Langdyke Countryside Trust
Annual Report 2007-8

Contents

We hope you find this publication informative and enjoyable.

Line drawings courtesy of Ivan Cumberpatch and Natural England.

Foreword

Welcome to a bumper edition of the Annual Report which I hope that you will enjoy reading. It demonstrates both the variety of our work and our increasing reach, with contributions from both Ufford and West Deeping.

We have again had a very active programme of field visits and this year we have also run a number of evening talks as well, including a presentation, 'I am Swaddywell' at Botolph's Barn in November 2007 and a talk on the Great Fen, by Chris Gerrard of the Wildlife Trusts which attracted 100 people to John Clare School in January 2008. Our regular walks around Castor Hanglands and the Nene Washes proved as popular as ever, with the Washes walk in December producing wonderful views of seven short-eared owls, 2 barn owls, 1 marsh harrier, 5 kestrels, 1 sparrowhawk and a buzzard!

Swaddywell continues to prosper and the Hebridean sheep are turning tall rank grassland into a shorter grazed sward in which the orchids and scarcer herbs can thrive. Last winter and spring finally resulted in a significant increase in water levels in the ponds and marshes where we have a good variety of wetland plants such as rare species of stonewort growing under the water, which is a favoured habitat for the great crested newts, and the local saw sedge in it's only site away from Wicken, Woodwalton and Holme Fen. In addition tiger beetles were seen for the first time as you can read about in Stuart's article.

As always we need all the help we can get to keep the ever rampant bramble in check! Please remember that there is open access and walking is easy on the tarmac road that runs down to the bottom of the old quarry. Do come and enjoy it! As Frieda's article shows you can visit Swaddywell and then use adjoining footpaths to explore the surrounding countryside.

A lot of work has been going on behind the scenes with a view to securing the ownership of all of Swaddywell and acquiring additional nature reserves such as Torpel Manor Field. To this end the launch of our public appeal for funds in March 2008 was another important milestone for the Trust. The appeal is making progress but we are still looking for further contributions! We hope to be able to make some announcements on our progress in the near future.

One of our goals for the future is to obtain charitable status which will require more work so if anyone has skills and time available then please contact us!

As always we would like to thank those organisations that have helped us financially including Ufford Parish Council and Helpston Post Office. Thanks also to our adjoining landowners and to Ivan Cumberpatch for providing original artwork for this report and Ingrid Green for designing it.

Richard Keymer
Chairman

The Natural Year – 2007/08 - *by Richard Astle*

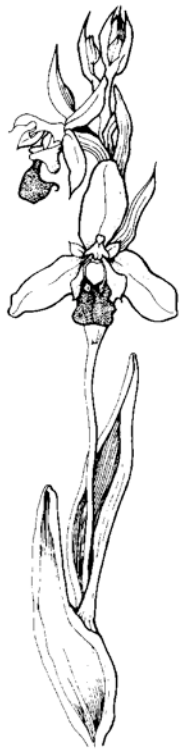
As Peter Holt's weather report reveals, the outstanding feature of the 2007 summer was rain – and as ever the weather will have had considerable impact on local wildlife – reducing the numbers of young produced by our breeding birds and making life difficult for many of our insect species, including butterflies and dragonflies, which need sunny periods to feed and lay their eggs.

April and May of any year is always a wonderful time in the natural world, with migrant birds arriving back from Africa and the gradual greening of the countryside as trees come into leaf.

A particular highlight of spring 2007 was the amazing chorus of grasshopper warblers at Castor Hanglands with at least 12 of these birds singing there on 23 April. As you can guess from its name the song of this secretive bird sounds a bit like a grasshopper, although it is best described as long, monotonous reeling. As dusk falls over the Hanglands the volume seems to get turned up, so that by the time it is dark the noise is quite something.

There seemed to be good numbers of bats around the area this spring too – with many sightings in Helpston itself and along Heath Road, near the entrance to Ben Johnson pit. Bainton Pits is always a good place to see Daubenton's bat – sometimes known as the water bat - as it hunts over the main pit. There was also a party of five pipistrelle here on 8 April.

Etton Road - Maxey Pits produced its usual crop of interesting spring birds with a wood sandpiper there on 7 May and large numbers of breeding common terns, nesting on the mud banks. These birds can often be seen hunting for fish up and down the Maxey Cut and occasionally flying over the village.



bee orchid

The Swaddywell lambs arrived fairly late this year – the first arriving on 29 April, with a total of 17 in all, taking the flock to 45.

Buzzards and red kites were also much in evidence in the area – with buzzards nesting near Swaddywell and the first pair of kites breeding here since the early 19th century. Just 10 years ago you wouldn't have dreamt of seeing either bird anywhere nearby. A family of five soared over Helpston on 15 September with four at Oxey Wood the next day too.

The first bee orchids appeared at Swaddywell on 3 June – the start of a wonderful summer of orchids on the reserve. In total there were over 2,000 bee orchids and by early July there was an incredible display of pyramidal orchids – attracting comparisons with Alpine meadows from visitors! In addition two other species of orchid – twayblade and southern marsh – appeared for the first time on site, making this a six orchid species field!

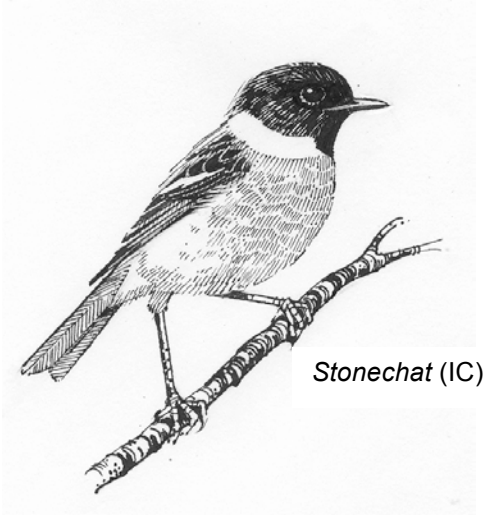
Just as exciting was the discovery of two new insect species on the reserve. Stuart Irons discovered a green tiger beetle at the pit in June. These beetles are lovers of hot dry conditions and the previous dry summer and winter provided ideal conditions for them. Mick Beeson found two marbled white butterflies there also. This striking large black and white butterfly is commonly seen at Barnack Hills and Holes, but has yet to establish a colony at Swaddywell – these first arrivals might be the sign of things to come.

Another insect to look out for at this time of year is the aptly named ghost swift moth. This eerie white winged moth hovers over damp ground at dusk, flying erratically to and fro to attract a mate. Their caterpillars take 2-3 years to develop in the roots of plants. Ghost swifts could be seen at both Castor Hanglands and at in the fields north of Royce Wood in June.

The rain didn't deter the local barn owl population from occupying a record four sites in the area and birds could be regularly seen hunting over fields around Helpston, Maxey and Etton in the summer. The recent run of mild winters has increased survival rates for many birds and barn owls seem to be recovering well – at least in our area - after a period of long-term national decline. But the wet summer will have reduced breeding success significantly – barn owls can't hunt in the rain, and any chicks may well have either starved or resorted to cannibalism, with the older chick ensuring its survival at the expense of the younger ones (a clutch of owl eggs doesn't hatch simultaneously).

Maxey Pits continued to demonstrate its importance to insects as well as birds, with a lesser emperor dragonfly found there in July – this is a rare migrant species from southern Europe which has started to turn up more frequently in Britain in recent years and occasionally stays to breed. In addition throughout July to August the pits were home to up to 16 green and two wood sandpipers – both wading birds that breed in the Arctic Circle. These birds have presumably returned early from their northern home having failed to breed. They are very similar and can be hard to tell apart, but both very beautiful, particularly as they feed quietly on a fine summer's evening with Etton Church spire in the background.

Once again hobbies were very much in evidence in September – with a family often seen at Maxey Pits with up to four in the air together on 16 September. Hobbies were also seen as usual at Bainton and Franks Pits (hobbies are often associated with water as they like to feed on dragonflies – the family at Maxey could often be seen chasing, catching and then eating dragonflies) and over Helpston, with a bird near Woodcroft in the spring too.



Stonechat (IC)

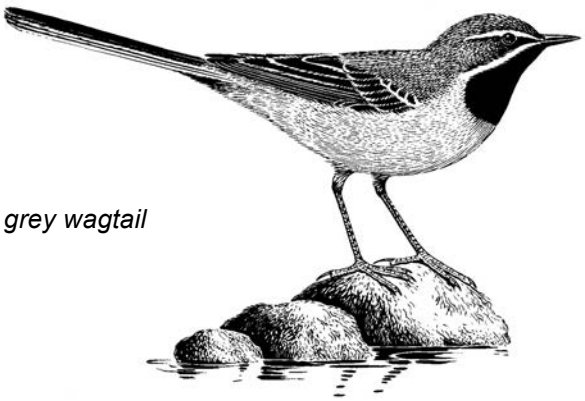
The sight of hobbies on the wing is often a sign that summer is drawing to an end as this is a late nesting bird and seems to time the fledging of it's young with peak numbers of late flying dragonflies and soon after they finally depart the first winter birds start to arrive. This year the first redwings arrived from Scandinavia at Swaddywell on 29 September, just six days after the last hobbies were seen. Also on 14 October a stonechat – another winter visitor – had taken up residence at the pit

– with at least three there later in the month.

Wagtails are familiar birds for many of us I am sure, particularly the pied wagtail, which can be seen in and around the villages at all times of year. In winter these small birds roost together in large numbers to keep warm. Swaddywell is one such roost, with around 60 birds gathering there at dusk in October and November.

Another is at Queensgate bus station, where over a hundred can be seen diving into a small group of bushes every evening – look out for them if you are ever catching the bus home!

In addition, this year has been a good one for grey wagtails, which have been seen regularly in and over Helpston – probably again encouraged by the mild weather. There was one in my garden on 26 November – a first!



grey wagtail

Ivan Cumberpatch also found a white wagtail – the continental version of our pied wagtail at Maxey Pits in September.

An interesting regular addition to my own garden bird list this year has been the magpie. When I moved to Helpston in 1997 there wasn't a magpie to be found in the village. From October 2007 onwards I have had two in the garden most days. Winter 2007-08 was a fairly mild affair and as a result winter birds seemed fairly few on the ground. One notable absentee was the goosander, which can usually be found along the Maxey Cut and Maxey Pits in good numbers from late November onwards, with up to 30 seen in previous years. This year I only saw a party of five on one occasion (15 December), although other small groups were reported.

The siskin, however, a very small and very noisy and aggressive little finch did make a return to our gardens this winter. There were no reports last year, but many in February 2008. It can often be seen at bird feeders, pushing other birds out of the way and facing the watching gardener as if to say, 'What do you want? This is my territory.'

Barn owls too stayed at the four nesting sites throughout the winter and could occasionally be seen hunting around the villages - a hopeful sign for the next breeding season.

By March the first signs of the new spring were already with us. A male wheatear returned from its wintering grounds in Africa on 20 March, en-route for the hills and moors of northern Britain and passage migrants were already at Maxey Pits by early March, with dunlin and ringed plover there on 9 March and six black tailed godwits on 30 March.

wheatear

John Clare Country – the Trust's Vision for Green Spaces – *Richard Astle*

Over the last few months the Trust has been talking to a number of local partners, including the Forestry Commission, Natural England, Wildlife Trusts and the John Clare Trust to take forward plans to create a network of nature reserves and heritage sites, united under the theme of 'John Clare Country'.

The idea behind John Clare Country is simple – to get all those involved in the future of the villages and countryside west of Peterborough to work together to preserve and enhance the natural and built heritage of the area, linking this with the legacy of John Clare – uniting people, places and poetry. Our thinking goes far beyond the Trust's usual focus on wildlife and heritage. Much more ambitiously we have developed a simple vision for the rural areas west of Peterborough -

> *To create a model of 21st century rural living to the west of Peterborough[1] famous as an exemplar of how to build sustainable rural communities for the benefit of local people and local biodiversity.*

The model would be based on:

- A number of thriving **village communities**, each with easy access to local services and employment opportunities, local community activities and strong, empowered bodies of local government;
- A green **transport** infrastructure, with a network of cycle paths, footways and 'quiet roads' where priority is given to walkers and riders;
- A prosperous **farming** community, profiting from a combination of eco-friendly farming practice, eco-tourism and recreational activities;
- A flourishing **local economy** providing local jobs for local people**,** based on services provided to visitors, plus environmental businesses located in village business centres;
- An outstanding **natural biodiversity** created by environmentally friendly farming practice, habitat restoration and a mosaic of smaller wildlife havens.

[1] Roughly the area bounded by the A1, A47 and A16

Of course, the Trust cannot achieve this vision on its own. We recognise that our role can only be as one of many champions of this agenda and that we should look to landowners, bodies such as the Greater Peterborough Partnership, Peterborough City Council and the parish councils of the area to deliver many of its elements.

Our own focus will be on facilitating and promoting the natural biodiversity elements of this vision, working in three principal areas of activity:

1. **Places** – working with landowners, or if appropriate managing land ourselves, to enhance or create habitats in order to increase both the diversity and the numbers of our local wildlife species. In particular, and working with the John Clare Trust and the John Clare Education and Environment Trust, we will focus on the restoration of the lost landscapes as described by John Clare, including areas of limestone grassland.

2. **People** – working with schools and other community groups and wildlife charities, such as PECT and the Wildlife Trust, we will offer opportunities for people to learn about, appreciate and support the natural environment on their doorsteps.

3. **Projects from Poems** –we will establish specific programmes of conservation activity designed to support increases in population of certain species that feature in the poetry and writing of John Clare.

Working with the partners mentioned earlier we are now developing more detailed plans for all three areas of activity and for working together to make this vision a reality. We are hoping to receive grant funding to help us with this – not just for the purchase of Torpel Manor Field, but also for more community work and for specific projects as set out below.

Places

The Trust is currently working on three main projects within this theme:

Swaddywell Pit - The Trust already owns Swaddywell Pit and aims to manage the land sensitively in order to enhance the limestone grassland, ensure the continued viability of the ponds and wet areas of the pit and to provide a significant community asset that is enjoyed by growing numbers of visitors.

Torpel Manor Field - Torpel has the potential to be a showcase for the Trust's work, bringing together both our focus on wildlife and the links to our local heritage. As a scheduled ancient monument, it can become an exciting venue for educational visits and community events linked to its history.

Maxey and Bainton Wetlands - Working with the parishes of these villages and with partners at Tarmac and the National Grid we aim to create a large area of wetland running from Bainton across to Maxey and Etton and south towards Helpston, linked by the Maxey Cut.

Much of the work for the creation of this patchwork of wetland is already under way, but there is no current master-plan that recognises how the various elements can be

brought together to create a carefully linked patchwork of lakes, wet meadows and grassland that supports a wide range of wildlife and provides a significant landscape asset to the communities of the surrounding villages as well as recreational opportunities such as fishing, bird-watching, riding and walking.

People

The Trust is committed to achieving its aims through community action – in other words, involving local people in running the Trust and delivering its projects. We want to engage a wider group of people in our activities and to widen our membership base to include residents from all the villages to the west of Peterborough.

We also hope to increase our engagement with local schools, particularly the primary schools at Helpston, Castor and Barnack and the Arthur Mellows Village College, and organisations such as the Scouts and Guides to offer young people opportunities to be involved in the Trust's work and visit local sites such as Swaddywell.

We would also want to develop the connection between art and the landscape, working with local artists and organisations to promote this link.

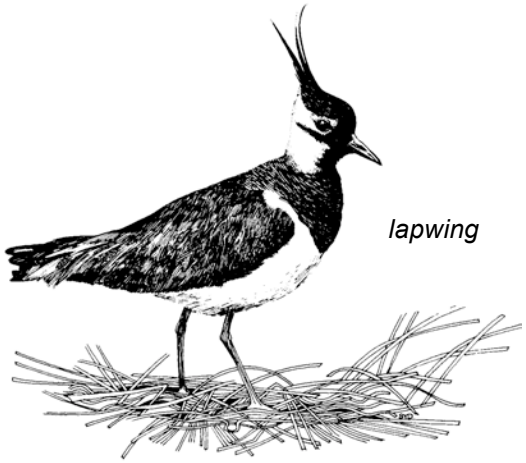
Projects from Poems

Our priority projects at present are as follows

Project Hillsborough ("the home of the owls") – a project designed to increase the local barn owl population. We aim to encourage local landowners to use the government's agri-environment schemes to support the spread of the barn owl population by leaving wide uncut grassland strips around the margins of fields and along the edges of tracks and lanes. We will also work with landowners to supply barn owl nest-boxes where needed. A specific aim will be to achieve and maintain four breeding territories in the square between Maxey, Etton, Swaddywell and Marholm.

Project Nightingale – working with Natural England, the Forestry Commission and National Grid we would aim to sustain and increase the nightingale population at Castor Hanglands, Southey Woods and Bainton Pits and to see its local range increase so that villagers in Helpston and Maxey can once again hear the sound of the nightingale in Royce Wood and at Maxey Pits.

Project Lapwing and Snipe – inspired by the poem, *To the Snipe*, we will seek to re-establish a breeding population of snipe in the area and to increase the number of breeding lapwings. This will be a long-term aim linked to the Maxey and Bainton Wetland project.



lapwing

Next Steps

The Trust believes that if we can take this work forward then we can make a real and positive difference to our communities. By working with other partners we can create a wonderful network of nature reserves – from Hills and Holes in the west to Maxey Pits in the east, from the Hanglands and Southey Woods to Swaddywell and Torpel Manor, linked by quiet roads and existing public footpaths, offering local people enhanced opportunities for walking, riding and appreciating our local wildlife and heritage.

That sounds like something worth working for!

Tiger Beetles - *Stuart Irons*

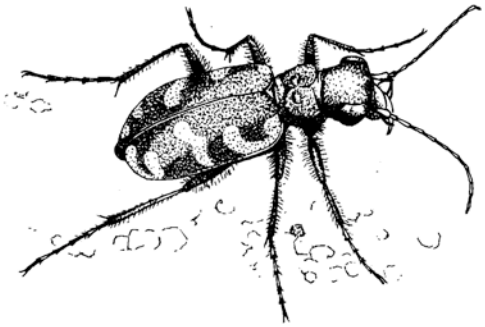
I'll not forget 20 May 2007 for a long time. Not only did we discover my first tiger beetle but we found it on our nature reserve, Swaddywell Pit. I have been looking for tiger beetles for many years, so to discover my first one at Swaddywell was a momentous occasion for me. Suitably inspired by our discovery I decided to do a little research to find out more about them.

There are approximately 2300 different species of tiger beetle across the world, of which five are found in the UK. The Swaddywell tiger is the green tiger beetle (*Cicindela campestris*). This is the most widespread of the British species and is found in open grassland on sandy or peaty soils right across the country from Orkney to Cornwall. It ranges in size from 12 to 17 mm (½ - ¾ inch). The green tiger beetle is well named being predominately green with five or six pale yellow spots on its back with long bronze coloured legs and mouth parts. The other four species found in this country are much rarer and are generally found either in coastal sand dunes or on sandy heaths.

Tiger beetles form a distinct family within the insect group of beetles. They are most closely related to ground beetles (those large black beetles sometimes found under rocks in the back garden) and water beetles. Several characteristics distinguish tiger beetles from their close relatives. These include their long sickle shaped jaws, large eyes and long thin running legs. These key features give a clue to their lifestyle. The long slender legs are for fast sprinting across the ground. The prominent eyes of these visual hunters are usually so wide that they make their head the widest part of their body. Tiger beetles typically run in short spurts interspersed with brief stops. The stops are necessary because the beetle literally runs so fast that it cannot see its prey. If it sees potential prey such as an ant, small spider or fly, the tiger beetle

quickly turns in that direction and waits for another movement. The tiger beetle then runs the prey down and, if successful, grabs it with its long toothed jaws.

In addition to their long legs adult tiger beetles are able to fly. Their wings are intricately folded and hidden under the hard abdominal casing. When required the abdominal casing opens forward to allow the flight wings underneath to unfold and extend for flight. The wings are used for short, low escape flights from predators and for longer, higher dispersal flights which is how our tiger beetles arrived at Swaddywell.



tiger beetle

If you watch a tiger beetle for a few minutes you will soon discover that one activity dominates all others - mating. Males will interrupt a valuable meal, leave a hiding place or ignore a lurking predator if they see a female. To begin the mating process the male approaches a female in intermittent sprints similar to those used in hunting. When he gets close enough without any attempt to woo his mate he simply leaps on her back clinging on with his jaws and long legs. The poor unfortunate female tries everything she can to dislodge her suitor and only if the male can successfully hang on will he successfully mate with her.

Following a successful mating the female will look for a suitable site to lay her eggs. She tests various sites with her antennae and jaws. Once she has found somewhere with the right texture, salinity, moisture and temperature she extends her ovipositor up to a centimetre below the surface where she lays a single egg before moving on to find another site. She can lay up to 20 eggs in a day. The eggs will hatch in about two weeks. Once the larva's skin hardens it sets about enlarging its chamber, constructing a long tunnel (at least 15 cm, 6 inches, long) with a round entrance hole by carrying soil to the surface in its jaws and flicking the soil backwards. Having dug its burrow the larva must stay there until its larval stage is complete (1 to 4 years depending on temperature and food availability) which is why the female is so conscientious in laying her eggs in exactly the right place. When the larva has grown sufficiently it pupates (similarly to a butterfly) before emerging as an adult.

It is one thing to know that tiger beetles have been found at Swaddywell but it would be even more exciting if they were breeding there. So our task this summer is to find some tiger beetle larvae.

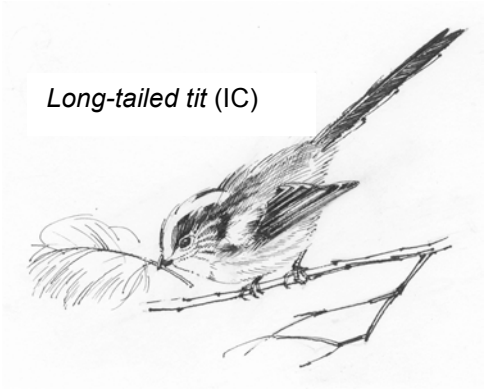
Tiger beetle larvae are unique among beetles. They are designed for life in their long narrow burrow. They are white and grub-like, with a dark armoured capsule that covers the head. They have a large head with six small eyes and a pair of ferocious jaws underneath. The larvae like the adults are carnivorous but unlike the adults they are ambush predators waiting for their prey to come to them. Each larva positions itself at the top of its burrow with the armoured capsule covering its head flush to the ground, exactly filling the diameter of the burrow entrance. When a prey item

approached the burrow entrance, the larva, anchored to the walls of the burrow by two large hooks on its back, extends its body and quickly reaches out backwards to grab the prey in its powerful mandibles. The larva then pulls the struggling prey down into the depths of the burrow and despatches it with a few mighty bites. Because the head capsule is usually the same colour of the surrounding soil surface the larvae are often hard to find. However their reaction to danger is to retreat immediately away from the mouth of the burrow; thus their presence is made obvious when a black hole suddenly appears where previously there had been none.

So if you happen to visit Swaddywell one hot sunny day this summer you may well find me crawling around on my hands and knees looking for holes in the ground, what better way to spend a summer's afternoon!

Weather Review - Spring 2007 to Spring 2008 – *by Peter Holt*

Spring



Long-tailed tit (IC)

Following exceptionally mild weather in January, the spring of 2007 continued the warm theme with lots of warm, sunny dry weather especially in April. The average temperature for the month was more than 4˚C above average. According to Met Office data, April 2007 was the warmest in England in a series going back to 1914, with some parts of southern England being as much as 5˚C above average. During April rainfall was negligible, but that was to change during the second week in May when the persistent high pressure which had given rise to all the fine weather, gave way to low pressure which predominated for the next three months, associated with the North Atlantic jet stream being much further south than usual for the summer. This resulted in a dramatic change in the character of the weather.

The month of May had twice as much rainfall as usual (106.5 mm v. 53.7 mm). Skies were generally overcast with temperatures back to near average.

Summer

The first two weeks of June were mainly dry but there then followed three weeks of miserable "summer" weather when it was cool, overcast and rained at some time on almost every day. June and July, like May, had twice the average rainfall (106/109 mm respectively against an average of 51/52 mm).

In our part of the country we have had wetter summer months. As recently as 1992, July, August and September were wetter. However as far as 2007 was concerned, compared to some parts of England, we escaped the worst. Many places in addition to the general high rainfall also had thunderstorms giving an additional 50 mm of rain in a day. This led to the widespread flooding in places such as Hull and Tewksbury, with many people today still unable to return to their own homes. During this "wet"

period temperatures were depressed and daytime temperatures in July were nearly 2˚C lower than usual (20.6˚C compared to 22.8˚C).

At the start of August the weather actually warmed up with a day maximum being recorded at Helpston 29˚C on the 5th. . Although the month was relatively dry (33.0 mm compared to an average of 55.8 mm), a cool overcast period in the middle of the month resulted in daytime temperatures being a little below average.

Autumn

After the much talked about weather of the earlier part of the year September, October and November were fairly quiet months associated with generally high pressure. September and November were significantly dryer than average, 30% less rainfall than usual, with October having 10% less. October is overall the wettest month of the year for our area with an average rainfall of 61 mm, while February is the driest at 40.6 mm. The average monthly rainfall for the whole year is 51.5 mm. Temperatures were not far from average. There was little frost or persistent fog with the first air frost of the winter being recorded in mid-November.

Winter to Spring 2008

December was another quiet, fairly dry month with a quarter of the nights being sufficiently cold for an air frost, although the temperature overall was a little above average. The Christmas period was once again mild with no hint of it being a white one. Statistically eastern England is more likely to have a white Easter than a white Christmas due to milder winds from the Atlantic being more prevalent around late December, whereas early spring often sees more northerly or easterly winds.

January saw a change in the quiet weather as south westerly winds touching gale force at times brought in cloud, rain and above all very mild air, especially at night; (only one slight air frost the whole month). The net result was a wet month (80.0 mm compared to average of 50.7 mm), after five consecutive dry ones but the average temperature was some 3˚C higher than usual, resulting in the second mildest January ever with only the previous January of 2007 being milder.

High pressure again took charge in February, which was by contrast to January, a very dry, particularly sunny month with only half the usual rainfall (22 mm v. 40.6 mm average.). The clear weather, while giving pleasant temperatures during the day allowed for some cold nights in the middle of the month when the lowest temperature of the winter, minus 6˚C, was recorded on two consecutive nights. The month overall however was not especially cold, being a little milder than the long-term average. March and April were not very pleasant months especially when compared to last year. March was wet at times (60% wetter than usual) and when not wet, chilly northerly winds made their presence felt sufficient to give a covering of snow on Easter morning. April's rainfall was near average, but again the month was chilly with northerly winds. In both March and April daytime temperatures were rather below average, but the temperatures at night rarely got below freezing with what is to be hoped the last actual air frost of the season being on 25 March at minus 2.5˚ C, although ground frosts were frequent.

The year taken from the end of April 2007 to the end of April 2008 has seen a slowdown in the warming trend, with only January 2008 being considerably milder than average. Having said that, there has been no outstandingly chilly month and once again the winter period overall was mild.

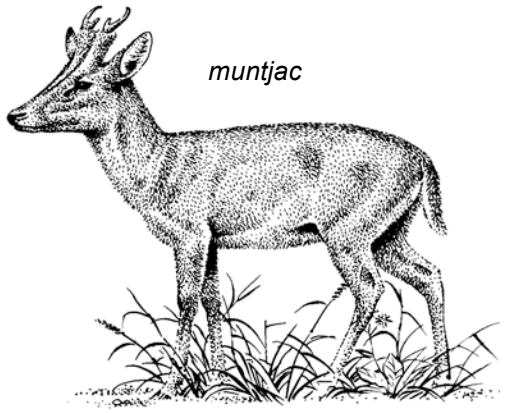
The Alien Invaders are here – *Chris Topper*

No, ET hasn't taken up residence at Swaddywell Pit and no we don't have Martians lodging in the stables at Torpel Manor Field but what we do have is over 3,000 non-native species currently living wild in the UK. It is currently estimated that two-thirds of these are plants. With climate change bringing generally warmer winters it is anticipated that even more foreign species will be able to adapt to our conditions and establish themselves in the UK. Other than habitat destruction invasive non-native plant and animal species are considered to be the greatest threat to biodiversity worldwide.

The vast majority of non-native species introduced into Britain cause no significant harm, but, given suitable conditions, some alien species can multiply at an alarming rate, dominating the local fauna and flora and transforming the landscape. These 100 or so species are our alien invaders and DEFRA has estimated that these mammals, insects, fish but mostly plants, are costing the UK economy circa £2 billion a year. Species are considered to be invasive if they possess characteristics that enable them to spread rapidly and out-compete native species to form large populations that dominate a habitat. Invasive plants will exhibit some or all of the following characteristics:

- rapid growth and maturity;
- prolific seed production and dispersal;
- rampant vegetative spread;
- ability to out-compete native species;
- few pests or diseases in their new environment; and
- extremely costly to control once established.

So how did these "alien invaders" get here and who are they? Over 60% of the invasive non-native plant species both terrestrial and aquatic have escaped from gardens or garden centres, whilst mammals and birds are again largely escapees from exotic collections. Many of our insect invaders have arrived here either under their own steam aided in establishing a foothold by our warmer climate, or by hitching a lift on the exotic plants found in all our garden centres.



muntjac

The range and diversity of species classed as invasive is enormous, at one end of the scale Canada geese (*Branta canadensis*) and muntjac deer (*Muntiacus muntjak*) and at the other colonial sea squirts (*Peraphora japonica)* and New Zealand flat worms (*Arthurdendyus triangulatus*).

Obviously in this article I don't have space to describe all our invasive species, so I will concentrate on some of the ones that can be found locally.

Japanese Knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*)
Known in Japan as Itadori, which means "strong plant" it certainly lives upto it's name here in the UK. Introduced into Europe as an ornamental plant early in the 19th century, it is a large vigorous weed that is now a major problem, reducing biodiversity by shading out native plants and damaging structures such as paved areas, flood defences, tarmac and concrete surfaces. It can regenerate from less than a gram of root tissue, grow 4 metres tall in four months and has a large underground stem making removal difficult and costly. It is estimated that the cost of removing Japanese knotweed just from the building sites for the 2012 Olympics will be several million pounds. With no natural enemies in the UK, DEFRA is now planning to import its natural predator from Japan and release them in the UK countryside. Known as psyllids, the jumping plant lice lay eggs on the plant and the hatched larvae suck out the sap. Environmentalists are concerned that the psyllids may feed on our native relatives of the knotweed.

Giant Hogweed *(Heracleum mantegazzianum*)
A cow parsley type plant with thick, purple blotched, bristly stems that can grow to 6 m in height (the native hogweed is much smaller growing only to 2 m). Giant hogweed dominates vegetation in marginal habitats. Its size makes it a most impressive plant, but not only is it invasive it is potentially harmful as well. Chemicals in the sap can cause photodermatitis whereby the skin becomes very sensitive to sunlight and may suffer blistering and long lasting scars. A significant stand of giant hogweed could be seen along the Bainton to Ufford road.

Himalayan Balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*)
Introduced into the UK in the mid 19th century Himalayan balsam is a classic example of garden escapees colonising and invading damp areas and riverbanks. Growing in dense stands up to 3 m tall it suppresses the growth of native flora which, when the plant dies down in autumn, leaves the banks bare of vegetation and susceptible to erosion. Being an annual Himalayan balsam needs to produce seeds to ensure it's survival, each plant can produce up to 800 seeds and it has the ability to catapult the seeds up to 7 metres from the parent plant. Himalayan balsam grows in abundance along the banks of Maxey Cut.

Grey Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinesis*)
The introduction of the grey squirrel in the 19th century is probably the best known example of an alien species invading the territory of, and driving out the native fauna, ie the indigenous red squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*). Not only are they bigger and stronger than the red squirrel, but they have proved to be more adaptable and able to colonise habitats not favoured by red squirrels. If that wasn't enough they are carriers of the squirrelpox virus to which they are immune, but which is fatal in 99% of cases to the red squirrel. The grey squirrel population is now estimated at 2 million plus and are regarded as a major pest due to their impact on forestry operations. Red

grey squirrel

squirrels are now confined to Scotland, Northumbria, Cumbria, the Isle of Wight and Brownsea Island in Poole Harbour.

Red Lily Beetle (*Lilioceris lilii*)
Several short-lived infestations of this beetle occurred in the 19th century but it wasn't until 1940 that a permanent population established itself in Chobham, Surrey. Over the next 40 years (1980) it had expanded it's range only within a 25 mile radius of Chobham. However by the year 2000 the beetle was being found as far afield as Cheshire and Lincolnshire, by 2002 it was in Scotland and Northern Ireland and by 2006 was widespread in Wales. After a very slow start this beetle has proved to be very invasive and it's rapid expansion over the last 20 years may well have been assisted by the milder winters we are now experiencing. The red lily beetle is now rated the ninth most serious garden pest in the UK and is very common in this area.

Harlequin Ladybird (*Harmonia axyridis*)
Compare the rate of expansion of this beetle to that of the red lily beetle (above). First discovered in south-east England in the summer of 2004, it has spread in the intervening four years to virtually every county in England and has been recorded in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Its rate of colonisation has been even more dramatic in North America where it was introduced in 1988 and is now the most widespread ladybird species on the continent. Harlequin ladybirds pose a serious threat to many of our 46 species of indigenous ladybirds. They are very effective aphid predators having a wider food range and being able to adapt to more varied habitat they can easily out compete native ladybirds. If that's not bad enough, if aphids are in short supply Harlequins will eat the eggs and larvae of native ladybirds as well as lacewings.

So what will be the next big "alien invader" of our shores? Making this call is a major preoccupation for Government scientists and environmentalists alike given the potential economic impact that invasive species can have as well as their impact on our native fauna and flora. Here are a couple worth keeping an eye out for:

- **Water Primrose (*Ludwigia grandiflora*)**
  An aquatic plant native to South America, water primrose is currently clogging up the waterways of France and the Low Countries. Forming dense mats it threatens other aquatic species by depriving submerged plants of light and causing consequent problems for aquatic invertebrates.

- **Oak Processionary Moth (*Thaumetopoea processionea*)**
  This moth, which causes defoliation of oak trees, already has a foothold in the UK. Discovered breeding in Kew Gardens in 2006 it resisted all attempts to eradicate it and has now spread to surrounding areas. Not only could the financial implications be extremely serious, but it is also a potential health hazard. Inhalation of the caterpillar hairs or contact with the skin can cause rashes, asthma attacks and anaphylactic shock.

Or maybe the next invasive species will be the Psyllids being brought in to control the already invasive Japanese knotweed!

References: DEFRA
Kew Gardens
Royal Horticultural Society
Plantlife

In the footsteps of John Clare – *Frieda Gosling*

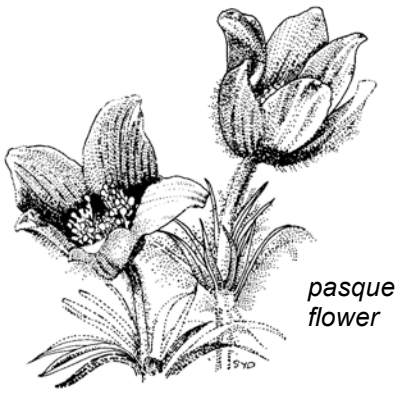
How fortunate we are to have such a good network of footpaths and bridleways between all the villages to the west of Peterborough. For centuries they were used by the local people walking from the village to their strips in the open fields, or they originated as drove ways along which the village livestock were moved from the limestone grasslands, known as "heaths" to the water meadows by the River Welland or Nene.

Even at the beginning of the 20th century, the villages were largely self-sufficient and, within living memory, Ufford children walked 2 miles each way, over the fields to school in Barnack. Until the advent of cars, the local roads were rough tracks, maintained by the parish.

A century earlier, John Clare must have trodden every footpath and road within a radius of about 20 miles from his home in Helpston – to school in Glinton, to Woodcroft as a ploughboy, to Burghley as a gardener, carrying corn for grinding at Maxey mill, to Casterton as a lime burner, to Stamford to the fair and to take the stage coach on his visits to London, not forgetting his meetings with Patty in Tickencote. On Sundays he used to ramble through the countryside, looking for plants and collecting bird's eggs or visiting his friend, Artis, who was Earl Fitzwilliam`s steward and an archaeologist.

Roman Bank was the name used by John Clare for the raised track, which is now called King Street. Beside it was Langdyke, which he said was four feet deep. He used to find multi-coloured pootys or snails at the bottom and they are still quite common locally.

Close by was Swordywell, so named because of the legend that a sword had been found there. This land was part of Helpston heath and as a child John Clare had played roly-poly down the slopes. Later on, while watching the village livestock graze, he was entranced by the pasque flowers and orchids, the butterflies and the song of the skylark.



pasque flower

After the Enclosure Award of 1820, the villagers lost the right to graze their animals on the heath, the large open fields were divided into small fields separated by hedges and barriers were erected across some of the old footpaths. A number of John Clare`s poems reflect his anger about enclosures and the resulting rural poverty.

Swaddywell, as we now call it, suffered serious abuse from 1924 until 2003 when the Langdyke Trust took over its management. The miracles of regeneration can be seen year by year.

One of John Clare`s favourite destinations was Langley or Langdyke Bush and this was one of the places where he used to meet the gypsies. It is now, as it was in his time, a grassy mound with a hawthorn tree on top. It is situated at the junction of the parishes of Helpston, Ailsworth, Ufford and Upton. For centuries it had been the open-air court of the Langdyke Hundred, which met twice a year to judge serious

crimes. It was attended by parish representatives and presided over by the Abbot of Peterborough. It had also been the site of the hangman`s gibbet, but by John Clare`s time the court had moved indoors to what is now the Exeter Arms in Helpston. The hawthorn was cut down in 1823 and he wrote in his Journal:

> *"Nothing is lasting in this world. Last year Langley Bush was destroyed, an old white thorn which had stood for more than a century, full of fame. The gypsies, shepherds and herdsmen all had their tales of its history and it will be long ere its memory is forgotten".*

The footpath between Peterborough and Stamford, Torpel Way, crosses Torpel Manor field which for several years was used for grazing horses, and walkers felt inclined to get across it as quickly as possible without exploring the banks and ditches and examining the walls of the old deer park.

Since being managed by the Langdyke Trust a few months ago, it has already been tidied up and it has the potential to be a valuable environmental and community asset.

The medieval manor house was already in ruins when John Clare used to walk across the field on his way home from harvesting at Ashton. Even as a grown man he was very superstitious, especially after dark and he had the worst fright of his life among "the ruins of roman camps and saxon castles". It was after midnight and he was remembering stories of ghosts and goblins when he saw "something wavering in the path". Trembling, he wished the earth would open to hide him. He ran as fast as he could and when he reached the stile he found it was close at his heels. When he reached home "he felt nearly fit to die". It turned out to be a foal that had lost its mother!

The challenge I faced was to introduce local residents and visitors to the attractions, both in the landscape and historical, of what is now being called John Clare Country. There is so much to see – interesting old stone villages with Collyweston slate or thatched roofs; woods, heaths, nature reserves, pubs serving refreshments and, most important of all, the footpaths are already there, clearly defined and waymarked.

So far seven Circular Walk leaflets have been printed. All include a map and directions. The walks span the area from Wothorpe to Helpston, are all interconnecting and mostly 4-5 miles long. Most can be reached by public transport from Stamford and Peterborough. They can be downloaded from the Botolph`s Barn website (www.botolphsbarn.org.uk). They are available in packs from Stamford or Peterborough Tourist Offices and may be available singly in local shops, village halls, churches and at the Bluebell Inn in Helpston.

- Wothorpe
- Heath, Hills and Holes
- Three Villages
- Southey Woods and Langley Bush
- Burghley Park
- Torpel Manor
- The Poet`s Favourite Places

Sources: John Clare by Himself edited Eric Robinson and David Powell and many of his poems.

Conservation in West Deeping – *Jean Stowe*

An interested band of residents form The West Deeping Conservation Group. We aim to create and maintain wildlife habitats in the village, and have been meeting on an informal basis since February 2002.

Areas of interest in West Deeping are:

The Henry Tinsley Field

This was given to the village by the Tinsley family in 2002, and is administered by The Parish Council on behalf of West Deeping charities. In Autumn 2002 the West Deeping Jubilee Committee installed a seat and planted daffodils.

lady's smock

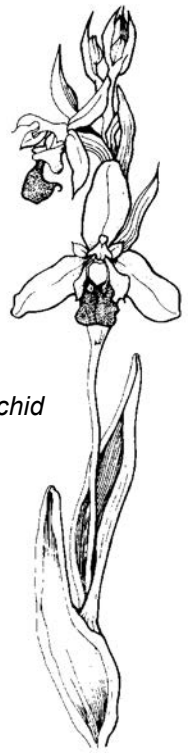
In addition to the playing area, a small patch in the south-east corner of the field aims to re-create a lowland, wet hay meadow. More than 35 species of wildflower have been recorded but this figure needs to be updated. A management plan has been prepared, and footpaths are mown to give access to the area. Some wildflowers have appeared naturally, particularly ladies' smock. Others have been planted, with the help of children from the village. Willow logs provide habitats for insects and small mammals. If you walk round the meadow part of the field you will see butterflies, dragonflies and damselflies. The heron is a regular visitor.

The long grass is mown once a year by Garry who does our village mowing. Then the conservation group rakes and removes it. This is a backbreaking task, though pleasant enough if the weather is fine and a useful number of volunteers can be conscripted.

bluebell

The Boaty

A wildflower patch is situated at the south-west corner of boaty – a lane that leads off to the west of King Street. This is the route of the Stamford-Market Deeping canal. The water is now led underground, but re-emerges at the other side of King Street and passes along the backs of gardens in The Lane. Each spring there is a wonderful stand of snowdrops which were planted a few years ago. Regular work parties lift and divide the clumps of bulbs each year to increase the colony. Nettles and ground elder also need checking. About 30 species of plant have been recorded along the boaty – another figure which needs updating. I am building up stock of English bluebells and wood anemones in my garden ready to plant in this area. Good stands of both these species are found in woods near Helpston. **(NB - Do not remove plants or bulbs from the wild!)**



bee orchid

The churchyard

There is a wildflower area in the west corner of the churchyard where primroses are well established. We are also very proud of our bee orchids, although they do not rival the numbers to be found at Swaddywell Pit. We mark them in early spring and fence them off so they don't get mowed down. They are fickle creatures, and somewhat erratic in their flowering. We were lucky there were about nine spikes last year for Gardens Weekend. Another highlight of 2007 was the appearance of a small clump of pyramidal orchid, *Anacamptis pyramidalis*. This is another speciality of Swaddywell. We will be watching this carefully, and hope a substantial colony will develop.

Conservation isn't all glamour – a good proportion of our time is spent clearing rubbish. We fill our green bins of course. Logs and woody prunings make habitat piles – unfortunately these cannot accommodate contributions from all the gardens in the village. Compost bays have been built in the churchyard and the cemetery, and these need clearing at regular intervals. Good from a sustainability point of view, but heavy work.

The 'WARAG' Barn, Helpston – *Richard Keymer*

Many Helpston residents will know of the 'WARAG' Barn, but how many know the meaning of the name and the role that the building played in the war effort? The Trust's aims include maintaining local landscapes and features of interest and I hope to show that the Barn is indeed of historic interest. The 'WARAG' Barn is located down the track that runs east, opposite the Blue Bell pub. WARAG is short for War Agriculture, or to give it its full name County War Agricultural Executive Committee (CWAEC).

County War Agricultural Committees were first established in 1915 in order to help increase home food production through education and advisory work. They were established by County Councils and often based on pre-existing county agricultural committees, which had had responsibility for education or the management of agricultural land owned by the authorities. These committees were modified and given greater powers in 1917. Each CWAEC consisted of seven members from the county committees, together with one or two members appointed by the Board of Agriculture. Each committee had a chief executive officer who was a full time civil servant. This person was often the existing county organiser of agriculture. District Committees made up of 'respected farmers and local residents' were appointed by the CWAECs to 'carry the production policy on to every farm in every parish'. The membership of these committees tended to be the larger farmers who employed labour. They exercised a crucial role in advising the CWAECs and carrying out their instructions.

The CWAEC's strengthened powers included the ability to make Cultivation of Land Orders under the Defence of the Realm Act 1914. While they acted primarily through consultation and exhortation, they were given compulsory powers to order the recalcitrant to plough up pasture and to bring land up to a satisfactory standard of cultivation. The authority of the Committee could even dispossess the exceptionally bad, although such powers were only rarely used. The CWAECs were grouped into 21 Districts, each having a Commissioner also appointed by the Board of Agriculture. These arrangements greatly enhanced the power of the state in determining the local agricultural practices. The CWAECs received their instructions in a series of circulars from the Board of Agriculture. This included the need for a survey of all farms, and target acreages of corn for each county and areas of grassland that should be ploughed. Although ploughing was done under orders from the Executive Committees, the great majority of such orders were carried out willingly. As time went by the CWAECs had less work to do and were instructed to refrain from further control over use of agricultural land in the spring of 1919. The new Ministry of Food was established in 1920. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) maintained a system of county agricultural committees for some time but with greatly reduced powers.

A committee set up in 1935 stressed the need for the establishment of county committees to encourage the conversion of pasture land to arable and to secure adequate supplies of food. The report was accepted, and by the end of 1936 a chairman, an executive officer and a secretary for each proposed committee had been selected. The Minister of Agriculture placed principal committee members on standby in the autumn of 1938. The new CWAEC members were appointed as individuals to act as the Minister's agents and were not recommended by county organisations. Most were experienced people in their field.

MAFF's and CWAECs had extensive powers, allowing them to take 'all necessary measures to secure that the land in their area was cultivated to the best advantage'. The executive committees normally had eight to twelve members and their administrative staff included a number of special officers, including district officer, drainage officers, etc.

The work of the CWAECs was carried out through a variety of local sub-committees, with the CWAECs themselves providing an overall integrating role. This gave a highly dispersed and localised structure to this example of state intervention.

The speed and efficiency with which the whole organisation started to work were a source of amazement even to those who had been optimistic about its potentialities. An elaborate machine was rapidly put in place to bridge the gap between Whitehall and the huge number of individual farm holdings in the country.

The 'WARAG' barn at Helpston was the depot of the Northamptonshire Committee. I assume, but have not been able to verify that it was erected as a purpose built building at the outbreak of the war. It was the place where machinery repairs were carried out and machinery was stored. The Committee owned the machinery and farmers could hire it. The Foreman of the Depot was Fred Swepson and his brother also worked there. He lived in Eye. The fitter was Jack Wroughton. The depot was well equipped with tools and lathes. Machinery such as Alice M crawler tractors was taken out on low loaders pulled by tractors. One of the Wilsons was a driver and his

son Albert also worked there. Gordon Wade was another worker who lived on the estate in Glinton. When the Committee was wound up at the end of the war combines trailed behind tractors were just coming in.

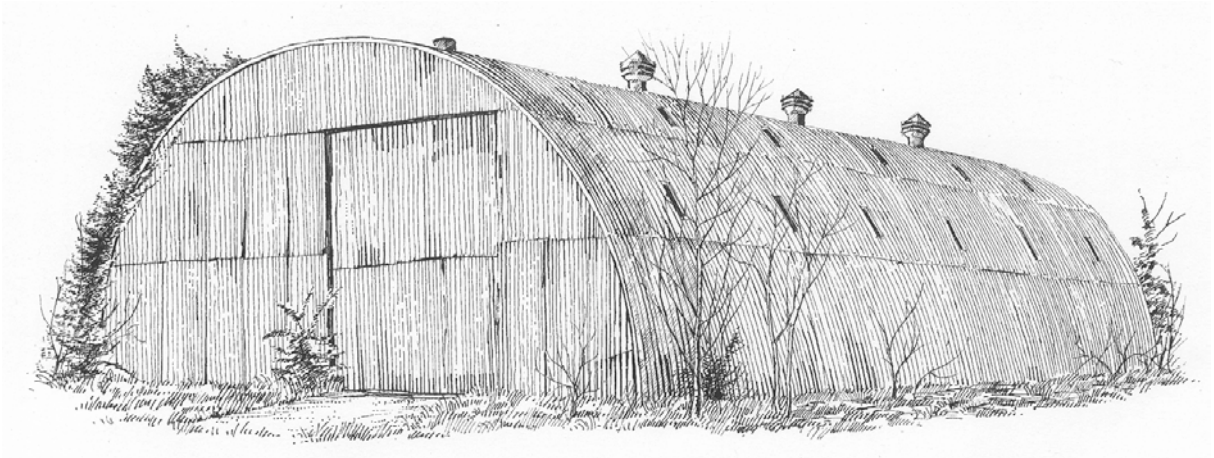
The Committee itself farmed a large farm at Kingscliffe belonging to Burleigh Estates. The farm was on the A47, opposite Wittering aerodrome. Stroud and Morgan farmed it after the war.

It would be very instructive to look at the records of the Northamptonshire War Agricultural Executive Committee, which should be held in the Northamptonshire Public Record Office, in order to obtain more information about the activities of the Committee.

Given the historical significance of the building in playing its part to help ensure food supply during the war, it would be good if its future could be ensured.

Mr Owen Mann from Glinton provided the information on the Helpston Depot as he worked there during the war. If anyone has any further information then could they please get in touch with me.

The information on the CWAECs was taken from the book *The National Farm Survey 1941-1943*. *State surveillance and the countryside in England and Wales in the Second World War* by Brian Short, Charles Watkins, William Foot and Phil Kinsman. Published by CABI Publishing in 2000.



WARAG barn (IC)

Langdyke Countryside Trust 2007/08

Events

Sunday 7 October 2007	**Fruits and Fungi Walk** - Castor Hanglands
Wednesday 7 November 2007	***I am Swaddywell – from Poem to Tip*** - St Botolph's Barn
Sunday 18 November 2007	**Swaddywell Work Party**
Sunday 9 December 2007	**Nene Washes Walk**
Thursday 27 December 2007	**Swaddywell Work Party**
Tuesday 1 January 2008	**New Years Day Walk** - Maxey Pits
Wednesday 23 January 2008	**Great Fen Project Talk** - Helpston School
Saturday 26 January 2008	**Hedge Planting** - Glinton Road, Helpston with Helpston Parish Council
Tuesday 11 March 2008	**Garden Wildlife Talk** - St Botolph's Barn
Saturday 5 April 2008	**Clearance Work** - John Clare Cottage
Thursday 10 April 2008	**Annual newt, frog and toad count** - Swaddywell
Wednesday 14 May 2008	**Nightingales at Castor Hanglands**
Saturday 17 May 2008	**Trust Stand at Helpston Gala**
Sunday 1 June 2008	**Trust Stands at National Farm Open Day Event** - Willow Brook Farm Shop
Tuesday 10 June 2008	**Breeding Birds on the Nene Washes**
16 and 18th June	**Brownies visits to Swaddywell**
Sunday 12 July 2008	**Trust Talk at John Clare Festival**

Membership of the Langdyke Countryside Trust

Membership is open to anyone who supports the aims of the Langdyke Countryside Trust. These aims are:

- to manage, to acquire or assist in the acquisition of local sites in order to enhance the flora, fauna and landscape;

- to provide educational and recreational opportunities for members of the public by allowing appropriate access to sites and in particular to provide interpretative displays, guided tours or otherwise disseminate information about the area and its flora and fauna;

- to acknowledge and promote the natural history and literary references made about the area by John Clare and the naturalist Charles Rothschild.

Members of the Trust:

- receive a quarterly email up-date on the Trust's activities and a round-up of what's going on in the local natural world as well as a list of dates of forthcoming events;

- receive a free copy of the Trust's Annual Report;

- can attend any of the Trust's events, including the regular nature walks, free of charge.

There is no set fee for membership. We would ask our supporters to give what they can afford on an annual basis. We certainly do not want any of our supporters to feel that they cannot continue to be involved with the Trust because of cost.

✂

To become a member, please fill in this form, detach and return it to Jennifer Britton, 8 Heath Road, Helpston, Peterborough PE6 7EG.

Please accept my donation of £_____in respect of one year's membership of the Langdyke Countryside Trust.

Or

I / We wish to make a contribution of £_____ to support the Langdyke Countryside Trust.

Name(s) or Organisation:_____

Address: _____

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Email address: _____

Telephone number: _____

Your details will be kept solely for the use by the Langdyke Countryside Trust.

Your records will be updated and used in accordance with any requirements of the Data Protection Act.