



GADDESSEN
ESTATE

Nick Halsey's column for the Great Gaddesden Parish Newsletter

Woodlands

January is always a time of renewal in the woodlands, when the hazel catkins "Lamb's tails" appear and the work of the woodman intensifies. There are several reasons for this. Planting of trees, most of which is bare rooted stock, needs to be completed before the sap rises in March; thinning and felling is best undertaken in the winter, before the leaf is on the trees. This means that there is much less "lop and top" to be disposed of, that nesting birds are not disturbed and that the "white" woods, like ash, beech and sycamore, are not discoloured by the rising sap. The shooting season ends on February 1st, and this also removes a constraint on woodland work.

This month has been particularly busy, for while the snow prevented us from doing much other outside work, it is fine for forestry work. Nathan and John were able to fell and clear the leaning and windthrown larches in New Gorse which suffered storm damage a year ago. In Birchley Wood between the Gaddesden Place Lodge and the Cricket Pavilion a woodman from Norfolk, Alfie Gibson, has been thinning the sub-compartment, producing mostly birch for firewood. In the Golden Parsonage Belts, planted under the now defunct Farm Woodland Premium Scheme, Michael and John have been cutting all the aspen suckers. This has to be done every few years to prevent them smothering the young oak.

One of the advantages of the snow has been that whilst it smothered brambles, it enabled the regeneration of holly, for which this parish used to be famous, to be seen. This was especially noticeable in Old Marsh Wood and Birchley. Deer can graze on holly, notwithstanding the prickles, so while we continue our deer management, we will fence some of the groups of holly to enable them to get away.

In February a harvester and forwarder are coming to thin the other part of Birchley Wood and the plantation in Marsh Wood, in the former case mostly Norway Spruce and in Marsh a mixture of Larch and exotic conifers.

Later we will be felling mature oak mostly in Big Wood which we hope, as in the past, will be to a large extent furniture quality.

Beef Shorthorns

The cattle have done well in the past two snowy months, though we have had to feed silage when the snow has been on the ground. Frozen water troughs are always a problem, and can be time consuming to remedy. In February the herd will be moved back to Hawbush Farm for calving.

Farewells

We were sad that Mac Graham died recently. His father was the last farm tenant of Upperwood Farm, and I believe his uncle was tenant of Whitehouse Farm before the late Percy Fensom. Some years ago Mac gave us a blueprint (yes it really is blue) of the Dutch Barn at Upperwood which was built before the war. Mac was always a keen supporter of the hunt and used to come whenever the hounds met at Bridens Camp or The Chequers.

We also heard that Miss Speary, the last of the local family of wheelwrights of Markyate had died. Truly the end of an era.

Mill Hill Farm

Since Mike Grayson last wrote he has been busy working at Chipperfield Common, Whipsnade Zoo and training a couple who whilst not wishing to pursue a career in forestry are keen to extend their equine skills to work with and show heavy horses. They have been set the goal of showing one of the horses in at least two competitions next season. He will keep us posted with regard their progress. They also had a visit from the members Bedfordshire Goat Society who were able to gain some practical knowledge of the working horse and for the more adventurous a chance to drive one.

This year Mike and Kathy took the horses to schools in Bucks and Beds to broadening the knowledge base of pupils with regard environmental studies. They visited schools in Milton Keynes and Luton where they continued their work with pupils from some five schools. On speaking with them it was heartening to discover that a number of senior pupils had chosen to study animal based sciences which they hoped after University would lead to employment.

Despite the latter Kathy and Mike were made very much aware of the ever-widening knowledge gap, which exists between many young town dwellers and the countryside. Of great concern was the inability to appreciate the importance of agriculture in respect of their day to day lives and the need actively support it.

One of the most pleasurable events of the year was the two days spent by the team at the Potten End Steam Rally. This wonderful and well attended show supported our local Hospice and provided both entertainment and a chance to rekindle past memories as the sight of the heavy horse working proved extremely popular and ensured them an invitation to next year's event.

This autumn and winter saw Mike and Kathy working with the young Suffolk Colt Foal, William. This young chap proved to be quite a live wire but extremely friendly. Sadly at times his desire to please and be man's best friend resulted in things not always going right such as when he stood on Mike's foot and through complications Mike spent three weeks in hospital. Whilst a little less exuberant, William remains confirmed in belief that all humans and Springer Spaniels are to be made friends with. One of only a little over 400 of his breed in the country today, William is in Category 1 (Critical) of the Rare Breed Survival Trusts register which means that he and his breed are at risk, which makes him a pretty special fellow.

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