Supporting and promoting our local Wildlife Trust

Friends of Cothill Reserves

Newsletter, December 2025

The Newsletter

A celebration is a fine thing to be able to report on and in this issue we catch up with the events of 30th May 2025 when, to mark National Nature Reserves Week, a fen-focused day of talks and walks took place at Cothill. The talks, by various specialists, are still available online at Cothill NNR Day and include key species of the fens, the history of the Ruskin reserve and present and future aspirations for management and restoration of the county's fens. First up in this issue Bob Evans takes us back to **the earliest days of the Ruskin reserve**, followed by David Lloyd and Steph Wilson reporting on the **NNR day** itself. Next, updates about some of **the work parties** on the various reserves tell of the dedicated and enthusiastic volunteer groups. **Moths** next, with the ongoing quest for the Scarce Burnished Brass and Peter Philp's moth-trapping event in July. Finally, **fungi**. Judy Webb walks us through Hurst Copse in search of waxcaps, inkcaps, milk-caps and all manner of fascinating things. Many thanks to all our contributors, generous as ever with their time and expertise.

Happy New Year.

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The RUSKIN RESERVE AND THE ORIGINS OF NATURE CONSERVATION part 1

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During our study day on 30 May 2025, which is described elsewhere in this *Newsletter*, I made a presentation about the history of the core reserve at Cothill. It's a fascinating as well as an important story, I think, and rather too long for a single contribution. So I'm dividing the material into two, leaving the larger national and even international context of the conservation movement for next time and relating here the local story of the acquisition of the 'Ruskin Plot' as a 'reserve' in the first years of the 20th century. I seek the indulgence of those who already know much of this detail, especially from the excellent work of Serena

Marner and Judy Webb; but it's a tale with implications much wider than would have initially appeared, and it bears retelling, even for those who already have a grasp of its lasting significance!

First we need to meet the key player in the story. George Claridge Druce (I've written about him at greater length at https://anhso.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Fritillary/frit8-druce.pdf) came from a simple background in south Northants, but a combination of practical skills and intellectual acumen, steely determination and social engagement took him to parallel careers in Oxford, as a pharmacist with a go-to shop on the High and a Liberal politician who became mayor of the city in 1900-1. He acquired a large house in Crick Road and named it Yardley Lodge, to remind him of the village and countryside where he had grown up.

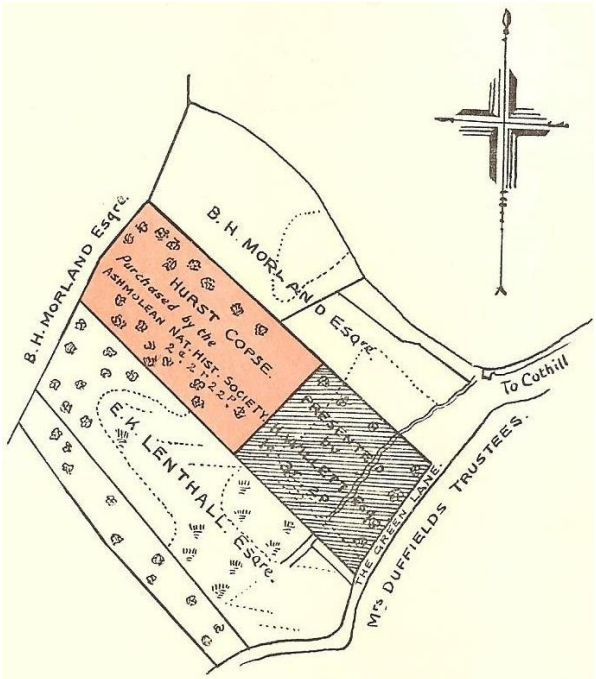
George Claridge Druce by Philip de László 1931. © Oxford University Images / Bodleian Library

For above all Druce was a passionate botanist, who by the turn of the century had compiled county floras for both Oxfordshire and Berkshire (he would later add two more, for Northants and Bucks). That, combined with his organizational talents, impelled him in those same years to reform the long-established but semi-dormant Ashmolean Natural History Society of Oxfordshire (ANHSO) and to endow it with a new, more outgoing purpose.

That takes us to a sequence of events, modest in scale but propitious, during the year 1901. Druce visited his friend Henry Willett, a prominent citizen of Brighton. Willett was a brewer, miller, and entrepreneur, and also a notable collector, especially of porcelain (some of his treasures are still to be seen in the museum there), but also fossils and archaeological finds; he was wealthy (he would leave £230,000) and munificent. While in Willett's house, Druce 'accidentally picked up a paper which announced the gift to Cambridge of a portion of Wicken Fen'. When he drew Willett's attention to this, the latter 'at once, with characteristic kindly generosity, said "I should like to do something of the kind for Oxford".'

The outcome was a joint expedition to Cothill. At the time the place formed a sort of no man's land on the edge of four parishes (which made for considerable and lasting confusion, as we shall see again later): Marcham, Besselsleigh, Dry Sandford – long belonging to Abingdon, but lately reconstituted as a new parish called St Helen Without – and Wootton, itself technically long a part of Cumnor. Apparently unremarkable and sparsely-settled, Cothill lay away from any main route, though it must have been well known to the drovers who walked their animals along String Lane. It comprised a scattering of private residences, especially a flour mill, whose present structure dates from the 18th century, alongside some more recent public buildings: a Baptist chapel, in place by 1840; a village school; and a church down the road at Dry Sandford.

This new site of worship needed a vicarage, and one was constructed near the entrance to String Lane. But within a few years it became a private school, which had been founded in Warwickshire in 1870 by an educational entrepreneur, Charles Wyndham Carles, and moved here as Cothill House a decade later. The grounds bordered the lane, and the boys would have grown familiar with the rough and boggy local terrain on its far side. Here lay two tiny adjacent parcels of enclosed land, known as Hurst Close and Copse.



THE "RUSKIN RESERVE."

Reduced from the 25-inch Ordnance Sheet, Berkshire, 6.13, edition 2nd, 1899.

These it was on which Druce had set his eye and showed to Willett, whose funding, helped by an appeal to the ANHSO, secured their purchase in two tranches during 1902-4: the first, a patch of fen, measured 1 acre, 3 roods, 2 perches and cost £90; the second, a piece of carr and woodland, extended to 2 acres, 2 roods, 22 perches, and was priced at £93-1s-6d. (In comparison, two acres at Wicken had gone for £10.) The land was bought from the estate of Mr J Aldworth. Does anyone know about this family? The neighbouring plots belonged to Morlands (who also owned the mill) and Lenthalls, both noted clans resident in the area for centuries.

Why did Druce choose Cothill? For one thing it lies close to Oxford (closer in fact than Wicken does to Cambridge). Moreover, it was evidently a favourite location of his: 'Cothill' (as a whole) is referenced more than 200 times in his *Flora of Berkshire,* often with the qualifier 'Bog' or 'Marsh'. In his general description of the county's habitats Druce explains it thus:

> [A] still more interesting feeder of the Ock, is a small brook with two or three branches, which comes from the watershed, at an elevation of about 300 feet near Besilsleigh … The branch which passes by Cothill forms a marsh, which is one of the richest and most interesting in the Midland Counties.

Mixed in with his appreciation of the merits of the site were also worries about potential habitat destruction: Druce feared the overall spread of 'drainage and cultivation', but he commented expressly on the threat from house-building in the area around Boars Hill.

The reserve was given to the newly refounded ANHSO, to be managed by two trustees, Druce and Edward Poulton. The latter was an eminent evolutionary zoologist, who having married into biscuits – Huntley & Palmer – lived in a grand and bizarre North Oxford residence (Wykeham House on the Banbury Road, these days home to the University Careers Service) and had a son soon to be equally eminent, as a peerless rugby footballer. More importantly for our purposes, Poulton had been a pupil of John Ruskin, indeed one of those undergraduates employed by him to build a road at North Hinksey in a famously futile pursuit of Ruskin's ideal of creative labour for all.

Ruskin, a friend of Willett's too, had died in January 1900. Esteem for his aesthetic and moral appreciation of nature stood at its height early in the new century. That's why the Cothill site was named after him, originally as the 'Ruskin Plot'. In 1916 the ANHSO handed over the two pieces of what now came to be called the 'Ruskin Reserve' to the young National Trust, another body founded in the spirit of Ruskinian enthusiasm for the natural world. They were to be 'retained as far as possible in their present state and condition and so as to maintain their natural aspect and features and to preserve the existing flora'. This larger picture gives richer meaning to Cothill's modest experiment in conservation, and I shall sketch it in the next issue.

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COTHILL FEN – A NATURAL HISTORY TREASURE

The following article by our Chairman, **David Lloyd**, is based on a report about the 30th May event published in the Oxford Times, with additional material by **Steph Wilson**, the event organiser. The brief history outline is based on the much fuller account presented by Bob Evans at the May meeting and which is this newsletter's leading article.

In 1903 eminent Victorian George Druce, pharmacist, botanist and mayor of Oxford together with his wealthy brewer friend Henry Willett recognised the natural history importance of an exquisite area of fen at Cothill, near Abingdon. They bought the land and named it after Willett's great friend and social reformer John Ruskin and presented it to the Ashmolean Natural History Society of Oxfordshire. Later the parcel of land passed to the National Trust and was managed by the Nature Conservancy. The name survives and today the 'Ruskin Plot' is incorporated within a larger area known as Cothill Fen. Being an extremely unusual combination of alkaline spring-fen with acidic areas underlain by calcareous Jurassic rocks, the fen's flora and fauna comprises a wide diversity of species including many national rarities such as marsh orchids, butterworts, grass of Parnassus, southern damselfly and rare soldierflies. The main part of the fen today is made up of two adjoined reserves: a National Nature Reserve and Parsonage Moor

maintained respectively by Natural England and Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT). It is considered to be of national significance and has been designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest together with BBOWT's nearby Lashford Lane Fen. The whole site is of European importance, designated a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). There are also two more close-by BBOWT reserves, Dry Sandford Pit and Gozzards Ford that also contain parts of the same fen complex and all are linked by Sandford Brook, a tributary of the River Ock.

Over the years Cothill Fen has been visited by many biologists and naturalists who have recorded an impressive list of species. It has also seen some seminal academic research studies. Two, for example, that are still regularly taught to biological science students are Arthur Clapham's study of peat deposition and E.B. Ford's work on the genetics of colour variations of the Scarlet Tiger moth which nicely demonstrated how natural selection works.

This year Natural England chose to focus on Cothill Fen for a special event and on May 30th a mixture of about 50 professional biologists, fen specialists, stakeholders, ecologists and keen amateur naturalists met, using lecture room facilities kindly donated by nearby Cothill School, for a series of talks on the history, biology, ecology and hydrology of the fen. *[see Newsletter introduction for a link to the recordings.]* These were followed up by guided walks led by local dedicated naturalists involved in the area's conservation.

This event day nicely tied in with National Nature Reserves Week (NNR): slightly longer than a week, this is an annual celebration of England's most important places for nature. NNRs play an important role in nature recovery, acting as core sites across the nation for biodiversity and geodiversity, as well as being fantastic places for people to discover nature and enjoy the benefits they provide, both to the environment and to society. This fen-focused event brought together some of the key players across the county, managing these important habitats, including The Freshwater Habitats Trust and BBOWT.

Participants at the National NNR Week event at Cothill Fen – time for networking over coffee and a chance to see the results of some of the habitat management work carried out at the Ruskin reserve and Parsonage Moor. Photos by Denis Kennedy.

Left: Martin Harvey from The Centre for Ecology and Hydrology kindly ran a moth trap the previous evening. Here he is showing some of the attendees what he found in the traps, including showing Sally Rankin from The Oxfordshire Flora Group an impressive Lime Hawk-moth

Right: Regius Professor of History Emeritus at the University of Oxford, Robert Evans, who gave a fascinating talk about the history of Cothill Fen. Photos by Denis Kennedy.

Many in the nearby villages of Dry Sandford, Cothill, Wootton and Marcham are very aware of having such a natural history treasure on their doorstep and in 1987 a Friends of the BBOWT Cothill Reserves was established as a forum to promote and conserve this special area. The fen is openly accessible to the public but, being slightly off the beaten track, is fortunately not over-visited. If you do visit wellies are essential and please give the fen the respect that it richly deserves.

If you might like to get a little more involved with the Friends there is currently a vacancy for a Secretary. The duties are light, mainly maintaining the Friends register and distributing by email the occasional newsletter, plus a little committee admin four times per year. A volunteer would be warmly welcomed. Please contact the Chairman, David Lloyd, email: gabylloyd@btinternet.com, or tel. 01235 529704 if you may be interested.

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WORK PARTIES ON THE RESERVES

The regular BBOWT and Natural England volunteer work parties on the reserves are a vital part of the management of these sensitive sites. In addition to the site-based teams Abingdon Green Gym are regular visitors to several of the reserves. Here we have updates from four of the teams.

Dry Sandford Pit, by Oliver Nicholls, BBOWT Volunteer Work Party leader

Having been a member of the Dry Sandford Pit work party for over twenty years—I joined when I was about nine—I am delighted to now lead it with my dad, Ian. Since taking over from Steve Grigson in 2023, we've enjoyed renewed energy and enthusiasm thanks to several dedicated members who attend sessions regularly. What makes Dry Sandford Pit so special is its diverse variety of habitats – from woodland and grassland to sandy cliffs, ponds, a stream, and an alkaline fen. Our work focuses on caring for and conserving

each of these unique areas, helping to preserve the rich biodiversity that makes the site so remarkable.

Our latest project has focused on restoring one of the ponds on the reserve. Willow and alder had grown so densely over time that all of the pond was shaded out. By carefully cutting back these trees in specific areas along the east and south sides, we've opened up patches of sunlight to give aquatic plants a much better chance to flourish. We're excited to see how the pond develops over the coming year.
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Before and after the pond restoration work. Photos by Oliver Nicholls.

Meanwhile, work continues on the fen. Our volunteer team has been clearing shrubs from the edges to prevent encroachment, while other groups have been tackling some of the larger trees and cutting back reeds in the central area. These efforts together help maintain the fen as a rich habitat.

We've also replaced rotting steps, cut back foliage along the edge of the cliffs to provide a good place for solitary bees and wasps to live, and carried out our annual task of removing ragwort - just in time for the Dexters to start grazing on the fen. Thanks to the combined efforts of our volunteers, Dry Sandford Pit continues to be a thriving haven for wildlife.

If you'd like to get involved, we meet on the first Sunday of every month from 10am to 1pm - just get in touch with BBOWT!

Abingdon Green Gym: activities in the Cothill Fens during 2025, by Adrian Thorn

Over the course of this year we have been busy making a total of 9 Saturday morning visits to work on various Cothill fens.

Ruskin Reserve.
At this site there has been work in the woodland towards the North East boundary of the site by Rod d'Ayala to block the stream and re-wet the woodland. The Green Gym were working in advance of Rod clearing the stream and improving access prior to Rod dam-building and we returned again afterwards to create scallops in the woodland to allow sunlight in and create varied habitats. We also had a session cutting material from the fen area and adding this to the fish bunds on site which had rotted down.

Lashford Lane
A couple of visits during the year saw us continuing our previous work of clearing scrub from the west of the fen area to open this up and over time expand the fen. We also had a visit cutting the fen itself and clearing along various footpaths.

Dry Sandford Pit
A total of 5 sessions will have been completed by the year end undertaking a variety of tasks. We have been cutting and removing scrub from the fen as well as cutting rush during the summer. Brambles have been cut back below the cliff face and in the grassland area with scrub also being removed. The summer saw us having our usual foray into the stream area on the western edge of the site to hunt down and pull any Himalayan balsam we could find. Following a couple of subsequent unscheduled weekday visits over subsequent weeks we believe that this was all removed prior to setting seed so there should be a noticeable reduction in the number of plants in 2026.

Looking to the future we will be undertaking further work sessions on these sites during 2026 as well as visiting Hitchcopse Pit. A more detailed report of our activities can be found by visiting https://abingdongreengym.blogspot.com/ where you will find a weekly report.

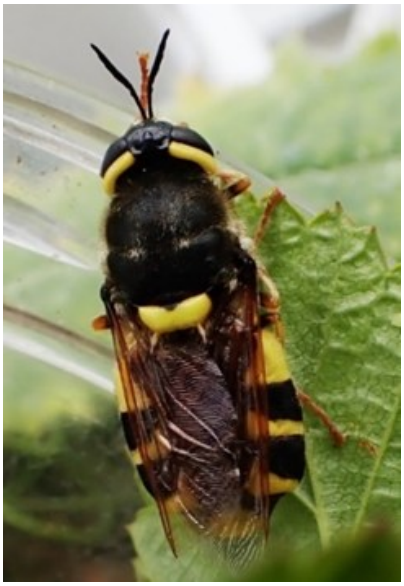
Ruskin Reserve work party: text and photos by Steph Wilson, Natural England Senior Reserve Manager.

In addition to the exciting work by The Abingdon Green Gym along the eastern wooded edge of Ruskin, the rest of the fen has, as ever, been a hive of activity over the year, thanks to a determined group of hardworking volunteers and ecologists.

Continued maintenance of the fen habitat with scything resulted in some of our vegetative material being bagged up and taken to Hinksey Heights fen: this is part of a wider project with The Freshwater Habitats Trust, linking up fens with a good seed source, and sharing this seed with other fens in the county which are being restored. Movement of “green hay” in this way, should result in species like black bog rush, grass of Parnassus and marsh lousewort spreading at Hinksey Heights fen into new areas being created.

In September, a good display of Devil’s bit Scabious flowers across the fen saw good records of the Orange-horned Scabious sawfly – Devil’s bit scabious leaves are a vital food source for the larva, whilst the adults feed on Parsley water-dropwort flowers.

More good news on the species front – this summer saw our highest ever count of Broad-leaved Cotton grass heads, with 246 flowering heads recorded, in addition to some of our key soldier fly species associated with the fen habitats being recorded, like this Clubbed General which is an incredibly rare species.



Parsonage Moor work party: by Kathy Warden, BBOWT Volunteer Work party leader

The prolonged drought took its toll on Parsonage Moor and one of memories of summer was the seaweedy smell of baked stonewort bleaching in the sun as parts of the site dried out. On the plus side, the drier than normal conditions allowed us access for some management work on the western boundary where the water is usually too deep for us to venture without waders. As with Steph on the Ruskin, part of the cut material generated was donated to the Freshwater Habitats Trust for use as green hay on Hinksey Heights fen.

Work parties over the summer and autumn followed the usual seasonal trend – lots of scything and raking plus diversions into cutting back vegetation encroaching on the boardwalk, a little ragwort pulling and the odd bit of boardwalk repair. Renewal of the boardwalk is being done in sections when resources permit and in the autumn a section was done by a splinter group from the Chimney volunteers who, I'm told, wore themselves out driving the new uprights three feet into the ground, so hats off to them for all that effort! The upcoming winter programme for the home team sees a return to some scrub-bashing and coppicing, particularly along the southern boundary where the tree belt is gradually expanding towards the fen.

The management of a site like Parsonage Moor by its nature involves a lot of cutting and clearing of the various areas of fen and reedbed and we are fortunate in having among the team a good number of skilled scythers. From time to time a training day is organised by Beth at BBOWT so there's regularly the chance for new people to learn how to take up the scythe. None of which would be much good without the determined rakers and clearers shifting the cut material to habitat piles - a vital part of the whole business.

Left: scything of the Grass of Parnassus area in progress in November.
Right: view from the northeast corner looking south across the area newly brought into the cutting regime, indications of the effect of re-wetting work in foreground; Grass of Parnassus area in middle distance. Photos: KW

Over recent months we've expanded the cutting along the north-south runnel at the top end of the site, which is a bit of stronghold for southern damselfly and keeled skimmers. Along with the re-wetting modifications at the northeast corner, reported on in the last Newsletter, the idea is to try to create the conditions to favour an expansion of more diverse fen vegetation rather than reeds. The nearby Grass of Parnassus area south of the main runnel received its biennial cut and clear this autumn.

Special and amazing things are what Parsonage Moor is good for and it was exciting to hear during the summer from David Morris, botanical recorder for the Oxfordshire vice county and Freshwater Habitats Trust plant ecologist, that he had discovered a small population of Flat Sedge *Blysmus compressus* at Parsonage Moor. One of Oxfordshire's most threatened species, the discovery here doubles the number of sites in the county where the species is known to survive, down from an admittedly low baseline historically.

Left: Flat Sedge, photo: David Morris Right: Snakefly, likely *Xanthostigma*, photo: KW

Not nearly so rare, but an intriguing visitor one work party lunchtime was the extraordinary, primeval-looking Snakefly, a species that has indeed been around since the Jurassic apparently. A predator of small arthropods such as aphids, snakeflies spend most of their time high up in the tree canopy so it was a lucky chance to see one when it came down to inspect a goats cheese and rocket sandwich.

Work parties are held on the third Sunday of each month, from 10.00 to around 2.30/3 p.m. Please get in touch via BBOWT Volunteering if you might be interested.

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MOTH TRAPPING EVENT – PARSONAGE MOOR & DRY SANDFORD PIT

A report from event leader Peter Philp, chairman of the Upper Thames branch of Butterfly Conservation

One of our regions less common moth species, the Scarce Burnished Brass, has been recorded in the past at the BBOWT Parsonage Moor nature reserve. Our Branch 'Moth Office', Peter Cuss, was keen to have another look to see if it was still present. I was keen to 'try out' an event where members and the public could come along and see what happens at a moth trapping session and what might be seen. So we agreed a joint event on 18th July 2025 with BBOWT that would also take in their nearby Dry Sandford Pit nature reserve (DSP).

Ruby Tiger - © Garry Barlow

Canary-shouldered Thorn - © Iain Leach

Sallow Kitten - © Iain Leach

Chocolate-tip - © Iain Leach

The weather forecast for the evening was not encouraging. However, I set up three traps on DSP and Peter arrived and set up another 5 traps for PM. Participants arrived and a dozen of us set out to see what could be found. As the daylight began to fade, we started to pick out a wide variety of species including loads of Ruby Tigers, Dingy Footman and Wainscots.

Unfortunately we did not manage to find the Scarce Burnished Brass but, thanks to Peter's expertise we did manage to identify almost 80 species. Amongst these were some impressive looking moths ranging from Sallow Kitten and Canary-shouldered Thorn, to Elephant Hawkmoth and Swallow Prominent. The group voted the scarce Chocolate-tip as moth of the evening.

It was after one o'clock in the morning by the time we had packed up and left. All the participants enjoyed the evening and said they would be keen to participate in the future.

Would you be interested in attending a similar event in 2026 or, perhaps, even leading or helping out. Please do let us know.

The moth conjuror at work: Peter Philp (in background) with moth trap 18 July 25.

Photo Kathy Warden

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FUNGI IN COTHILL NNR (RUSKIN RESERVE)
Text and photos by Judy Webb

The oak, ash, birch and sycamore bluebell woods just to the north of open fen at the Cothill NNR were historically called Hurst Copse. The bluebells indicate it is a bit of ancient woodland even though all the trees are relatively young, the oldest oaks are probably re-plantings from after 1906 when the woodland section of the Ruskin Reserve was purchased. It's where I find most fungi every autumn although the marginal woodland to String Lane is also a productive site. The fruiting of fungi is mainly in the autumn and is strongly controlled by the abundance of rainfall from August onwards (toadstools are over 90% water). A rainy late summer and autumn gives the most spectacular show of toadstools, brackets etc. Dry late summers and autumns mean that most species don't bother to fruit and just wait for a better year. Because of such erratic fruiting, it can take well over 20 years to observe anything like the full range of species on any site. There are always new things to me every year, so nowhere near the full list yet. Of course the real fungus body is the wefts of whitish fungus threads (hyphae or mycelium) in the soil or deadwood, toadstools mushrooms and brackets etc. are just the fruiting stage for producing spores for dispersal. The word 'toadstool' can encompass the caps with gills as well as caps with sponge-like pores. Mushrooms are just really a type of toadstools that include some edible species. Mushrooms (*Agaricus* species) come up on String Lane, but please note these are mostly **inedible** species like **Yellow Stainers** and **Inky Mushrooms** with the occasional **Blushing Wood Mushrooms** (stains red on cutting or bruising) as well.

Left: Inedible Yellow Stainer *Agaricus xanthodermus* and right a Blushing Wood mushroom, *Agaricus sylvaticus* both from String Lane.

There are very few fungi that fruit in the fen but on some of the big tussocks every year we get a few colourful **Spangle Waxcaps *Hygrocybe insipida***

Spangle waxcaps from top of a fen mound

Shaggy Parasols*, Chlorophyllum rhacodes*. Hurst Copse.

The best year recently was the amazingly wet summer and autumn of 2023 when Hurst Copse sprouted a great many species but most obvious were the hundreds of big **Shaggy Parasols *Chlorophyllum rhacodes.*** These are species that grown on rich leaf litter.

Common in the woods are various species of Boletes (have sponge-like pores not gills), **Brittlegills *(Russulas*) and White Knights (*Tricholoma album*)** which all have mycelium that associate with the roots of the birch and oak trees in a symbiotic relationship (fungus gets sugars from tree, tree obtains mineral nutrients from the soil that are sourced and absorbed by the hyphae of the mycelium). All tree species need fungi either on or in their roots to grow successfully.

Some Hurst Copse Boletes, *Xerocomellus* species, note sponge-like pores under cap

The grey- green topped Powdery Brittlegill *Russula parazurea*, Hurst Copse

Other fungus species are tree pathogens like **Honey Fungus *Armillaria*** sp. and sadly Hurst copse and the alder wet woodland adjacent to the fen show abundant troops of honey-coloured toadstools of this species every autumn. It is undoubtedly the reason so many trees of all sorts in Hurst Copse are dying and falling.


Troops of Honey fungus toadstools with fungus fly on a cap

This year 2025 has had a drought that set in from mid-March with four recorded heat waves and the soil in Hurst Copse (which is free draining sand) got incredibly dry by summer – the leaf litter was so dry and crispy that walking through it sounded like walking on cornflakes. Odd showers made not much difference. Incidentally somehow the weather seemed to stimulate a ‘mast year’ for acorn production; the woods were just carpeted with thousands of acorns, almost paving the ground.

Significant rain started again in late August, but I had not much hope for autumn fruiting because there was just so much water deficit to replace – the woodland dipwells were dry to the bottom for some months. It takes at least three weeks of rain before some fungi can fruit. This most fragile **Hare’s foot ink-cap *Coprinopsis lagopus*** was the first up.

A delicate Hare’s foot inkcap, a most ephemeral toadstool

However, there was sufficient rain for some fruiting in October but it was a very odd selection of species that fruited in abundance – somehow the climate of a long period of hot and dry followed by rain favoured them and not others.

Early on in September it was the year of the **Brown Roll-rim *Paxillus involutus.*** Hundreds of these brown caps with the furry in-rolled rim were everywhere (more than ever seen before) near the birches in woods (they live with birch roots) and this year not even one Shaggy Parasol emerged. No puff-balls either.

Brown Roll-rims *Paxillus involutus* under birches

Later on in October it turned to the year of the **Fiery Milk-caps *Lactarius pyrogalus***, which have inconspicuous buff-brown caps and pinky-orange-tinted gills. I found hundreds in places I had never seen them before and always associated with the roots of Hazel trees. Milk-caps produce whitish exudate called milk if you break the cap. None are poisonous and sometimes to identify the milk-cap one is instructed to taste (and then spit out) the milk. Some are tasteless, some sweetish and some are unbelievably strong and hot-tasting like chilli. The Fiery Milk-cap comes in the last category and it will give a burning sensation that lasts a long time, hence its name!

Fiery Milk-caps from under Hazel, note milk on damaged gills

As to deadwood-fungi, Hurst Copse always has large numbers of **the Birch bracket or Razor-strop bracket *Piptoporus betulinus*** on dead fallen birch and attractive **Turkey tails *Trametes versicolor*** on fallen dead ash. **Beefsteak fungus *Fistulina hepatica*** occasionally sprouts from dead Oak rot holes (it really looks red with bloody drops like steak but does not taste like it).


Turkey tails and Birch bracket.

But the most spectacular fruiting this year was from the base of a dying Oak on the margin with the sand field to the north. Here every 2-3 years large clumps of clustered caps of **Hen of the Woods *Grifola frondosa*** arise from the base of the tree. All fungal fruiting bodies are very important food resource to a variety of small flies and beetles, this *Grifola* clump has had visits from expert entomologists and numerous insect species have been collected and identified for some years now. It is fascinating to watch the fungus gnats flying around it and egg-laying and then over some weeks to watch the caps slowly be consumed by larvae and collapse to mush. In the young stage it is apparently edible for humans, but I would prefer to leave all such fungi for the flies and beetles.


Hen of the Woods *Grifola frondosa* growing from base of dying oak. Note white pores under the caps which produce white spores

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