

## **Mike's Musings: environment and conservation**

### **Mid summer**

#### **Weather June July 2009:**

##### *June*

It was generally a dry month there being 19 days with no rain and four days with only trace readings recorded. There were quite a number of days when there were fresh winds from NW/NE/E direction in the early days of the month giving good weather up to the 12<sup>th</sup>. A change of direction in the winds (SW/W) were of much lighter strength before they reverted back to NW/NE/E until the last three days when they were more southerly. Temperatures were in the mid twenties Celsius at the start and again in the middle of the month. At the end there were two hot days that touched 30 Celsius. It rained on seven days giving a total of 35.24 mms (1.4 inches) a third of which fell on the 12<sup>th</sup> of the month

##### *July*

The first few days of dry weather, the so-called BBQ summer, continued with temperatures of over 20 Celsius rising to the high twenties with light SW/S winds. This spell of fine weather was rudely interrupted on 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> when 27mm (over one inch) of rain fell in heavy showers. After the 9<sup>th</sup> everything went down hill with unsettled weather as it rained every day (with heavy showers on 11<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>) until 24<sup>th</sup> there were dry days on the 25<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>, but the month ended with heavy showers overnight and through the morning of the last three days. There was rain on 23 days, the total for the month being 115.4 mms (4.5 inches) making it the wettest July in our area for 18 years

##### *Prospects for the rest of the summer*

Well, the meteorological office has changed its mind and stated that there will be no settled and hot weather during August, with uncertainty surrounding the prospects for September. So, put your BBQs away folks as the Atlantic wet and windy jet stream appears to have settled along the Channel for the third year running.

#### **Wildlife around Inkpen:**

##### *Birds*

Throughout June and until the beginning of July the birdsong persisted with residents such as Blackbirds, Mistle Thrushes, Song Thrushes, and Robins raising their second or even perhaps third broods.

##### *Butterflies*

The sightings were variable, being dependent very much on whether there were dry and less windy days. The most abundant native species were undoubtedly the Meadow Brown and Whites. The village was not blessed with the huge numbers of Painted Ladies seen elsewhere locally. It was not until the Buddleias were in full bloom that Peacocks, Red Admirals and Tortoiseshell were observed in respectable numbers.

##### *Trees/Shrubs*

Elder and Rowan produced a good show of blossom that promised a terrific crop of berries, with Hawthorn being not far behind. It also looks as if there will be a bumper crop of holly berries. Horse chestnuts again suffering from the afflictions of the Leaf Miner Moth (*Cameraria*

*ohridella*) that leads to the premature autumn appearance of the leaves: fortunately the infestation does not kill the tree. However, more worrying is the infestation by the Processionary Moth (*Thaumetopoea processionea*) of Oaks in Southern England that is capable of killing the trees by completely stripping the leaves from individual specimens. This is a moth that has extended its range Northwards into temperate European countries as a result of climate change.

## **Environmental/conservation issues**

### ***Waste, litter and fly-tipping***

CPRE (Council for the Preservation of Rural England) Berks branch has produced a four page leaflet containing its 'Ten Point Charter' on what is entitled the "Declaration on litter abatement and Waste Management" that has only just come to the attention of the writer. This leaflet reflects the initiative by Bill Bryson's (CPRE President) 'Stop the Drop' concerning his 'bete noir' of litter and fly-tipping that is rife in the UK.

The CPRE supports Bryson's national appeal taken by local authorities, parishes, villages, amenity and civic bodies and residents. The CPRE has identified seven land-based sources of litter: Poorly contained household refuse; poorly secured refuse falling from road vehicles; slovenly loading/unloading of commercial vehicles; littering by members of the public which are walking, cycling and motoring;(often at organized events). An eighth source is the waste dumped at sea that ends up on beaches and shore lines (termed by mariners as 'jetsum' and 'flotsam').

The other principal features of the 'Ten Point Plan' are: environmental education in schools; more active enforcement of legislation on waste, litter and fly-tipping; supporting all initiatives to recycle; encouraging residents to care for their immediate environment by litter-picking and challenging those who litter, as long as pay due regard to their own safety and security.

### ***More about set-aside***

Bodies related to agriculture: the National farmers' Union (NFU), Country Landowners' Association (CLA), Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) and Linking environment and Farming (LEAF) have put forward a voluntary proposal, referred to as the Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE) to replace the now abandoned set-aside and countering the proposals for its replacement by DEFRA (Department of the Environment, Farming & Rural Affairs) reported on in the previous musings for April and May.

The RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) that has already endorsed the DEFRA scheme to replace set aside, notwithstanding that it is in favour of voluntary schemes where they are effective. With other conservation bodies, such as county wildlife trusts, the RSPB considers that the CFE proposals contain overly modest targets and little incentives for farmers to adopt environmentally sensitive practices.

*Footnote: The minister for DEFRA is due to announce the replacement regime for set-aside very shortly.*

### ***The impact on the landscape in West Berks arising from the change in agricultural production.***

Our much admired landscape of hedged fields, copses, streams and ponds has been the result of farm practices associated with the nature of foods produced in the past. We have become

accustomed to the loss of hedges (now fortunately being reversed) bordering arable fields and the proliferation of the bright yellow oil seed rape crops in spring and sweet corn (maize) later on in the year. Increasingly the purple/blue blooms of Linseed and even Borage is a common sight. However, more subtle changes have been occurring that have very probably not been noticed by most of us, especially in our own area, in which two kinds of farmland dominate, namely: relatively large and flat cultivated fields and unimproved downland grassland. These features respectively allow farmers to concentrate on arable cropping and sheep-rearing, that are complementary activities.

There are very few farms where dairy and beef cattle are reared locally. The principal change in these farmers' practice has been the preference for harvesting grass for silage rather earlier than making hay. However, what is less obvious are the relationships between what food we wish to eat and what farmers produce and consequently how the land is used that ultimately influences the appearance of our landscape.

Given current trends in our diets in order to control our weight and improve our health, we will almost certainly cut down on our consumption of dairy products and eat less meat, while conversely eating more fruit and vegetables. It is already apparent that there are fewer animals in the countryside, although with organic food output continuing to grow, despite a recent report by the London School of Hygienic and Tropical Medicine that it is no more healthy than intensive forms of production, this reduction in animal numbers might be offset by more free-range stocking, such as pigs and chicken. Moreover, as agriculture practices presently rely on oil for fuel and fertilizers a move to organic farming would mean more natural fertilizers would become available. This would be an argument for maintaining the numbers of animals. Lord Melchett (policy director of the Soil Association), reported in *The Independent* Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> July 2009, responding to the above report, argues that an increase in organic farming would benefit rural environments through a reduction in the use of pesticides and herbicides and be more sympathetic to wildlife as a result of the organic farming practices. It would also improve animal welfare and reduce the use of additives in our food and the medicines given farm stock, such as antibiotics.

In a sense we are at a crossroads. If we reduce animal husbandry the quantity of grassland will become less. This will certainly adversely affect agriculture in the West of England and upland areas, which is based on stock rearing, with much land likely being abandoned for farming. On the other hand, a move towards growing more fruit and vegetables will possibly lead to a revival in orchards and horticultural land use. Some aspects of this could be a greater variety of crops and more use of greenhouses and polytunnels. These changes will definitely change the appearance of the landscape having both beneficial and detrimental impacts on its appearance. In our area, in the short run, such changes are not likely to be very marked; the prospect is a continuation of the present regime. The relationship between the nature of the food we demand, how it is produced (intensively or extensively) and its effects environmentally are extremely complex; especially when the issue of the relative costs and generation of greenhouse gases are taken into account. This however, is not pursued at this juncture; it is a topic for a future musing.