

Honorary Professorship for Ali Driver

The Society warmly congratulates Alastair Driver on being awarded Honorary Professor of Applied Environmental Management at the University of Exeter; Ali was “extremely chuffed about” this distinguished appointment!

June visit to Dropmore and Cliveden

Rare opportunity on Wednesday 8 June 2016, 10.45am to 4.00pm: visit two outstanding gardens in Buckinghamshire! Dropmore is one of the finest Pinetums in England and the tour will be led by Christian Sweet, landscape consultant for the current restoration project. At Cliveden, Richard Wheeler will guide you around the established gardens at neighbouring Cliveden. Places are limited, so please book early by visiting www.gardenhistorysociety.org/events. Bookings are online or by post

No respect for authority?



Lancelot Brown at Caversham Park

A brief reminder that the BGT has arranged with the BBC for Caversham Park to be open on 12 June and 18 September from 2 pm to 6 pm. Admission will be by ticket, which must be obtained in advance. Tickets are £7.50 per person and can be obtained for 12 June, or reserved for 18 September. Please contact Pauline Simmonds for a booking form.



Future Events

Barn Owl Box Project

Nature Notes 2, by Alastair Driver

Although there are many doom and gloom stories about wildlife these days, there are also some genuine successes to celebrate and one of those is that of the Barn Owl, one of the most widespread birds in the world, but a species that almost disappeared from the UK in my lifetime.

The reason for the decline was a combination of the impact of toxic persistent pesticides in the 1950s and 60s followed by the major reduction in old trees and barns in the countryside largely due to modern farming practices and the conversion of barns to residential buildings.

Barn Owls nest in holes in large old trees and on ledges in open barns and the reduction of nest sites reduced the population in the UK to around 3000 pairs in the late 1980s. In response to that decline, the Hawk and Owl Trust and other groups then started promoting the installation of Barn Owl boxes in old trees and modern barn buildings and even on poles along the tree-less banks of drainage channels. At that time I was Conservation Manager for the Thames Region of the National Rivers Authority and I secured funding to initiate a Barn Owl box project with the Hawk and Owl Trust, which installed Barn Owl boxes in the floodplain farmland downstream of Sonning and along the Loddon Valley. This project led to a rise in the breeding population in Sonning from zero to several pairs. Unfortunately over time, these boxes deteriorated and fell down and so now 20 years on there are very few breeding sites

locally for this beautiful bird.

However following reports that individual Barn Owls had been seen early this year down on the Reading University floodplain farmland and even in the centre of the village (Trefor Fisher’s garden to be precise!) I decided that it was time to resurrect the Sonning Barn Owl box project – but this



Sue Dewar (Hawk & Owl Trust) and Alastair Driver (NRA) with Barn Owl in Sonning - early 1990s

time using local community funding, and covering a range of suitable sites all over the village. A quick conversation with the former head of the Hawk and Owl Trust Colin Shawyer (not to be confused with our own dynamic builder Colin Sawyer!) confirmed that indeed box installation projects were the primary reason

for the national population expansion to over 8000 pairs today, with probably 75% of pairs breeding in boxes. To get things started, I have canvassed my network of local contacts including SSES members and Friends of Ali’s Pond, to see if anyone would be prepared to fund purchase of a box at £80 each (in kit form) and I have had a fantastic response with funding for 12 boxes already pledged. I could do with a few more though so if there is anyone else out there who would be prepared to fund a box, please contact me at ali@sonningdrivers.plus.com

Installation will probably take place in the autumn of 2016.

As ever you can find out more about wildlife and conservation action locally and around the country via my Twitter account: @AliDriverEA

DATES FOR YOUR DIARIES

Members are welcome to attend Executive meetings. Please note that these meetings start at the new time of 7pm

15 June 2016

Executive Committee St. Sarik Room 7.00 pm

26 June 2016

Afternoon Tea in a Sonning Garden – Acorns, 2 West Drive - See Page 2

10 August 2016

Executive Committee St. Sarik Room 7.00 pm

8-11 September 2016

Heritage Open Days Weekend - further details to be supplied in the next edition

30 September 2016

Talk on Salisbury Cathedral by Head Guide, Stephen Dunn

bridge

Newsletter of the Sonning & Sonning Eye Society

Recalling Denys Amos

Peter Van Went

Visitors passing Sonning Lock often ask about a memorial gate near the towpath and the way through Reading Blue Coat School’s woods. Designed with two wrought iron oars as its centrepiece, this gate with its red brick pillars was erected in memory of Denys Amos, a young teacher who drowned in the Thames on 26 January 1953. The accident occurred when, walking back to school with his friend and colleague, Harry Needham, Amos lost his footing and fell into the river. Despite Needham’s desperate attempts to rescue him, Amos was swept away in its icy waters. Several weeks later his body was recovered. This brought an end to a brief career that had shown immense promise.



In September 1951, Amos, a young Cambridge English graduate, was appointed a boarding master to teach English, coach rowing and assist with the school’s small scout troop. Outgoing and energetic, he very quickly earned the respect and affection of colleagues and pupils alike. “Always happy”, observed Headmaster Bernard Inge, “throwing himself completely into everything he undertook, utterly oblivious of self, and spreading everywhere the happiness which was perhaps his outstanding characteristic.” Summing up Amos’s achievements at the end of his first year, Inge commended him for his “cheerful enthusiasm and tremendous energy”; his year had “met with

great success”.

Although the School’s Boat Club was only three years old and relatively inexperienced, its members were keen to compete in local schools’ regattas. Amos coached his First Four with great determination. In March 1952, having taken a School party to watch the exciting Oxford and Cambridge boat race, he witnessed the ‘dark blues’ win by ten feet in appalling weather conditions. This turned out to be the closest result since the dead heat of 1877. Meanwhile, School crews underwent rigorous training for a new inter-House competition.

Also in March, Amos helped organise a highly successful scouts’ ‘social’ consisting of an evening of games, songs and sketches from gang shows performed around a big camp fire in Sonning. High point of the scouting year was the annual summer camp held in July near Beaulieu.

Amos’s sudden death was a blow to his many friends and the school community, prompting the Parents Association to launch an appeal for an enduring memorial. On 15 March 1954, a gate was dedicated by the Rt. Rev. Arthur Parham, Bishop of Reading, at a ceremony attended by every member of the School as well as Amos’s mother and sister who had travelled down from Scarborough. Very appropriately, this attractive shady entrance continues to be used by successive generations of rowers as they head down to the river.

»Eye on Sonning a view from the Bridge

Mike Hart, Chairman

Readers will see that the Society is holding a tea party in West Drive on Sunday 26 June to celebrate Her Majesty’s official birthday. Her real 90th birthday took place on 21 April and it is amazing to look back and see how many tumultuous events have happened during her lifetime.

Her birthday in April 1926 coincided with the first general strike in British history which commenced on 4 May 1926 and lasted for 6 months, ending on 12 November. Two years later British people over 65 years of age received their first pension of 10 shillings per week (£0.50p in today’s money) and in the same year the Equal Franchise Bill was passed unopposed giving the vote to women over 21 years of age. The following year, 1930, saw the Wall Street crash leading to a world-wide economic slump and the same year saw the rise of Adolf Hitler’s National Socialist Party leading to the Second World War by the end of the decade.

It is easy to take our current relatively peaceful times for granted but the past 90 years have witnessed huge changes that have transformed our lives. Since her accession to the throne in February 1952, 64 years ago, the Queen has led us through thick and thin and it will be a great pleasure and privilege to celebrate her birthday in June.

Bridge: Newsletter of the Sonning and Sonning Eye Society

Education & Social Panel
c/o Red House Cottage,
Pearson Road, RG4 6UH

tel: 0118 9692132
email: bridge@sonning.org.uk
web: www.sonning.org.uk

»Executive Committee & Panels: breaking news

Patrick Hamblin, Pauline Simmonds and Andy Bell

Planning applications

The Planning and Traffic Panel continues to meet monthly. There have been 20 applications reviewed since the last edition of Bridge and written comments were submitted to Wokingham BC on the revised application for The Pavilion, Holme Park Sports Ground, Sonning Lane; Apricus House, Garde Road; and Hillside, Pearson Road.

Planning permission has since been given for the development of The Pavilion at Holme Park Sports Ground.

The Inspector's report following the appeal relating to the proposed August Field/Acrefield site has now been published. As a result of the Inspector's decision, Acrefield cannot now be demolished unless it is replaced on a one for one basis.

SPC Planning Committee meetings

The Society continues to attend these meetings regularly as an observer.

Conservation Area Appraisal

As this edition goes to press the Society's Chairman, Mike Hart will join a group of SPC representatives at a meeting with Wokingham BC to confirm the status of the Appraisal and to discuss the consultation phase.

Cycle racks

At the time of writing it is anticipated that the new cycle racks will have been installed outside the Pearson Hall in good time for the Sonning Festival.

Traffic

No further developments have taken place regarding discussions on the traffic issues in Sonning Lane but it is hoped the Society will be involved when they resume.

The Panel has concluded that it will concentrate its efforts on one or two issues where there is a possibility of bringing about change, for instance, the parking in Sonning Lane.

Sonning Cutting

The Society continues to be grateful to Ali Driver for his continuing involvement with the Sonning Cutting issues.

What is the point of it?

Look out for the our Scarecrow during the Festival weekend, as he shows how to lay bricks and use correct lime mortars for re-pointing Old Forge Cottage. You can't fail to notice the impressive beard and the authentic tools!



Save the dates!

- 8-11 September - look out for our free afternoon walks conducted as part of the Heritage Open Days Weekend
- 30 September - our autumn lecture will focus on Salisbury Cathedral, in light of the ecclesiastical parish of Sonning being within the Diocese of Salisbury until 1846.

Executive News

Society members are always welcome to attend Executive Committee meetings which are normally held bimonthly in the St Sarik Room. With effect from the meeting scheduled for Wednesday 15 June, the Executive will now meet at the new time of 7 pm.

» Membership news

Welcome packs for new residents are available from Lesley Heaney, the Membership Secretary, on 0118 969 7231.

New members will be most welcome to join the Society at The Village Show in September, when they can benefit from an extra four months free membership.

Queen's birthday party

Pauline Simmonds



To celebrate the Queen's Birthday the Society is holding a special Summer event on Sunday 26th June.

A Champagne and Strawberry Tea will be held at Acorns, 2 West Drive Sonning by kind permission of Mr and Mrs Gordon Jones. June should be an ideal time to enjoy their beautiful garden and members

are very welcome to bring guests. The afternoon starts at 3 pm and we hope that as many as possible will join us to celebrate this very special occasion. There is plenty of parking and tickets cost £10

Please use the enclosed booking form or phone Penny Feathers to reserve a place. (Tel 0118 9343193)

Secret life of bees: informed insight

Tracey Hicks and Jeremy Gilmore, Beekeepers

In March both beekeepers provided a fascinating insight into the lives of bees. We are very grateful to them for preparing this distilled version of their double act.

Jeremy began by giving a description of Apis mellifera, the (western) honey bee, and explaining how it is the only native bee to maintain a colony over winter. Bumblebees and solitary bees all hibernate whilst the honey bee colony packs itself into a tight ball inside the hive and uses up its store of honey to keep warm. A queen bee will live 3-4 years and although worker bees only live for 36 days during the summer they will last up to 6 months over winter.

Nowadays the majority of British bees live in man-made hives and are looked after by beekeepers but there are occasional 'feral' bees who find



Bees in a roofspace

somewhere on their own and remain there unmolested. Jeremy once had to remove bees from under a thatched roof where they had been for about 5 years. The bees live in the base of the hive, in the 'brood box', and the honey is stored in 'supers' which are slightly shallower boxes placed on top of the brood box. A colony comprises three types of bee: the female queen, multitudinous sterile female workers and the male drones. In all there are between 20,000 to 60,000 bees in a hive, depending upon the time of year. At the height of summer the queen is laying up to 2,000 eggs each day, which means that the colony is gaining a large number of workers. Most of the workers, once they have been nurse bees in the hive for 4-5 days, become foragers for pollen or nectar. Others specialize in collecting water or become guard bees.

Tracey took over to explain how,

when colonies become overcrowded or have an old queen, the bees will swarm. They create a number of special 'queen cells' which are attached to the edge of the combs and raise queens. When a queen hatches she will kill any other queens that are about to hatch and then she flies off taking all of the flying bees with her and a lot of honey too.



A swarm

Which is why, quite apart from the anti-social behaviour of swarms, it is not in the beekeeper's interest to allow this to happen. Though they sound aggressive and are often compared to a helicopter flying around it should be noted that swarming bees are usually very docile since they have no brood or stores to protect. The swarm will find a gatepost or tree to cluster on while the scout bees determine the best place to set up their new home. Which is when most people get in touch with beekeepers.

The swarm can be captured by knocking the branch or sweeping the post and collecting the majority of the bees, hopefully along with the queen, in a skep or box. This is then placed upside down on a white sheet on the ground, leaving a gap for the bees to enter. If the queen is in the box then she sends out a pheromone to attract the rest of the swarm and they will all gather together, which takes maybe 40 minutes. Then the sheet can be tied up around the skep and the swarm taken away.



Bees "walking the plank"

Once back at the apiary the bees are either poured into an empty hive or, as was captured on a movie, the bees can be poured onto a plank placed at the hive entrance. And the bees will walk up the plank and into the hive.

Jeremy discussed the different threats that our bees face. The two main ones are the varroa mite which, as well as weakening bees, carries some nasty diseases; and the neonicotinoids used in farming which are strongly suspected of having devastating effects on bees. The neo-nics have been banned in the UK for the last two years, and there is anecdotal evidence that the bees have been doing better, but now farmers have demanded their reinstatement.

Tracey drew the evening to a close by describing how she went about the important task of collecting the honey from her hives and the processes involved in getting it into the jars that people buy from her. A combination of factors such as healthy bees with a prolific young queen, as well as good weather and good local forage are necessary for a plentiful honey crop. You can expect about 25 pounds of honey from each super on a hive – Tracey's most prolific hive had 6 supers last summer! The frames are removed from



The satisfying sight of Sonning Honey

each of the supers and then placed into a centrifuge where the honey is spun out from the wax honeycomb. It is then filtered and left to settle in large vats before finally being poured into individual jars which are labelled with the producer's name and EU approved description of contents.