

BACS

Newsletter

September 2003 No. 41

Benenden Amenity and Countryside Society

Dates for your Diary:

Autumn Walk – Sunday 28th September at 2pm
Clean Up Benenden Day – Saturday 11th October at 9am
16th AGM – 11th February 2004 at 7.30pm

Fly infestation:

The public meeting held on Thursday 21st August was well attended by nearly 200 parishioners, who were able to question a panel of councillors, local authority officials and other experts. The Panel included: Gordon Reynolds, Chairman of the Benenden Parish Council; Peter Davies, a local member of the Tunbridge Wells Borough Council; Russell Vickers, an Environmental Health Officer, Dr Chandra Khuma from the Kent Public Health Protection Agency, and James Molyneaux of the NFU. Our local MP, Ann Widdecombe, was unable to attend the meeting. However, she did issue a statement in which she expressed her concern over the fly infestation around Benenden and her sympathy for what the people of Benenden have had to endure.

Miss Widdecombe would welcome any comments or observations which readers might have. Ann can be contacted at The House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA (telephone: 020 7219 3000). She can also be contacted at the Conservative association of Maidstone and the Weald, 3 Albion Place, Maidstone, ME14 5DY (telephone: 01622 752463).

Russell Vickers was able to confirm that chicken manure, which had not been stored and treated in accordance with Local Authority guidelines, has been identified as the most likely cause of the fly infestation. However, this manure did not originate from the local Chicken Farm, Fridays, but from an establishment near Benenden within Ashford Borough. Mr Vickers was also able to confirm that action has now been taken on two farms which we understand stockpiled manure inappropriately. He also made the point that thousands of tonnes of chicken manure are produced in Kent every year, and this is normally spread on farmland without any adverse affects such as flies or odour. It was suggested that the hot weather in recent weeks exacerbated the problem. This was strongly contested by many local residents who claimed flies have been a major problem in Benenden every summer for several years. There was general agreement within the audience that the Borough Council has not done enough in the past to tackle the problem and Mr Vickers did concede that, on this matter, the Borough Council has been reactive rather than proactive.

It was noted during the meeting that covering the chicken manure with black polythene can drastically reduce the fly problem at source, and it was suggested that this practice should be included in any code of practice issued to farmers. James Molyneaux gave a brief outline of the relevant guidelines issued to farmers by the NFU. It was revealed that the guidelines for spreading chicken manure on farmland predominantly relate to the potential problem of odour, and do not mention flies in any part of the document. There was general agreement that these guidelines were inadequate and Mr Molyneaux assured the room that the NFU will now work with farmers and local authorities to update them.

There was, however, disagreement amongst the audience over whether new guidelines would be sufficient in eliminating the problem. It was suggested national legislation (which can take up to 5 years to enact) is needed to regulate the use of chicken manure on farmland. However, many local residents believed the best way of ensuring action is taken is to set up a local group which would work with local farmers and elected councillors to develop a code of practice. The panel agreed to the principle of setting up such a group, which would aim to prevent a recurrence of the fly infestation next year.

This local group has now met on two occasions and is working with local councillors, farmers and the NFU to develop a code of practice which will include guidelines on the production, transportation and spreading of chicken manure around the Parish. This should prevent any repeat of the problem next year. If you would like more information about this group, please contact our Chairman, Alan Milne, who represents BACS in the group.

Autumn Walk:

This year's Autumn Walk will be from the home of Ann and Stuart Andrew – the Papermill at Foxhole Lane - on Sunday 28 September, leaving at 2pm. Come into the drive and park down by the house. Following the completion of the walk, tea will be served back at the Papermill. Whilst drinks will be provided, food contributions will be welcomed. As always, this is a family event and all members and friends will be most welcome – together with dogs on lead. Much of the walk (which should take 2 hours or so) will be through privately owned woodland. Provided that we get a useful amount of rain by then, there should be a good display of funghi. We look forward to seeing you on the 28th.

Clean up Benenden Day:

Everyone is invited to help out in the Autumn Clean Up Benenden Day, which will be held on Saturday 11th October. We shall be helping the Parish Council to clean up the major roads within the parish, as well as the Village Green and Glebe Field. Volunteers should meet outside the Village Hall at 9.00am. Rubbish sacks will be provided, but volunteers may wish to bring their own gloves.

Planning Matters:

The Committee continues to look at planning applications for the benefit of all in Benenden. Ernie Pollard is responsible for monitoring all planning applications. BACS has also now created a new planning sub-committee, which will examine plans and sites and submit the Committee's view, where an application may be contentious.

Subscriptions:

Annual membership is still only £2 for an individual and £5 for a family. Members receive a quarterly newsletter, which has now been redesigned. The newsletter contains details of events being organised by BACS, and items of local interest from around the parish. I'm sure you will agree this represents excellent value for money. If you have not already paid your subscription for 2003, or if you know of anyone else who may like to join BACS, please get into contact with David Grief.

Your committee:

Alan Milne – Chairman

Somers, Mounts Hill, Benenden, TN17 4ET
Tel: 240819 Fax: 241109, Email: alanmilne@chartsec.co.uk

Dick Hill – Treasurer

Columbanus, Off Standen Street, Iden Green, TN17 4HR
Tel: 240517, Email: dandmhill@lineone.net

Angela Lloyd-Jones – Secretary

West Winds, Cranbrook Road, Benenden, TN17 4EU
Tel: 240354 Fax: 243064, Email: atljones75@hotmail.com

David Grief – Membership

Crit Hall, Cranbrook Road, Benenden, TN17 4EU
Tel: 241772 Fax: 240772, Email: david@grief.co.uk

Ernie Pollard

Springhill Farm, Standen Street, Iden Green, TN17 4LA
Tel: 240674, Email: erniepoll@beeb.net

Lizanne Brown

Lower Standen Farm, Benenden, TN17 4LA
Tel: 240193

Roger Lake

Benenden Barn, The Street, Benenden, TN17 4BZ
Tel: 241605

Carol Varley

White Lodge, Cranbrook Road, Benenden, TN17 4EU
Tel: 240514, Email: varleyuk@aol.com

William Davies

Weald House, Iden Green, TN17 4HH
Tel/Fax: 240723, Email: wgd@wealdhouse.co.uk

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Benenden Walks:

Once again, we are grateful to Ernie Pollard who has written the seventh in a series of guided walks in the Benenden Area. Comments would be welcome on the trail, which is attached to this newsletter. Is it too long, short or inaccurate in any way? Do you enjoy reading them? Do you walk them? Please let us know. These are drafts, not finished products. All the walks that have been printed in recent editions of the BACS newsletter will shortly be published as a small booklet. It is hoped that they will also be published on the internet. More details of this will be in BACS 42. If you know of a walk that has not yet been included, again, please let us know.

Trail 7: Standen and Dingledden

This walk, of about one and a half hours, starts at the Woodcock pub in Woodcock Lane (Grid reference 8063013) and is mostly along quiet country lanes.

Take footpath **WC335**, running south alongside the Woodcock garden to the extensive Standen Street Orchards. There have been orchards here for over 100 years. In the 1970s the land was split into small plots and sold to people hoping to build, or just to own a small piece of countryside. Because of planning restrictions, the owners lost interest; most plots were abandoned and became overgrown. The orchard is now back under unified management under a Countryside Stewardship grant. It is mostly apple trees, planted in the 1950s, with a few older cherries. The footpath follows the hedge-line at the western edge of the orchard. A map of about 1850 shows a house called "Sharpes" in the orchard a few metres from the road ahead.

Turn south-east (left) along Standen Street, an old road dropping gently down to the Hexden Valley. Queen Elizabeth I is thought to have used this route on her journey from Hemsted (presumably across the ford and along Field Lane to Iden Green) in 1573. As its name suggests, Standen Street runs though the den of Standen, which, like the adjoining dens of Iden and Dingledden, belonged to Aldington Manor on the edge of Romney Marsh.

Campion House, down a lane to the right, was named after Edmund Campion, a catholic martyr of Elizabethan times, by a recent owner, the actor Robert Speight. An earlier name was Standen the Less. Chapel House on the right, was perhaps used as a non-conformist chapel, although evidence is lacking, and on the left Little Standen and Old Standen (Standen the Great) are, like Campion House, medieval hall houses.

Opposite Old Standen is Leesden, restored after a recent fire. In the 1660s it was owned by Thomas Sharpe vicar of Beckley and occupied by his nephew Thomas Sharpe. At the same time, Old Standen was occupied by another Thomas Sharpe and Springhill Farm (then The Homestall) by still another Thomas Sharpe, uncle of Thomas Sharpe of Old Standen (pity the poor postman). Two hundred years earlier, John Sharpe had been a large landowner in Benenden; the family prospered and multiplied. No doubt the Kentish system of equal inheritance (by all sons) contributed the multiplicity of Sharpe landowners in the 1600s. By the end of the next century, few of the family were left in Benenden.

Beyond Springhill and a steeper slope with trees on high banks, the field on the left is known as Tank Field. The tank is still there close to the road; it was used for dipping hop poles and fence posts in hot tar, to preserve them. The small chimney is just visible from the road, partly hidden by ash trees. The tank probably dates from the late nineteenth century, when there were many in the parish; no doubt others have survived. Opposite Tank Field is a newly planted farm woodland, which may point the way to the future of some of the marginal agricultural land in the parish.

It is late May and yellow flag irises are in flower in the ditch outside Springhill Cottage. The cottage was built as a pair in the 1850s for farm workers at Springhill. The hedges along the walk are rich in shrub species, and beyond Springhill Cottage, with an old orchard on one side, the road is especially attractive. We are now on the parish boundary, with Sandhurst to the right and Benenden to the left. On the Benenden side is a field known as the Thirteen Acre. In 1777, when it belonged to Old Standen, it had its present bounds and was one of the largest fields in the parish. It now has a cluster of small rectangular ponds in one corner; dug for fish farming but now the home of marsh or laughing frogs and much other wildlife. The marsh frogs have spread widely since they

were introduced to Stone in Oxney from eastern Europe in 1935. We can hear them “laughing” half a mile away at Springhill in spring and early summer.

At the T-junction junction turn left. The junction was a crossroads, with the lost road going straight on and curving south-east to Kensham. There is a shaw of hornbeam coppice in Benenden on our left; hornbeam is a good for charcoal, no doubt used in the hop kilns.

Near Cattsford Bridge, there are alder trees and meadow-sweet benefiting from the damp conditions and beyond the bridge several quarries, perhaps for roadstone. Cattsford, formerly Cersford and similar forms, suggests the “cress” ford. However, in the 1400s Richard Kirsford had (un-named) land in Benenden, Sandhurst and Rolvenden. Cattsford farm was the only farm with land in the three parishes, so farm and bridge probably take their name from the Kirsford family.

At the next junction, where the three parishes meet, turn left along Dingledden Street, as it was known. Cattsford House ahead dates from around 1800, but has old timbers, perhaps from the earlier Cersford house. The stream in the valley on the left is the boundary between the dens of Dingledden and Standen and also between the hundreds of Rolvenden, where we are now, and Selbritten. There was almost certainly a watermill near to the modern Bankside bungalow, as the 1777 map names an “old mill field” here.

There is a wide variety of shrubs and climbers in the hedges, with hops and honeysuckle prominent. Trafford House, built as a guesthouse in 1908, is high on the right. On September 15th 1940 a German Heinkel bomber crashed here; members of the Benenden Home Guard were congratulated, in a letter from a guest, on their calm and efficient response.

The stream has an old, broken dam near the drive to Benton’s Farm; perhaps for a holding pond for the mill lower down. Both mill and the pond had gone by 1777. On the right is Dingledden House, dated at 1420-60 and one of the oldest houses in the parish. The porch and the carved timbers above it, are illustrated in *Haslewoods Parish of Benenden* (1889). Laurel’s’s Nursery does not have quite so long a history, but there has been a nursery here since 1920 and, in the 1930s the first owner Stuart Low employed about 100 men. At the junctions, keep bearing left; there are some handsome ornamental maples by the road.

Soon on our left, just short of Woodcock Farm, is a large yew marking the site of cottage and its garden. We are now in Woodcock Lane, a deeply sunken road, with Moor Wood to the west and Standen Wood to the east. Both are ancient woods with rich floras; on the roadside banks wood melic, a woodland grass with graceful flower-heads, is abundant.

Both woods have extensive chestnut coppice, probably planted for hop poles in the nineteenth century. In 1777 Standen Wood was divided between several farms in the den of Standen, with the woodland alongside the lane owned by Old Standen. It is possible that this pattern of ownership reflected the division of woodland, once held in common, between early settlers in the den of Standen.

The walk ends with our return to the Woodcock Inn – some of its history is shown on its wall inside.