

Friends of Naphill Common

Our AGM on 21st January attracted 45 people. John Morris gave an excellent talk on historical and archaeological aspects of local woodland; beautifully illustrated and full of intriguing information. We heard that our membership has now passed 200 and that our funds are healthy due both to the subscriptions and a gift of £500 from Margie McGregor (née McCue). The winners of our first **photo competition** were announced and given their prizes. The whole evening seemed enjoyable and positive.



Winner : Harriet Slade

The committee was re-elected and so consists of the following people:- Trevor Hussey (chairman); Kevin Bennett (minute secretary); Stephanie Morgan (membership secretary); Peggy Ewart (treasurer); Peter Davis (web master); Ron Collins (walks for health); Steve Rodrick; Daisy Leek; Philip Hussey; Marek Pawlik and David Greenwood.

The committee's first task will be to organise working parties, events and walks for the coming year. The **walks for health** will continue but this year some will be on Mondays as before and some on Tuesdays, so that we may be able to attract new walkers. Some walks will be local while others will be around more distant areas and will involve car sharing. All will start from Naphill Village Hall at 10 am. Those planned are Tuesday 22nd March (local); Monday 18th April (Bledlow, 4

Newsletter No. 6 March 2011

miles); Monday 16th May (Ibstone, 4 miles); Monday 20th June (Lane End, 5 miles) and more to come. We would still like to hear from someone willing to lead short local walks.

Recent working parties have focused on clearing scrub from the **Clumps**. We have made excellent progress thanks to a hardy band of

volunteers, having cleared four of the five rings. They are already much more visible than they were, and when the National Trust has finished burning the piles of holly and cut down some of the saplings that have smothered them, they will stand out in something like their original forms.

Many of the original trees have gone but some lime, horse chestnut and ash trees have survived.

One of our new notice boards has been damaged by a vehicle. The damage is not serious and we hope to have made a repair by the time you

read this. The paths on the Common present a real challenge, not least because there are miles of them. Many are overgrown and people are forced to paddle through mud. We hope to widen them by removing the scrub and, perhaps, improve the surfaces by spreading chipped brush, but this has to be a long term project.

We have started to organise a wide range of events, see the box overleaf. Someone at the AGM suggested a social event of some kind: any suggestions?

www.naphillcommon.org.uk

How did we get to here?

Today Naphill Common has an area of 71.1 hectares (175.7 acres), almost all of which is woodland. Anyone who came to the village during the last twenty years might think that it has always been like that – a dense forest of oak, beech and holly. However, a close inspection reveals clues to a very different past: small areas of birch; a scattering of wild cherry; traces of gorse; the occasional hawthorn; a few junipers, and even one tiny patch of heath bedstraw. These together with the absence of some species of grass and flowers that one would expect to find in ancient woodland, such as wood melick, dog's mercury and wood anemone, indicate that the Common was once very different.

In 1087 at the time of the Domesday Book there were several millions of acres of wastes, heaths and commons throughout England. These were reduced throughout the Mediaeval period but were still very extensive up into the Eighteenth Century. W. G. Hoskins writes that they '...often extended for a dozen miles or more, with hardly a habitation upon them, and only rough and



Winner : John Taylor

narrow tracks crossing them, so that travellers feared the sudden onset of bad weather or the premature falling of darkness.' (*The Making of the English Landscape* p.141.) Commons were owned by the lord of the manor, or sometimes the Church or the Crown, but many villagers had extensive rights to graze animals, collect firewood, cut peat or turf, and so on.

The most dramatic loss of common land occurred during the **enclosures** of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, when the cultivation strips in the open fields were shared out into unified holdings. The poor got such tiny pieces of land that the resulting enclosures were too small to be viable farms, yet the cost of hedging was more than they could afford. Very

from under the goose.

The commons were so important for grazing and for a supply of wood that most, including Naphill, became 'wood pasture': open areas of grassland dotted with trees and ponds. The trees were generally **pollarded** – cut off a height of around twelve feet - so as to allow the growth of branches out of reach of any browsing animals. Since they were not ploughed, most commons developed areas of **heathland** plants. As the amount of grazing declined so the heathland flora and fauna prospered. The environment provided by gorse, juniper, heather and fescue grasses encouraged a rich ecology of plants, insects, birds, mammals and reptiles. Naphill Common became famous for



Our Programme.

- 29 May Rogation Day, beat the bounds walk
- May/June botany walk
- 26 June Midsummer picnic at the umbrella tree
- 17 July Mini Beast Safari at which children will be encouraged to catch insects for identification by an expert.
- August Bats detection walk
- October Fungal foray

Survey map of 1897, to the aerial photograph of 1961, and to the present day when only about 5% remains open grassland. Fine and wonderful as the woodland is, it has swallowed up so much – from the heathland ecology to the historic Clumps and the Broad Path where once fairs were held. A similar process has occurred all over the Chilterns: thousands of acres of heath have gone.

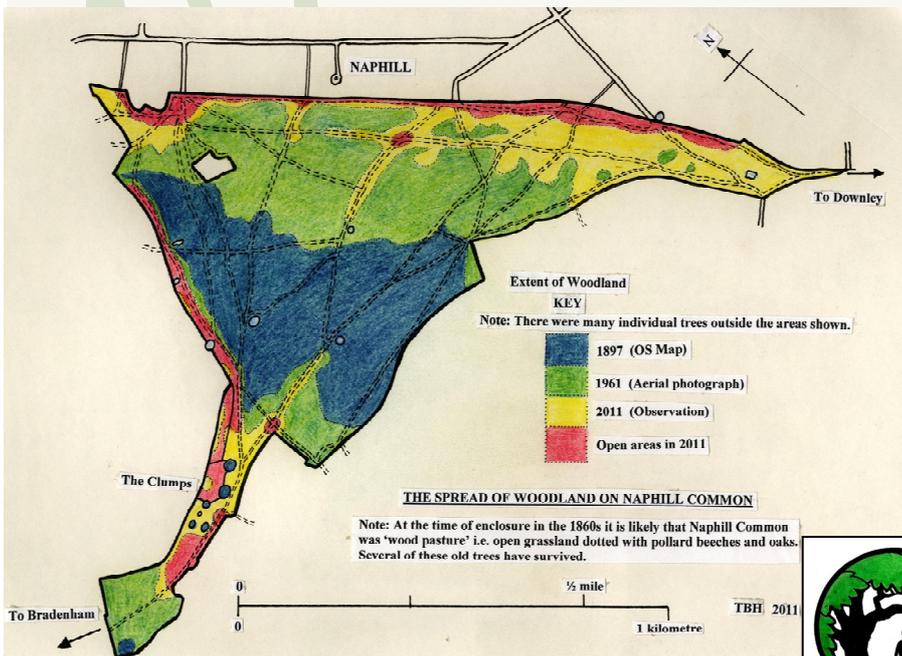
In an area so well provided with woodland, much of which is ancient with a rich woodland flora, perhaps we could try to recapture just a little of the open heathland. Would the Common be spoiled if some of the glades were opened out to let in the sun? Could we get junipers, harebells, orchids, linnets, whitethroats and common lizards back? It might be worth a try.

Naphill Common—History and Archaeology Group
We have formed a Special Interest Group to research the history and archaeology of Naphill Common. Possible themes include the Naphill Fair, the Romano-British farmstead, the Clumps, hollows bumps and ditches. If you are interested in helping please call Kevin on 01494 568689

quickly only the wealthy held farms and there was a large landless peasantry needing to be employed. At the same time huge areas of common land passed, as if by magic, into the possession of wealthy landowners. In the 1860s when Hughenden Parish underwent enclosure, Naphill Common was halved in size. That this slight of hand did not go unnoticed by the poor is reflected in the well known adage dating from the time: *'Tis a crime to steal the goose from off the common but not to steal the common*

its juniper and Wilfred Smith's map (drawn from memory in 1948) shows that in the early Twentieth Century it possessed spotted orchids, lesser butterfly orchids, spider orchids, nightjars, vipers and a forest of juniper.

The reduction and eventual end of grazing also enabled the natural succession from grassland to climax woodland to get underway, helped by the offspring from the old pollard beeches and oaks. **The map** shows the inexorable spread of **woodland** from that marked on the Ordnance



OUR YEAR 2 ACHIEVEMENTS

(Number of attendees in brackets)

- 5 path-clearing work parties
- 2 work parties on The Clumps
- Erect five notice boards
- 9 walks for health
- Red Kites talk at the AGM (40)
- Juniper cuttings walk (15)
- Beating the Bounds walk on Rogation Day (18)
- Midsummer Picnic (22)
- Moorend Common visit (7)
- Naphill Fete—animal skulls quiz
- Royal Forestry Society visit to Naphill Common
- Tree identification walk (12)
- Fungal Foray walk (30)
- Photographic competition

