split open to reveal bright orange seeds that attract birds for seed dispersal. Spindle is readily identifiable in winter by the young branches which are green, almost square in cross-section and have corky ridges.



The common name Spindle comes from a very practical use of the hard, straight, fine-grained wood, namely that of making spindles for the woollen industry and it was also used to make knitting needles, toothpicks and meat skewers. Charcoal made from Spindle wood was formerly much prized for producing military grade gunpowder and also providing consistent high-quality charcoal used in drawing. All parts of the shrub, especially the fruit, are poisonous to humans, containing compounds that can cause severe digestive issues. The powdered fruit was used historically to treat head lice and mange in cattle.

Ecologically, Spindle plays an important role, supporting a wide range of species. The fruits are eaten by birds, small mammals and even foxes and the leaves feed the caterpillars of several moth species, making it an important larval food plant. Aphids are strongly attracted to Spindle, which in turn draws in their predators such as ladybirds and lacewings, boosting local biodiversity.



The Spindle Ermine moth (*Yponomeuta cagnagella*) is a small native moth that lays eggs on Spindle bushes during late summer. The eggs overwinter and hatch in early spring and, as the caterpillars grow, they join others to form extensive communal web structures that can envelop entire bushes. Bushes may be completely defoliated (right) but recover the following year and apparently suffer no long term harm.



ANSWERS TO WORDSEARCH :

Nest, Bees, Chick, Season, Sunshine, Tulip, Bunny, Blossom, Butterfly, Eggs, Easter, Spring

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TYPE OF MEMBERSHIP (please tick)

- Individual (**£10**)
 Senior /student /unwaged (**£5**) Please delete as applicable
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Please note: Memberships are due for renewal annually on 1st January. However, any memberships taken out after 1st September in any year are covered for membership for the following calendar year.

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GIFT AID Please tick the box below if you are in a position to do so.

- I agree to the Downlands Trust claiming tax under the Gift Aid Scheme on all my donations and subscriptions until I advise otherwise. I confirm that I am paying an amount of UK Income and/or Capital Gains Tax that at least equals the amount that the charity will reclaim.

YOUR DETAILS

Title:		Full name:	
Address:			
		Postcode:	
Email:			
Telephone:			
Signature:		Date:	

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