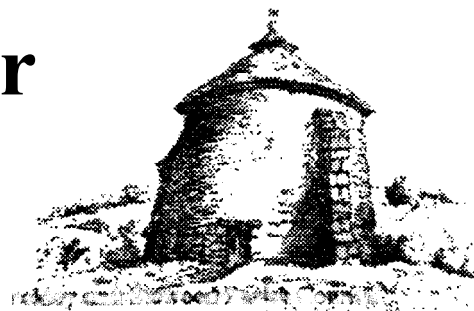


The Beckley Newsletter

News, views and comment from
around the parish
Spring 2010



Produced under the auspices of the Beckley and Stowood Parish Council.
Any comments or opinions expressed herein are not necessarily those of the council.

Beckley & Stowood Parish Council

The parish council meets on the first Thursday of the month at 8pm, in the village hall. The agenda and minutes can be found on the village noticeboards. The first half hour is always open to anyone from the village who wishes to bring something to the attention of the PC. Dates for the rest of 2010 are as follows:

April 1
May 6
May 20 (AGM – starts at 7.30pm)
June 3
July 1
No meeting in August
September 2
October 7
November 4
December 2

The Beckley and Stowood PC website is up and running (www.beckley-and-stowood.gov.uk). To include anything on the website, please contact Gary Chalmers (gary.r.chalmers@btinternet.com).

Samantha Hawkins
(samedena@hotmail.co.uk)

Beckley WI

Beckley WI meets on the first Tuesday of the month in the village hall. Meetings with speakers will be advertised on the village noticeboards. The next meeting will be the AGM, held at Old Manor House, which this year will be combined with a mad hatter's party as we had to cancel the new year party due to the snow. At the AGM we will discuss the agenda and speakers for the year ahead. Visitors are always welcome.

Marion Weinstein (351251) and Brenda Lambourne (351793)

Beckley book group

The Beckley book group meets regularly, and welcomes new members. For details of the next meeting, please contact

Mary Worthington (351270)

Anyone for tennis?

Are you interested in playing more tennis? Reviving the tennis club in Beckley? Expanding the facilities? If you or anyone in your family is interested please let us know by e-mail or phone by the end of April.

Susan Roberts (351898,
suesie@btinternet.com) and
Ginny Camps-Walsh (351762,
camps.walsh@btinternet.com)

Message from St. Louans, Beckley's twin village in France



Inside the "cave" of one of the viticulteurs in St. Louans

Winter arrived mid December in St. Louans, a few days after we saw the large flocks of geese flying south. 2009 in the Touraine had been the driest,

hottest and sunniest for many years, but 2010 certainly started with a cold bite. We picked up the tail end of the weather system that brought the snow to Beckley, but our share of it was small. The lanes in the village and the vines were dusted with about two centimetres of snow, but it stayed with us for over a week as the temperatures were so low. It was not, however, sufficient to prevent Jean-Claude from driving into Chinon each day in his battered Clio to buy his baguette, and no doubt drink a glass of wine or two with his friends.

Christmas in France is always a family affair, starting on Christmas Eve with a big dinner. The celebrations continue on Christmas Day, but the 26th is not a bank holiday, and many people return to work. The new year is the time for real partying, and this year was no exception. About 30 villagers assembled in the Maison de Quartier for a feast which included oysters, monkfish and wild boar, and which ended at about 5am after the traditional onion soup. The next morning everybody returned (some looking a bit jaded) to clean the hall and finish the food and wine not consumed the night before. Life is really hard in St. Louans!

Midway through January the village celebrated Epiphany, when over a hundred of us assembled to eat the Galettes des Roi. The people who find the fève (a small porcelain model) in their galette are made the King or Queen for the day and, wearing their paper crown, can traditionally tell the lord of the manor what to do. Today their privileges extend only to another glass of local sparkling wine.

The pruning of the vines is now underway, and this will continue until the beginning of March. Every day we hear the whirring sound of the automatic secateurs that the vine workers use. Usually they work in pairs, frequently husband-and-wife teams. It is a good time for our dog, Millie, who gets to meet again her collie friend, Oceane, who always accompanies the workers in the vines adjacent to our house. The vines are at their barest now, each pruned back to only two shoots.

In February we hold our annual general meeting, and we will be talking about the visit of some of you in June to our Dîner Champêtre and perhaps to our Bric à Brac in April. We already have a number of hosts who are keen to welcome you, and Wendy has started an English conversation group in the village. You may be pleased to learn that our village president, Edgard, now has a valid 'carte d'identité', and he and his wife Nathalie are looking forward to joining you for your winter warmer in March.

On 2 February the flocks of geese flew northwards over St. Louans throughout the day. The little serins have returned and the larks are singing over the vines. Maybe they are telling us the winter is over. Whatever happens, St. Louans sends you warm wishes for 2010.

Richard Packer

Trip to St Louans

If you've been inspired by Richard's description of life in St Louans, now is the time to get in touch with the twinning planning group if you would like to take part in the summer visit. The event to which we have been invited is the open air supper (eat, drink and dance!) taking place on 5 June. This is an opportunity to see the town of Chinon, a fifteen minute walk away, and perhaps other attractions in the valley of the Loire. Some are thinking of taking a short holiday that incorporates the stay in St Louans.

At the time of writing there are sixteen families in St Louans who would host visitors from Beckley for this event, so we are able to send a sizeable contingent from the village. The date falls on the final Saturday of the school half term holiday, and this may be helpful to families wishing to travel with school-age children. When we know who is interested in taking part, we are sure there will be opportunities to make savings on travel by doubling up on bookings for ferries. Do think now if you have been considering taking part in the twinning, and contact one of the planning group below to sign up for the 5 June or for more information.

**Susie Roberts (351898,
Suesie@btinternet.com), Mary Ashdown
(358971) and Peter Dickson (358971)**

French club

At the heart of the twinning activities is the desire to become familiar with language as much as with culture. So, we should all be thinking about brushing up any French that we may have learnt in the past. With this in mind, Sue Roberts makes a suggestion:

Is your French rusty? Would you like to improve your French? Are you quite fluent but would enjoy meeting up and conversing in French over a glass of wine. We find the wine helps!

If you like the idea of meeting up every two weeks or so in the Abingdon Arms to chat in French, could you let us know and we'll arrange a get-together. A bientot!

**Susie Roberts (351898,
Suesie@btinternet.com)**

Laying the playing field hedges

As many of you will have noticed, the last few winters have seen a small group of us make quite slow progress laying the playing field hedges. The task is now complete!

I learned to lay hedges on a course at Moreton Morell Agricultural College in Warwickshire, and asked for volunteers to help me lay this fairly long hedge. The team who did the work included Bob and Liz Bixby, Rob Bonney, Ted Cloke and Nick Crowley. On very cold winter mornings Sue (Chuckwagon) Cloke would turn up with coffee and cake to sustain us!

The hedge was planted many years ago with the intention that one day it would be laid. Although a little older in places than we would have wished, it has laid fairly well. Different styles of hedge-laying are used around the UK. We have used the 'Midland' or 'Bullock' style, which is fairly common in this area. Hedge-laying in its current form developed at the time of the enclosures but, as can be seen in parts of Africa, hedging and brushwood to keep animals in or out has been used for many thousands of years.

The basic process for a hedge such as ours is as follows. First, the side growth and suckers on the side where the hedge is to be worked on are all cut away. For a right-handed hedge layer the work starts from the left, and the laying then moves rightwards along the hedge. The stems (known as 'pleachers') have a long diagonal cut made through them until just a hinge of bark and wood is left. The pleacher is then laid down at an angle pointing slightly away from the line of the hedge. Stakes are hammered in every 20 inches or so (normally the distance between the hedger's elbow and fingertips), and then the stakes are bound together with long flexible hazel wands (known as 'binding' or 'heathering'). Finally, the stakes are trimmed – close to and level with the heathering in hunting country, but angled and above the heathering in non-hunting country.

The clean side is usually seen on the road or arable field side of the hedge, whilst the bushy part faces the field where stock are kept. The

result is a stock-proof hedge that cattle cannot break through – the binding is so tight when first done that a bullock cannot pull it upwards. Thereafter the regrowth of the hedge provides integral strength.

The benefits for both plants and animals are enormous. The clearing of the side growth allows light in, and the once dormant seed bank provides an immediate burst of wild flowers. That was evident in the spring after we laid the first stretch. The hedge thickens, shooting from the near horizontal pleachers, and thus provides greatly improved nesting habitat. In addition, since flowering increases, the food supplies for birds and animals are greater.

Hedge-laying is a traditional craft that is seeing something of a resurgence. Whilst expensive to do, it is in the long run a good deal cheaper than fencing (and much more attractive). The traditional hedge-layer would use a bill hook, a mallet and a slasher, but these days the chainsaw makes the task a good deal quicker (and less painful for the muscles!). Lengths of laid hedges are still measured in chains.

If you have a hedge that you would like laid and need some advice do get in touch – the village now has a team of hedge-layers! It was hard work, but I think we did all enjoy it, and my thanks go to all of them (and 'Chuckwagon Sue')!

Peter Ross

RSPB Update November 2009 to January 2010

Volunteers

Our volunteers were hard at work coppicing blackthorn hedgerows in November – muddy, spiky, seemingly never-ending work, but the benefits to wildlife will be great. November also included the autumn volunteers' meeting, with staff giving updates on all the summer's projects and management. Volunteers also heard about the RSPB's work across the wider area of the Upper Thames tributaries.

Further hedgerow management and the annual reed cut were the main tasks of the winter. With over 130 hours of volunteer time, the reed bed has received a good trim. Reed cutting helps rejuvenate and improve the reed bed, but cut reed needs pristine weather to be burnt, so flexibility was the watchword. Our volunteers had to prepare to change plans and dive into the reed bed at a moment's notice.

Volunteers have been helping to continue the development of the reserve's splendid new hide. This included some cementing and levelling work, bringing the hide a step closer to completion. For our volunteers winter has brought with it hard work, mud, and a lot of bad weather – snow in January, then flooding. Good for ducks, not so good for volunteer work parties. So why are our volunteers so dedicated? The great outdoors, new friends, the warm glow of achievement perhaps, but when the hard work helps nature to produce her best, one thing is guaranteed – pride in their work.

Bird / wildlife news

After the rain in November, Otmoor started to resemble a wetland again. Benefiting from the new network of scrapes and islands on 'Ashgrave Field', flocks of pied and grey wagtails, meadow pipits, and even an elusive water pipit were spotted.

Duck numbers increased slowly during November, with the highest numbers on the reed bed and Big Otmoor. The highlight was a red crested pochard, seen briefly. Amongst the duck flocks, the first signs of spring could be seen with a male and female shoveler performing their courtship dance on the water.

During the coldest period, all standing water on the reserve froze solid. All but a handful of the wildfowl moved on elsewhere, leaving Otmoor silent. However, as the snow receded in January and much of the area flooded, bird activity sprang back into life. Thousands of lapwings returned, with occasional redshanks scattered amongst them. A flock of 52 white fronted geese joined our usual greylag and canada goose accompaniment on Flood Field. Some great birds could be seen in the area of the new hide. What high hopes then for the future, as a black redstart took up residence.

December brought with it some memorable moments on the reserve. A gorgeous pair of Bewick swans, identified as normally being winter residents at the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust reserve at Slimbridge, aroused much interest. Their visit was brief, but very memorable.

A spotted redshank was seen leaving the reed bed, but the *piece de resistance* for December had to be the three bitterns, which delighted as they moved precariously across the ice. The bitterns stayed up until the snows in January. One solitary bird remained during the freeze. To lessen the impact of the icy conditions on this magnificent bird, supplementary feeding was initiated.

Visitors come from far and wide to witness Otmoor's amazing starling displays. This year was no exception, as the roosts once more impressed with numbers in excess of 50,000 birds. As was the case last year, their final en masse display was on or around Christmas Day. Why the birds leave so suddenly is a mystery, and a source of much debate.

Large scale projects

After a summer full of project work, the two final large scale projects drew to a close during this period.

Builders finished the construction of the hide in December, leaving only a few minor touches to finish off, which will be completed by reserve staff and volunteers.

A new sluice and valve combination were installed into 'Barn Field'. This will allow for easier water control across the field, which will result in better conditions for the birds.

Judith Lloyd, RSPB Otmoor

Jan Weller Pre-school

Holford Centre, School Lane, Stanton St John
Tel: 01865 358076
janwellerpreschool@hotmail.co.uk
www.janweller-pre-school.org.uk

Open Monday – Friday, 9.15 – 12.15, school term-time only
For children aged 2 1/2 years to rising 5
Free places the term after a child becomes 3
We accept Busy Bee and other childcare vouchers

Please ring the above number during opening hours or email for further information.

Hazel Christian

From the editors

Many thanks for all contributions to the spring newsletter, and for your support during our temporary editorship. Ann Henman should be back from her travels to take the helm again for the summer edition. The deadline will be mid-May. Please send your contributions to Ann Henman, 351492, annhenman@gmail.com

Julie McCulloch and Gareth Coleman (358899, garethandjulie@yahoo.co.uk)