THE APRIL FRITILLARY

The ‘Woodman’s Friend’, as it was affectionately known was common in the days when many woodlands were actively worked for coppice products and charcoal.

One of the first butterfly species to emerge each year, it was also once known as the ‘April fritillary’, but this was before the Gregorian calendar was adopted (11 day shift), pushing its usual first appearance date back into early May. However, as climate change has encouraged an earlier emergence, it once again lives up to its old name now appearing from late April onwards.

The sight of numerous male pearl-border fritillaries swooping low over flower-rich coppice cops, rides and glades is an uplifting spectacle of a British spring. Before the hunt for females begins, they take on fuel in the form of nectar from carpets of purplish-blue bugle flowers. Other species, including dandelion, are also visited with two or three males jostling for position on a single flower-head.

The males have beautiful, large, blue eyes and hunt down freshly emerged females by sight. They are attracted to any orange-brown objects and on several occasions have investigated the orange cap of my soft drink bottle!

In late afternoon and early evening the butterflies congregate on trackside patches of bugle to replenish their energy reserves. This is the best time for photographers to capture them – the pursuit of butterflies through coppice cops is discouraged as you may disturb breeding nightjars.

Once mated, female butterflies hide away for a couple of days while their eggs ripen, before fluttering over the ground to find some suitably fresh violet plants to lay a single egg on the underside of a leaf or on vegetation or wood litter close-by. The eggs hatch after about two weeks.

The velvety black, spiny caterpillar moults its skin three times during summer. Each time it sheds the old skin the caterpillar’s soft body expands quickly. Soon after the third moult, usually in July, it enters hibernation hidden within a curled, dried leaf.

Following a winter of inactivity the caterpillars wake in early March. Through diligent searching the caterpillars can sometimes be found sunbathing on dried leaves or wood chips, before their body temperature is raised sufficiently for them to become mobile and capable of digesting a meal of violet leaves.

After reaching full size they stop feeding and form a camouflaged chrysalis, suspended from low vegetation. Over a period of about three weeks the miracle of metamorphosis takes place inside. Then during the later part of that month the butterfly emerges, expands its tightly furled wings and once more begins its fascinating life cycle.

NEIL HULME, BUTTERFLY CONSERVATION – FRITILLARIES FOR THE FUTURE PROJECT OFFICER

Left: Pearl bordered fritillaries on dandelion
Right: Full grown caterpillar
© Neil Hulme
UPDATE FROM THE VRS TEAM


The latest fruit of our joint working is a new Volunteer Agreement which seeks to outline, in general terms, what Volunteer Rangers can expect from SDNPA; what we ask for in return and how we work together. I think it’s largely common sense and I hope there is nothing contentious in there. However, if you’ve got any comments on it or any of the other information you get from us [or don’t get from us], please get in touch with me, or talk to one of the other members of the Committee. A copy of the Agreement was sent to all active Volunteer Rangers in early February and it can also be found on the Volunteer section of the SDNPA Intranet alongside key documents. It’s now sent out to all new Volunteer Rangers as part of a follow-up ‘pack’ of information.

Another subject discussed by the VRS Committee recently was how we should recognise the fantastic long-term contribution that many Volunteer Rangers make to the National Park. VRS Chair Nevill Brooke has written a short note below and we’d very much like to hear your views.

Is a 9ct gold pin badge still the best way to make to the National Park. VRS Chair Nevill Brooke has written a short note below and we’d very much like to hear your views.

As many of you will already know, Sarah Brett recently left Iain Hartle’s volunteering support team to go on maternity leave and was replaced by Corinne Munday. I would like to take this opportunity, on behalf of all of us in the VRS, to wish Sarah all the best and to thank her for the excellent job she’s been doing – always smiling, always helpful and always committed to serving the VRS to the best of her ability. It is much appreciated, Sarah, we shall miss you. At the same time a warm welcome to Corinne Munday who joined Iain’s team in late January to replace Sarah, we all look forward to working with you.

In my last Chairmen’s Corner I mentioned the National Trails Conference in Wiltshire which was attended by four delegates from the SDNPA/VRS. From all accounts it was a very informative and valuable event, particularly the opportunity of being able to exchange views on volunteering with other UK National Parks. Arising from this, Alan Jones, who was one of the National Park volunteer delegates from Exmoor produced a valuable draft paper for the VRS Committee to consider regarding the possible establishment of an online VRS Forum which primarily would look to enhance communications within the VRS community. As it happens this paper very neatly tied into a wider review the VRS Committee had agreed to initiate at its recent meeting to look at the long term role and responsibilities of the Committee, particularly in light of the imminent SDNPA organisational restructuring. We intend to widen this discussion to all VRS members in due course.

Lastly, as you will see in the adjacent article, the SDNPA and the VRS Committee have agreed to look again at the whole question of the Long Service Award, please let us have your views.

NEVILL BROOKE, VRS CHAIRMAN

Harvest Mouse Survey

IT WAS WITH GREAT EXPECTATION THAT THE VRS WESTERN SUNDAY TEAM GATHERED AT QUEEN ELIZABETH COUNTRY PARK’S VISITOR CENTRE READY TO PARTICIPATE IN THE NOVEMBER HARVEST MOUSE SURVEY AT SELBORNE.

Ranger Rob introduced us to the standard safety points and gave a quick briefing about the plan for the day. He set the scene by highlighting that what we were about to do was initiated by Gilbert White in the 1760s! Guest ecologist Francesca Pella then told us about the habits of harvest mice, their nests and where we were likely to find them. Rob revealed his ‘highlighted maps’ and delivered his master plan to cover the areas where the nests were likely to be found. It felt very much like Monty briefings his staff in North Africa.

We split into groups and hastily went to our designated areas to find the elusive harvest mouse nests. Each group was made up of people of varying experience and needless to say Gary, one of the Sunday team old sweats, spotted his first of the day in under four minutes! Others were not so lucky and when we returned to the reception area for lunch our group had accrued a grand total of four nests. However, other groups experienced higher levels of success. For example Terry, another old sweat, announced his group’s morning total was an amazing 43! Obviously it was merely a coincidence that Rob was also in that group and it was pure luck that they had the best area.

Lunch was provided and served by farmer Kate Faulkner which proved to be a fabulous feast of homemade soups, sausages, rolls, cakes, chocolate bars and fruit for the healthy individuals. This was made even more pleasant by being joined by local farmers who were taking a break from their nearby hedge-laying training.

Suitably nourished and rested we deployed for the second phase of harvest mouse nest discovery. In each of the groups some members had managed to hone their spotting skills and were able to find the amazing tiny balls of matted grass delicately bonded to the stems of bushes or meticulously camouflaged deep inside the grass tussocks. Most of us came away satisfied and enthused in the knowledge that we had followed in the footsteps of Gilbert White.

All in all yet another thoroughly enjoyable day in the National Park thanks to the efforts of all involved and in particular to Robs, Chris, Francesca and Kate. Roll on the next survey when hopefully I shall be able to relay the experience of discovering that first nest!

JOHN LOWE, WESTERN DOWNS VOLUNTEER RANGER

VOLUNTEER LONG SERVICE AWARD

At the recent VRS Committee meeting we agreed to provide feedback to the SDNPA on the current volunteer Long Service Award (LSA) (UK LA).

Currently LSAs are awarded in the form of a badge to those individuals who have served 10, 20 or 30 years as a VRS ranger – these are presented at the Annual VRS AGM by senior SDNPA staff. Where an individual cannot attend the AGM they are presented locally by the relevant SDNPA Area Manager.

So the first question is on timings – are these still appropriate or should we consider, say, a 25 year award as well? In terms of the actual award – a metal pin badge – is this still appropriate or should we use something different, if so, what?

Please send any comments and suggestions to Iain Hartle by 31 May 2016. Many thanks.

NEVILL BROOKE, VRS CHAIRMAN
The field behind the community Forge Shop/Cafe was transformed for the day by volunteers and rangers. As well as all-day live music, a farmers’ market and traditional fete games, apples from the village’s gardens were pressed with a reconstructed press to make the village cider. It was a fabulous day, well supported by locals and visitors alike. The atmosphere created by the South Downs Folk Singers, Fishbourne Morris Dancers and bands such as ‘Renegade Dogs’ and ‘Said the Maiden’ was very fitting for a traditional English fete on a glorious autumnal day. If your bag is local food, good booze and great entertainment with like-minded people then Slindon Apple Day ticks the boxes.

The little village of Slindon in West Sussex welcomed over 1,000 people on Saturday 10 October to celebrate the National Trust’s third Slindon Estate Apple Day, an autumnal fete celebrating all things apple.

As a member of the South Downs Folk Singers (southdownsfolksingers.blogspot.co.uk) this day reminded me of where the traditional songs we sing originated: in the homes and pubs of the working population. I suspect nothing has changed back to prehistory with the themes we sing about – love, betrayal and wisdom that time has betrothed to us.

Most of the charitable events the South Downs Folk Singers support are at venues which they call ‘Witch’s Brew’! I was only about 8 when, on a hot summer’s day, he poured me a glass of his crystal-clear cider to quench my thirst after helping him dig in the garden. I poured it straight down my throat and didn’t wake up until mid-evening!

JOHN CRANE, SECRETS OF THE HIGH WOODS VOLUNTEER RANGER

That is exactly what Georg Müller has done and what a book it is, without question the most comprehensive reference book on one of Europe’s disappearing legacies. If you want to know how the Albanians make their stick picket fences, or which is the only country to have seaweed earth-banks, or how the discovery of field walls in Ireland dating from 3000BC changed archaeologists’ views of our Neolithic ancestors, this is the book for you.

Although clearly a reference book, it is far from a dry tome and makes a good read for anyone interested in the countryside. Illustrated by some beautiful photographs and drawings by Müller, I particularly like those capturing the finer differences of ‘folded, bent, stepped, woven and crossed’ hedge styles. Although adopting a fairly dispassionate ‘voice’, Herr Müller’s enthusiasm shines through. He is clearly dismayed by the wholesale use of barbed wire and I detect some enthusiasm for the variety of British and Irish hedges and dry wall styles.

Our earth-banks, hedge laying styles and dry stone walling are comprehensively covered. Müller indicates that, with few exceptions, it is only here that these skills have been systematically retained or re-learnt, particularly regarding hedge laying. We are now beginning to teach enthusiasts in other European countries to do the same, a process to which, in my own small way, I have contributed to by teaching hedge laying in Normandy. It is mostly in Holland that hedge laying has been re-introduced by the British, focusing on the old Dutch style of hedging with a few English refinements to the technique. Southern England residents may be disappointed by the lack of inclusion of seaweed earth-banks or how the British make their stick picket fences, or which is the only country to have seaweed earth-banks, or how the discovery of field walls in Ireland dating from 3000BC changed archaeologists’ views of our Neolithic ancestors, this is the book for you.

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Main: South Downs Volunteer Rangers
Volunteer Ranger

IAN RUNCIE, EASTERN DOWNS VOLUNTEER RANGER

Main: Accapella. Apple Day at Slindon Estate © National Trust Scott Ramsey Photography

WHAT DRIVES AN APPARENTLY NORMAL GUY TO, ONE DAY, LEAVE HOME AND SPEND THE NEXT 30 YEARS SURVEYING, RESEARCHING AND WRITING A BOOK OF TWO VOLUMES AND A TOTAL OF 1280 PAGES CATEGORISING THE HEDGES, BANKS AND WALLS IN EUROPE’S FIELDS?

EUROPE’S FIELD BOUNDARIES BY GEORG MÜLLER.

It is hoped that it may go some way to assist a revival of the European landscape.
I want to make fellow volunteers aware of the new paths that have opened up over the National Trust land at Gayles Farm between Birling Gap and Seven Sisters Country Park. There is a splendid new gate directly on top of the hill up from the dew pond at the sea end of Crowlink valley. You can then walk inland parallel to the very busy coastal stretch of the South Downs Way to a stile. After visiting a lonely trig point and going over another stile from there follow the fence line around to a hidden kissing gate with a way-marker stating this is the ‘Habitat Trail’. This is a slightly neglected and mysterious trail rapidly falling into disrepair which is rather sad because it is the prelude to a lovely undulating inland walk along to Exceat New Barn.

I wonder if this could be a volunteer project to reinstate the short stretch of the trail through the scrub before it breaks out into the open and rolling countryside?

At the barn you can head steeply uphill and climb another stile. Instead of taking the existing way marked path to the sea you turn sharp left through another gate and can walk around field edge paths heading in a westerly direction to lead you to the entrance drive of Gayles Farm. Here another new gate tucked away in the hedge leads out to the bus stop and the main coast road. You can either wait for a bus or, if you want to make a circular walk, cross over into Friston Forest and follow the path shadowing the road right along to Friston pond and back down Crowlink valley to the pond where this description started.

Jean Blemings, Eastern Downs Volunteer Ranger

Above: Overlooking the Seven Sisters cliffs towards Birling Gap © Peter Cairns

The day started out wet as the Eastern Wednesday Group joined Matt Dowse in early November at the Long Man of Wilmington, a figure outlined on the chalk hillside.

He overlooks the Cuckmere valley and is alternatively known as the Wilmington Giant.

We were to clear a patch of invasive scrub spoiling a piece of exquisite chalk grassland on a steep slope just a few tens of metres from the national landmark. The steep slope made the access to the site and the working conditions difficult; the early morning rain causing the surface to be slippery. Later a giant beach-ball shaped piece of gorse bounced right down to the bottom of the hill nobly retrieved by Mike Squires, who brought it back up to the fire site.

A small pale brown moth fluttered up. I found a pot in my bag and somehow managed to relocate and capture it. To the naked eye only the rounded wing and a median longitudinal streak were noticeable features. Back at home under a magnifying glass, various dots became visible, including one which had no opposite pair. Had my specimen been damaged? I thumbed through my book on micro moths. Yes there was a match, and the illustration showed one odd dot. (I suspect the wing fold on the moth at rest obscures a dot on the other appendage.)

The moth is called agonopterix pallonella.

Does 6 kilometres count as being near? It eats greater knapweed and occasionally common knapweed or saw-wort.

This finding made the day’s task of maintaining and restoring chalk grassland all the more worthwhile. However, agonopterix pallonella is hardly a name that inspires or sticks in the memory, unless you happen to be a Latin scholar. Why not give it an English name? My suggestion is The Giant’s Moth but at 12mm in length it might be compared with calling The Long Man – Little John…

Tim Visick, Eastern Downs Volunteer Ranger

“WHY NOT GIVE IT AN ENGLISH NAME? MY SUGGESTION IS THE GIANT’S MOTH BUT AT 12MM IN LENGTH IT MIGHT BE COMPARED WITH CALLING THE LONG MAN – LITTLE JOHN…”
“WHERE ARE WE GOING? WHAT ARE WE DOING?” WE ENQUIRE AS WE CLIMB INTO THE LAND ROVER AT BARNHAM STATION CAR PARK.

Being a Sunday we are a mixed age group of both sexes, retired and workers – some old timers and some newer recruits. “Do we need wellies? Are we having a fire?” we ask the ranger – usually Ian, Tom or Simon. They patiently answer us before we drive off heading for the Downs, usually north of Chichester but sometimes towards Hampshire or east to Storrington or Steyning. There is a variety of all tasks. The site also determines the type of task for the day but they usually involve scrub and path clearance, coppicing, fence, gates or steps work. After a briefing on safety, what we are aiming to do and where, we start working some together and some further apart so everyone feels happy. At coffee time sitting on the ground nearby we share biscuits while we catch up on news. Breaks are negotiable and no pressure is put on us if we feel like a rest now and again.

Most tasks with Darren Rolfe, West Sussex County Council ranger, amuse us as he brings a generator, kettle, benches, coffee and chocolate biscuits! However many of his tasks are tough and often seriously wet such as installing a kissing gate with horizontal timbers and some newer recruits.

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HELENA LEWIS, CENTRAL DOWNS VOLUNTEER RANGER

“We love the camaraderie and the way the group gels together…”

Above: Many hands at work on the SDW next to Ardington piggy. © Helena Lewis

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“We love the camaraderie and the way the group gels together…”

Above: Many hands at work on the SDW next to Ardington piggy. © Helena Lewis
MACRO PHOTOGRAPHY

I’m in my third enjoyable year as a Volunteer Ranger and a surprising outcome has been a new passion for me, macro photography and an interest in entomology.

I’ve always been a “snap-shooter” of people and landscapes but recently a focus on anything smaller than a human head – when walking I saw the views but never the bugs.

My new hobby has its origins in a talk on bumblebees given to our Thursday group by Cliff Hepburn, another volunteer ranger. It was suggested we had a photo competition to see who could take the best bumblebee pictures.

Great, I thought, grabbed my camera and rushed out to find bumblebees to photograph.

“Who could take the best bumblebee pictures.”

Disappointment, my camera was not up to the job – a replacement was needed.

Cameras are not cheap and I didn’t want to make an expensive mistake so I googled “insect photography” to see what inspiring macro-photographers were doing.

There’s a lot of information out there but eventually I contacted Faiz Bustamente who has a great website – mirrorlessmacro.blogspot.co.uk displaying his photographs, techniques and equipment.

I contacted Faiz via Facebook and he was extremely helpful so I eventually invested in a suitable camera and macro lens.

I have found macro photography very challenging. Insects and spiders are often very difficult to locate as they are so small and are usually in inconvenient places. They refuse to pose and being alive are usually on the move. Photographing dead insects, unless being eaten by a bigger one, is a big no no. The macro lens requires that you are no, no, no. The macro lens requires that you are extremely close to your subject, with my lens its 8cm, so you have to creep up very slowly.

You focus manually by moving back and forth so you need a steady hand and good eye sight. Illuminating small insects with a flash without blowing out the detail is a challenge and you need to experiment with all sorts of flash diffusers. Apart from the equipment you need patience and perseverance.

Photographing bugs and not knowing what they are is not much fun so I have found great Facebook sites to assist with identification. Post a picture on the “Insects of Britain & Northern Europe” or the “British Spider Identification Group” sites and you will get a response and an identification within the hour, usually accompanied by lots of discussion if members disagree.

The detail and colours you see in insects and spiders when magnified never ceases to amaze me. I’ve a lot to learn, but I’ve never had so much fun crawling around in the countryside – I am totally addicted and can recommend it to anyone interested in nature.

ROGER KIERNAN, EASTERN DOWNS VOLUNTEER RANGER

The Rise of Northwood

The ‘Rise of Northwood’ after the ancient oak and beech trees that once stood on the site, this 10 year project will see 185 acres of former arable fields (equivalent to 105 football pitches) return to their pre-World War One landscape.

During both World Wars, trees in Northwood were felled and the area was farmed to help support British food production. The farming role continued until September 2013 when the land was returned to the National Trust to be managed.

‘The Rise of Northwood’ only became a reality when the Slindon Estate received a bequest from a Mr John Springthorpe Hunt. He loved the South Downs and was a bequest from a Mr John Springthorpe Hunt. He loved the South Downs and was particularly interested in the creation of woodland. With a grant from the Forestry Commission the National Trust have been able to start the process of returning this landscape back to its former woodland through seed dispersal and tree planting.

There are still pockets of the original ancient woodland that remain today, however these areas are small and disconnected from each other. Natural regeneration of trees will gradually increase the size of the woods and connect these isolated pockets together, allowing wildlife to thrive once more.

Getting a project of this scale on the ground has taken a huge amount of effort. With help from the community and local organisations including the South Downs National Park Volunteer Rangers, we’ve already planted over 13,000 native tree saplings including oak, beech and field maple.

At this point I must say thank you to everybody who has already been involved in contributing towards a woodland legacy that will be enjoyed for generations to come.

Many tasks are now ongoing to protect the new saplings and areas of natural regeneration. There are also plenty of exciting plans for the years ahead including the creation of woodland pasture. We’re always in need of willing volunteers to help with the project so check out our ‘Rise of Northwood’ blog to find out more about our work, how you can help and details of upcoming tree planting events – riseofnorthwoodnt.wordpress.com

Northwood is accessible by a network of public footpaths and bridleways. We’ve also opened up some permissive pathways directly through the site to allow you to explore even further. Next time you have a chance, pop down to Northwood and see this new woodland growing right before your eyes.

HANNAH WOODHOUSE, NORTHWOOD PROJECT RANGER

Left: Planting trees

© National Trust Scott Ramsey Photography

Main: Sowing the seeds

© National Trust Scott Ramsey Photography

The Rise of Northwood

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YOUR REVIEWS

This section is all about sharing reviews of your favourite things. Tell us about books you’ve read, pubs you’ve visited, tools or gadgets you’ve used or even websites that you’d recommend to other volunteers. Email your reviews, of up to 100 words, to dt@southdowns.gov.uk with a picture.

TRADITIONAL INN AWARD

THE THREE HORSESHOES, ELSTED, WEST SUSSEX, GU29 0JY
A delightful old pub with a pleasant, unspoilt interior. This is a genuine local pub serving a variety of real ales and good food to the local community, but beware it can get packed at the weekends. And why? Because of its large garden offering magnificent views of the ridge of the South Downs. For me it’s probably the best view from a pub in the National Park that you can find. Well worth a visit.

JILL SEENEY, EASTERN DOWNS VOLUNTEER RANGER

PIC IN THE PARK
SELBORNE WATER SUPPLY
[GRID REF SU 744330]
At the edge of Selborne, Hampshire, you can find a Victorian memorial to the Reverend Gilbert White in the form of a lion’s head water trough. A spring that rose from nearby Noar Hill was diverted here by public subscription in 1879 to become the principle water supply to the village. Beside the road a retaining wall holds back most of the water to enable an overflow to discharge through the lion’s mouth into a trough. At least that’s what used to occur, today it is poorly maintained and most water comes out of a nearby pipe. But it remains an interesting feature which is easily spotted alongside the main road.

RUSSELL CLEAVER, WESTERN DOWNS VOLUNTEER RANGER

REVIEWS

A FOREST, BY MARC MARTIN
2015, TEMPLAR PUBLISHING £7.99
This inspirational fairy tale for children aged 7 and under is beautifully illustrated with dense colour, rich textures and the odd scribble. Simply but eloquently told, A Forest offers wise words about looking after our forests and our world. I found this at a National Trust shop and fell in love with it. A perfect purchase for future volunteer rangers and those of us who like children’s books!

JILL SEENEY, EASTERN DOWNS VOLUNTEER RANGER

SAY THE MAIDEN, CD
These three young ladies were the winners of the Bristol Folk Festival Isambard Folk Award 2015 and have supported Dave Swarbrick, one of the most influential fiddle players today, on several gigs. When performing free in support of the Slindon Village Apple Day they entranced us with their wonderful harmonies and multi-instrumental skills. Most of the tracks on the album are traditional covers with their own arrangements but they do write their own songs too.

JOHN CRANE, SECRETS OF THE HIGH WOODS VOLUNTEER RANGER

CAPTION COMPETITION

CAN YOU CREATE A WITTY CAPTION FOR THIS PHOTOGRAPH? EMAIL YOUR IDEAS TO DT@SOUTHDOWNS.GOV.UK

The winner of last edition’s caption competition was...

“I THINK I’VE JUST FOUND THE LAST MAN WHO TRIED TO CLEAR THIS BLOCKAGE”
GRAHAM WYNN
A very different shot of the famous cottages at Cuckmere Haven won first prize in the South Downs National Park photo competition 2015–16 for Piers Fearick from East Preston, near Littlehampton in West Sussex. In the first competition the 31-year-old has entered he also won the special ‘Dark Skies’ award and a total prize of £350.

Second prize was awarded to Martin Offer from Pagham for his crisp and beautifully composed photo of sheep and woods in a hoar frost and third prize went to Rhian White from Brighton for her brilliantly timed shot silhouetting a playful dog jumping in front of the setting sun.

More than 20,000 long-distance walkers, cyclists and riders complete the 160km South Downs Way every year and many more will explore a section of it. Some for pleasure, others for the challenge and many to raise money for charity. A new donation scheme means that people who’ve enjoyed the trail now have the chance to give something back.

As volunteers know so well it takes a lot of hard work to keep the South Downs Way in good condition. However, like many publicly funded initiatives resources are limited so if everyone who used the trail gave just £1 we could make the Trail even better.

Donations of any size are now welcome with 80 per cent of money received being used to directly fund improvements to the Trail. The remaining 20 per cent will be used to support the Trail website, where around 140,000 people go every year to find free and independent information on how to access the Trail, how to break it up into sections, where to stay and much more – this website isn’t publicly funded.

To make a donation towards the South Downs Way visit nationaltrail.co.uk/south-downs-way/donate

A 2.5km stretch of new and improved path has opened up year-round access for walkers and cyclists of all abilities from Chichester into the heart of the South Downs National Park.

The new section of the Centurion Way was officially opened by Trevor Beattie, CEO for the South Downs National Park Authority and Alex Barron, Chief Executive of the Edward James Foundation on Tuesday 22 December 2015. The trail follows the line of the old Chichester to Midhurst railway line, the last section of which closed in 1991.

For the time being the trail ends with information panels at West Dean tunnel telling the story of the railway line. Existing access to the village itself stays the same via the segregated path alongside the A286 – further sections of the route will be created as funding becomes available.

The project is one small part of a £5 million investment, supported by the Department for Transport, in a network of core cycling and shared paths across the South Downs National Park.

NEW DONATION SCHEME FOR THE SOUTH DOWNS WAY

NEW SECTION OF CENTURION WAY OPENS

PHOTO COMPETITION
On 17 December 2015 volunteers from the Eastern and Central Downs joined forces for a Christmas task and buffet at Foxholes Camping Barn, Seven Sisters Country Park. Around 50 volunteers carried out the morning task clearing tree growth and undergrowth around (and in) the pond in the grounds of Foxholes Farm. With so many volunteers present there was plenty of cutting and burning.

As a thank you and Christmas celebration we then sat down to a lovely buffet and an illustrated talk on bumblebees from Dave Goulson Professor of Biology at Sussex University.

IAN WILDRIDGE, EASTERN DOWNS VOLUNTEER RANGER

A TOUR OF RATHFINNY WINE ESTATE

In November last year Assistant Ranger Matt Dowse arranged a joint task day for the Seven Sisters Volunteer Work Groups.

The morning involved scrub clearance and burning on the north facing slope of Cradle Valley on the Rathfinny Wine Estate. After lunch we had a tour of the vineyard, winery and flint barns by Richard James, a former South Downs Ranger, now the Environment and Operations Manager at Rathfinny.

The original Rathfinny Farm was purchased in 2010 by owners, Mark and Sarah Driver. Since then the estate has developed with the vineyard now covering 180 acres along the south facing slope of Cradle Valley. It is already the largest vineyard in the UK with a target of 380 acres to be planted by 2020.

Those of us who have worked on the north slope over the years can remember the early development of the vineyard. The “roofless” derelict flint barns, the early environment studies and soil analysis and the mini ‘meteorological’ stations dotted along the valley measuring air and soil temperatures, wind speeds etc. I can also remember the first vines, which were grown in Germany, being planted in early 2012 using a GPS system.

On the tour we were shown recently planted vines and the winery’s new grape presses, large temperature controlled storage tanks and bottling plant. 10,000 bottles of Chardonnay (2014 harvest) were in store with the equivalent of a further 40,000 bottles of wine (2015 harvest) in the storage tanks. The first commercial sales of this wine will be in late 2017 and early 2018. Richard pointed out that 98 per cent of Rathfinny’s production will be sparkling wine, predominantly Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier, with a target figure of one million bottles per annum produced from 2020 onwards. Supermarkets are out as preferred sales will be to independent retailers and hotels both at home and abroad.

The final part of the tour was to the now restored flint barns which are hotel accommodation and a restaurant. Muddy boots removed, we were invited in to have tea and biscuits.

Rathfinny operate their own estate tours which begin in March and start and finish at their Alfriston retail outlet, The Gun Room. There is also a separate signposted ‘Rathfinny Trail’ which starts at this point.

IAN WILDRIDGE, EASTERN DOWNS VOLUNTEER RANGER

FOXHOLES CAMPING BARN

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