

La Société Sercquaise

Founded in 1975 to study, preserve and enhance Sark's natural environment and cultural heritage



Summer News 2020

From the Editor - Richard Axton

June 2020

Greetings from Sark to our members wherever you are! Safe, I hope, and busy and planning to return soon. The past three months Sark has been, as you can imagine, very quiet, a place - as the old travel guides used to boast - that Time forgot. Record spring sunshine coming after record winter rainfall has resulted in flowers and foliage more profuse than anyone remembers. The smell of hedge banks left uncut has been particularly appreciated; butterflies, bees and other insects were out early everywhere; rarity of

tractors has meant little dust in spite of dry east winds; sea swimmers have taken to the waters a month earlier than usual.

With cancellation of the archaeological excavations, exhibitions on hold and the Heritage Room closed, there are no major events to report. Before lockdown some members were involved in landscape work to assist the new Sark Dairy Project, described below. This offers an opportunity for controlled study of a traditional pasture as it returns to regular cattle grazing.

Harbour Hill trimmed in January for bluebells



Heath spotted orchids above Creux Belet in June



Environmental work - Clos de Milieu

You may be aware of the project to establish a new dairy farm business on a greenfield site at Clos de Milieu, also known as the Horse Show Field. Work has been going steadily forward with the aim of breaking ground in September and having milk flowing this time next year. Clos de Milieu lies between Rue de la Moinerie and the Seigneurie Gardens and is sheltered on all sides by strips of woodland. The project is being undertaken by Sark Community Dairy Charitable Trust, which was set up in August 2019. Once planning permission was granted in January 2020, preparatory work started round the edges of the field.

The woodland edges contain many of Sark's biggest and oldest Holm Oaks and Turkey Oaks, planted in the 1860s by Seigneur William T Collings to beautify the 'new road' to La Moinerie made by Pierre Le Pelley in 1836. Over the past few decades the woodland has become unruly and neglected - mostly good news for insects and wildlife but bad news for many fine trees and for browsing cows. Self-sown sycamores have crowded in and died. Vigorous growth of ivy has strangled many of the finest trees, forming great canopies which catch the winter gales and break off limbs and chunks of their host trees. Dead limbs hung supported only by ivy vines. Some work still remains to be done but many of the hazards have been removed and many fine old trees have been freed from their bonds. Lack of tree maintenance over the years has generated here and there some strips of rich woodland floor, where moss-covered,

Clearing the field edges in March



rotting trunks have become overgrown with bramble and honeysuckle.

Access to the dairy on foot is to be via the stone arch and iron gate commemorating the silver wedding of Michael and Diana Beaumont in 1981. People going to the Seigneurie often take a short cut along the eastern edge of the field, where eventually cows will graze right up to the trees. Preparation of a new path inside the woodland strip was begun in February by our Conservation Commandos: it winds between the trees before turning left (west) along the north side of the Seigneurie Gardens towards the proposed dairy building at the far end of the field. We cut through some fallen trunks, pulled out some ivy and brambles, burned up brush and combustible debris, leaving thick banks and mounds of twigs for insects. Mulch-mowing will be followed up with a layer of bark chippings. The short path includes a stile-ramp over a horizontal live trunk. The top half of a twisted Scotch Pine has been trimmed for safety and offers some natural seating.

A short path to the left of the gate has been cleared inside the field bank. Half-way up Rue de la Moinerie there will be a new entrance for cows and farm machinery. There will be 7-metre openings on both sides of the lane and two pairs of gates to form a 'level crossing' when the cows are moved from their home farm to and from the grazing in Clos Galleaux to the south (between Rue de la Moinerie and the Island Hall). This will avoid having cows going along the roads and will provide a regular 'cows coming home for milking' event in Sark's daily calendar. La Société will work with the farmers and with the Seigneur to help enhance diversity of the woodland as opportunities arise for planting more trees.

The pasture itself is rich in grasses and wildflowers. No-one can remember its ever being ploughed. It offers an opportunity to monitor changes in flora caused by regular grazing by dairy cows. Susan Synnott has made a list of plants and trees identified so far this spring. The field will be very much in the public eye of visitors to the dairy, whether they are locals collecting daily milk or holidaymakers taking their children to watch the milking and to meet Sark-born calves.



Red clover & various grasses



Dark green fritillary on red clover

Susan Synnott's list of species recorded in Clos de Milieu

Common Vetch	White Clover	Timothy	Hart's-tongue
Lesser Trefoil	Red Clover	Annual Meadow-grass	Ivy
Common Mouse-ear	Cat's-ear	False Oat-grass	Garden Privet
Dandelion	Common Knapweed	Cleavers	Ivy Broomrape
Daisy	Bird's-foot-trefoil	Wood Sage	Ivy-leaved Toadflax
Creeping Buttercup	Field Bindweed	Navelwort	Montbretia
Ribwort Plantain	Yarrow	Honeysuckle	Holly
Common Sorrel	Broad-leaved Dock	Germander Speedwell	Sycamore
Lesser Celandine	Sweet Vernal-grass	Nettle	Turkey Oak
Bulbous Buttercup	Cock's-foot	Hogweed	Evergreen Oak
3 Cornered Garlic	Yorkshire Fog	Bramble	Lime
Primrose	Perennial Rye-grass	Bracken	Elm
Common Dog-violet	Soft Brome	Broad Buckler-fern	Hawthorn
Red Campion	Crested Dog's-tail	Male Fern	

Out at Sea by Sue Daly

Seabirds

The lovely weather this spring and early summer has proved perfect for getting out and about on the sea. There seem to be good numbers of razorbills and the new colony of guillemots on the Burons (the reef just outside Creux Harbour) is going from strength to strength. This colony began three years ago and ornithologist Paul Veron, who was over from Alderney for a visit this June, estimated there to be around 200 birds there. He thought that the colony of Les Autelets is the same size as usual so this is really great news. Puffin numbers are about the same as in



Razorbills at Point Robert

previous years, as usual much lower than those of our other auks. Razorbill numbers seem to be steady with good sightings of birds around Grande Moie and Point Robert.



Part of the new guillemot colony on the Burons

Dolphins & Seals



Bottle-nose dolphins off Little Sark this June

Bottle-nose dolphins continue to be sighted all around Sark, bringing delight to all who see them, and Atlantic grey seal sightings also seem to be on the increase. I've seen a male near the Bec du Nez several times and had an encounter with a female at L'Étac and Point Robert. We didn't have a pup this winter, unlike last year when the first one was recorded on Sark, but with more adults around perhaps we might have seals breeding here again this winter.



Crayfish

Crayfish

Under the waves, I've started looking at the numbers of crayfish around Sark this year. In my five dives so far this year I've recorded a total of 20, almost all still juveniles but a few that I would estimate are breeding age. Crayfish were heavily fished in the Channel Islands in 1960s and 70s until they became commercially

extinct. In 2014 though good numbers of juveniles began to appear around the Channel Islands and the southwest coast of Britain. They were protected in Sark waters in 2018 for three years to allow the stock to re-establish itself, still the only place where they are fully protected.

Corals

Another lovely underwater find has been a new colony of beautiful sunset cup corals, one of the rarest species of coral in British waters. The new area on a reef called Boue Tirlipois, off Little Sark, is deeper than the cup coral site at L'Etac that I know so well (around 30 metres on low water as compared to 18 metres) and three or four times the size. These solitary corals, which grow to around 6cm across, are extremely slow growing and thought to live for several decades. This discovery made my 3,000th logged dive even more special!



Sunset cup corals



Atlantic grey seal near L'Etac

Susan Synnott's list of species in the area cleared at L'Eperquerie

Common Bird's-foot Trefoil
Oxeye Daisy
Common Knapweed
Cock's-foot
Crested Dog's tail
Tufted Vetch
White Clover
Red Campion

Yellow-rattle



Ribwort Plantain
Common Mouse-ear
False Oat-grass
Bracken
Bramble
Broad-leaved Dock
Sheep's Sorrel
Cat's-ear

Oxeye Daisy



Yarrow
Gorse
Yorkshire Fog
Foxglove
Yellow-rattle
Wood Sage
Greater plantain
Lesser Hawkbit

Tufted Vetch



Florence & Ruby pruning the new gorse growth, and quite a few other things!



Long-eared Owls

A pair of long-eared owls bred on Sark this spring raising at least five chicks. The adults, presumably the same pair, raised two chicks in the same location in Dixcart Valley last year but until then this species hadn't been recorded as breeding here since 1993 and 1994.

One of this year's long-eared owl chicks



Sark Parish Registers

There's a new addition to our resources in the Heritage Room for visitors and islanders wanting to search the parish registers. The hand written book was getting more fragile so Jane Norwich has created a typed version in date and name order. A very useful product of lockdown!

Membership payments

Our secretary Susan Guille would kindly like to ask those you who pay your annual membership fee by direct debit to please update it to take into account the increase a couple of years ago. Individual membership costs £15 and families are £20. Every penny helps towards our work.