HIGHWOODS PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Autumn 2026 Newsletter

www.highwoodsbexhill.org.uk

Registered Charity No. 282289

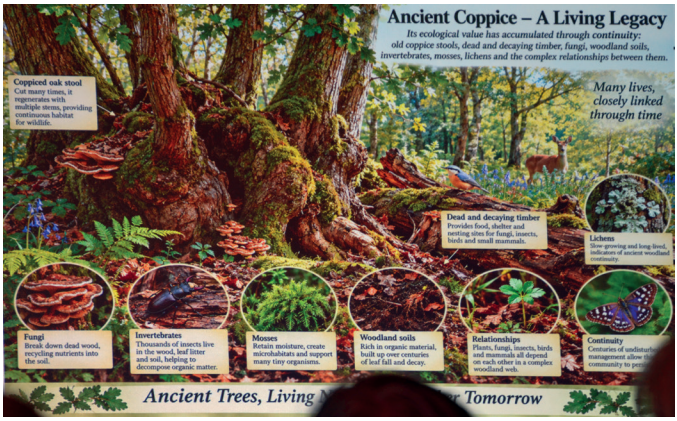
"Absolutely wonderful"

A SINGLE sentence at the end of one of the finest talks that Annual Meeting attendees have enjoyed put Highwoods Preservation Society's work in context.

The guest speaker on Saturday, September 12th was David Dennis. His subject was "The remarkable life of an oak tree."

In 30 minutes, David took his listeners through the evolution of British oak trees in their various forms, their introduction to Britain, the oldest surviving examples and the means by which they spread.





His talk was richly laced with informative illustrations.

Oaks increase their number via wind-blown male catkins pollinating female flowers. One cartoon slide suggested a humorous alternative.

Two slides had especial impact.

Oaks can host a remarkable 2,300 species.

Oaks can be home to 38 types of birds, 31 mammal species, 1,178 sorts of invertebrates, 108 kinds of fungi, 229 mosses and 716 different lichens.

One of the first things Highwoods Preservation Society did when it was

Continued overleaf

Continued from front page

formed in 1980 and set about caring for the woods was to seek Site of Special Scientific Interest status for the greater part.

Largely, this was because of the presence of a rare example of coppiced sessile oak.

The second notable slide underlined the significance of this:

"The High Woods is a33.7-hectare biological SSSI, notified in1985.

"The really exceptional feature is its sessile oak coppice (Quercus petraea).

"An ecological assessment noting the SSSI description calls it a type of woodland not known to occur anywhere else in East Sussex.

"High Woods at Bexhill is not protected simply because it contains sessile oaks. It is protected because of the particular woodland community those oaks form, together with several other unusual habitats." Oaks probably came to Britain via birds or driftwood.

Offa's Oak in Windsor Great Park is thought to be the country's oldest surviving example -about 1,300 years old, originating in Anglo Saxon times.

The Highwoods offer a rich variety of habitat from ancient woodland to open heath and wetland.

David concluded his talk: "You have an absolutely wonderful environment, said to be the finest in Europe."

Volunteers thanked

WORK-party members who, throughout the year, toil to keep the Highwoods in good order for the benefit of the wildlife there and the visiting public have been thanked.

In recent years this annual gesture has taken the form of a barbecue. This year it returned to the former practice of a pub lunch.

On the initiative of Society Treasurer Chris Ashford, this took place at The Wheatsheaf at Little Common on Saturday, August 8th.

More than 30 volunteers and their partners enjoyed a splendid buffet meal.

On behalf of Wardenship Group colleagues Mike Brett and Dave German, Jim Foster thanked not only the volunteers for their hard work and dedication but their partners for supporting them.

There was renewed applause when Chris Ashford was thanked for organising the gathering.

Your contacts

John Dowling, Editor/Press Officer
13 Claxton Road, Bexhill-on-Sea TN40 2PP
01424 217449
dowlingjohn44@gmail.com

Chris Ashford, Treasurer
Sunbeams, 41 Broadoak Lane,
Bexhill-on-Sea TN39 4LG
01424 844524
chris.ashford@btconnect.com

Vernon Findlay, Membership Secretary
31 South Cliff,
Bexhill-on-Sea TN39 3EH
vfindlay@btinternet.com

Wardenship Group: Jim Foster
07778 386565
jim.highwoods@gmail.com
jim@firstaidforyou.co.uk

Recruit or die

IF Highwoods Preservation Society does not attract newcomers to its committee it will die.

That was the stark warning given at the annual general meeting at Little Common Methodist Church Hall on Saturday, September 12th.

The speaker was the society's Membership Secretary, Vernon Findlay.

That he is also its Health and Safety Officer and was conducting the meeting as its Acting Chairman for the occasion underlined the difficulty the Society faces.

It has existed since the previous AGM without a Chairman. Committee meetings begin with someone offering to chair the gathering.

At the AGM, the Acting Chairman appealed for members to join the committee. There were no takers. He appealed for someone offer themselves for the chairmanship. Again, there were no takers.

Reviewing the year's work, he thanked Reg and Joy Groombridge who, in addition to their role in the work-party, frequently undertake repair work in the woods independently and promoting its work – plus providing the refreshments at the end of each group session.

He thanked the Wardenship Group, Jim Foster, Mike Brett and Dave German, for their efforts, work-party members for their toil and Treasurer Chris Ashford for his role.,

The Treasurer's figures showed that because of major work such as the re-surfacing of the car park approach, the Society's reserves had dropped from £25,451 to £17,504.

Jim Foster said the Wardens regularly monitored the woods. Mike Brett, a professional tree surgeon, had spot-coded ailing trees according to their degree of decay. He thanked contractors Trenchline for undertaking the re-surfacing work at a discounted price.

In return for cutting holly stakes to make processional flaming torches, Ninfield Bonfire Society members had added the resultant brashings to the dead hedging built by the work-party.

The creation of "leaky dams" in response to global warming was helping to retain water and establish wetland habitats.

At the suggestion of Vernon Findley in his report as Membership Secretary, the meeting voted to increase the long-standing annual subscription rate from £4 for individuals and £11 for families to £10 and £15 respectively.

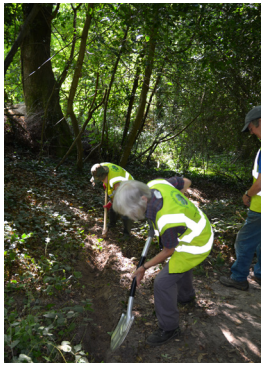
Vernon stressed that many supporters already contribute much more than the basic "sub." He welcomed the action of a recent subscriber who added a generous £500 to their £10 subscription after reading about recent key expenditure.

Some 197 households hold membership of which 117 boost the Society's funds via Gift Aid.

The existing committee was re-elected en bloc.

Horse-bridge problem





WHAT to do about the old horse-bridge? That has been a question which has concerned the Society's committee for a considerable time.

By necessity, the wooden bridge which carried horses and riders over the ghyll and stream at the upper point in the woods had to bear a considerable weight. It's upkeep and its safety were therefore paramount.

The age of the bridge was somewhat indeterminate but it may well have dated from shortly after the Society's inception and its taking over the care of the Highwoods in 1980.

Though constructed of extremely stout timbers, both in chronological terms and in sheer practicality it had long been judged to be "well beyond its sell-by date."

Over the years, the Society has considered a number of remedial measures, ranging from demolition and replacement to removal and its substitution with a simple ford.

Now the work-party has taken action and the end result could be something completely different in concept.

In one of their swiftest and most decisive moves, the work-party on Saturday. August 1st set to with crowbars and sheer manpower.

Plank by massive plank, the horse-bridge on the White (i.e. horse) Trail was systematically dismantled in a remarkably short space of time. Given the dimensions of the timbers involved, this was no mean feat.

As the huge planks and their supporting timbers were removed and stacked elsewhere the extent of the problem and the need for a remedy were immediately apparent.

Significant rot had set in. It really had been time for the old bridge to go.



So, how to replace it?

In retrospect, the bridge's scale can be seen to have been a classic example of "taking a sledgehammer to crack a nut" for even in a wet winter, the stream beneath is tiny.

Bridge removal was conducted during one of the longest droughts on record. The stream which burbled down the ghyll during the preceding equally extreme winter had long-since dried.







A number of possible replacement solutions are under consideration.

In order to cope with the anticipated flow next winter, one idea might to be abandon the idea of a bridge and instead insert a length of large-bore pipe, pack soil on it to raise the ultimate level to something near the White Trail's approaches and top this with crushed stone. Side timbers would help the structure retain its integrity.

A busy morning was complemented by work on improving the drainage trench running alongside the nearby steps which carry the Horse Trail down towards the bridge. This is aimed at diverting water away from the steps during wet weather.

Notices were swiftly erected, warning riders of the temporary situation following removal of the horse-bridge.

“Peckham’s” demise

SO many generations of Woodpeckers had hammered their beaks into a gracious old Scots Pine on the Blue Trail that work-party members had nick-named it “Peckham.”

But, sadly, old “Peckham,” long devoid of life, was rotting where it loftily stood.

Work-party member and professional tree surgeon Mike Brett did a final inspection. He found that large sections of bark were falling off, revealing the dangerously decayed timber within.

For the safety of the public, “Peckham” had to go.

Mike deployed his forces with care when the work-party met on Saturday, September 5th. He had already lobbed a weighted cord over one of the few remaining boughs at the very top of the tree by the time the team assembled.



With this he was able to pull a heavy rope over the bough. This was secured to a nearby tree. A ratchet winch took up the tension.

The team had cleared a path so that the giant – estimated at more than 50ft high – would drop cleanly in the direction determined by the taut rope without hanging up on any obstruction.

With volunteer marshals wearing their HPS hi-viz tabards standing guard to prevent any passersby wandering into the danger area, Mike set to work with his chainsaw.

He cut a notch on the side of the pine facing the direction in which he wanted it to fall and notches on each side.

A few moments cutting with the chainsaw at the rear of the tree sufficed. With a mighty crash it fell exactly where Mike wanted.



Thank you

IT’S nice to know that the Society’s work is appreciated.

Membership Secretary Vernon Findlay is always delighted to receive subscription renewals well in advance of the date. He was especially pleased not only to receive one faithful supporter’s “sub” but a substantial donation in recognition of the dip the Society has had to make recently into its reserves in order to fund such essential work in the woods as the replacement for Chesson’s Bridge and the re-surfacing of the car park.

In total, the gift came to £510.

Thank you, that generous supporter.



As Mike cut the fallen Pine into sections which could be rolled clear of the Blue Trail, colleagues marvelled not only at the extent of its decay but at the number of Woodpecker nest holes and the hundreds of peck marks where the birds had hunted for insects.

Within an hour, “Peckham” was reduced to a series of colossal logs – and the Blue Trail was safe for users of the woods.

Careful counting of the Pine’s annual growth rings revealed that it had been a Highwoods “resident” for at least 137 years.

Colleagues who had been undertaking clearance work near the main pond and others who had been patching the car park joined the rest of the gang as they enjoyed their after-work tea and coffee – and Membership Secretary and Health and Safety Officer Vernon Findlay’s birthday cake.











A mixed bag of work

A MIXED bag of work faced the work-party when it gathered on Thursday, September 10th.

This included fixing a hole in the newly-re-erected fence around the main pond, clearing drainage gulleys beside the steep slope on the Tesco Bags of Help access-for-all trail and creating more "leaky dams" – the last designed to slow water flow and create new wet habitats.



On behalf of the Warden Group, Jim Foster reported later: "I stayed with the fenced pond group. Reg and Joy Groombridge fixed the hole and secured other weak points. Three others cleared the gulleys, and Cliff Crawford and one other created two small 'leaky dams'."

Opportunity was taken when driving in three new fence posts at the main pond to attach bird-nesting boxes built by Society Health and Safety Officer Vernon Findlay.

Photos: Jim Foster.

