

# Hitcham and Taplow Society

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[www.taplowsociety.org.uk](http://www.taplowsociety.org.uk)

# Hitcham and Taplow Society

*Formed in 1959 to protect Hitcham, Taplow and the surrounding countryside from being spoilt by bad development and neglect.*

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Cover Picture: Glen Island House – part of the paper mill site (Andrew Findlay)

## Editorial

A very short editorial as this issue is bursting at the seams already!

We bring you the first published master-plans for the Mill Lane redevelopment, articles on William Wood and Sons, the Rowing Club, and an interesting bit of geology right on our door-steps. Fred Russell asks after the fate of small birds and chestnut trees, Gill Holloway reminds us to protect our right of access to the river at the Mill Lane Drawdock, and Mary Trevallion introduces us to some new footpaths. Esther Willmore reviews a book, and Neil Blundell suggests a new village shop.

There is a lot to think about, and we would welcome your views in the Forum section of our website.

## Derek Walker

It is with great sorrow that I have to report the sudden and tragic death of our Vice President Derek Walker on 17th September in Wexham Park

Hospital. Derek has been an invaluable member of this Society for many years and has been 'our man' dealing with all things to do with aircraft, including flight-paths, noise, and Heathrow expansion. He has been an enormous help and support both to me when I was Chairman and to the Society over a very long time.

He will be greatly missed.

*Eva Lipman*

## Website

Register on the Society website and have your say in our Forum:

[www.taplowsociety.org.uk](http://www.taplowsociety.org.uk)

# Woods of Taplow

William Wood and Sons Ltd is familiar to many in Taplow as a well-respected local landscape design and horticultural business. A recent enquiry to HTS by John Warden of Parks and Gardens UK (PGUK), a project cataloguing all notable parks and gardens in the UK, stimulated the following brief account.

PGUK has established that Woods was accorded a Royal Warrant in 1955 for work carried out at Windsor, paid for, it is thought, out of the Privy Purse, which means the work involved the Queen's private gardens. The business can be dated to at least the 1930s, based on copies of the firm's 1935 catalogues, currently offered for sale via a rare books supplier, where Woods is referred to as 'this key landscape supplies firm'. Wood and Sons Ltd is still listed as a current Warrant Holder on the Royal Warrant Holders' website, although the company's website and email contact details do not seem to be active.

My personal recollection of Woods dates from the 1969, when it was still a genteel firm of landscape gardeners, with whom I had my first job. I joined Dick (who came complete with pork pie hat and pipe) and his team, based in the potting shed about where the off-licence now is in the Bishops Centre: Dick's team consisted of Dick, Hazel, little Colin (who still lives locally) and myself.

The firm grew its own stock and had its retail site on the present Bishops Centre site. Much of my work was watering shrubs, etc., interrupted by firmly adhered-to meal breaks, the first of which was about 10am, after a 7.30 – 8am start, and involved Cornish pasties or similar, heated over a paraffin stove. Dick was an old-fashioned type of head gardener, who ruled his small empire with aplomb. The qualified nurseryman was John, a plant specialist, who lived in Lent Rise. There was still a sort of apprenticeship system, and promising youngsters were sent off to horticultural college.

The Woods landscape gardener I knew was Mr Brett, a gentleman in all senses, and a very well-respected garden designer. Mr Brett lived next to us in what is now Hillmead (following demolition of the school building), but was then still the original Taplow Grammar School, which had closed I think in 1947, and was then put to use as flats. Our house, The Lodge, is the

only remnant of the original buildings, and was the school housekeeper's dwelling (housekeeper upstairs, horse and trap downstairs) until my parents bought it in about 1951.

Around the late 1960s to 1970, Woods was taken over by the original Bishop (J.S.), a very different kettle of fish, who started to turn the plant sales business into a garden centre in the modern sense, and developed the landscape side vigorously. I went to work in the drawing office, and remember visiting Sid James' house to measure up for an outside swimming pool, and also John Lennon's large parcel of land, where Woods installed a very substantial lake. Bishops was probably a more dynamic operation than Woods had been, and I think got a good slice of the region's celebrity and showbiz business!

Gradually, the landscape side of the Bishops operation reduced, and plants sales became less important, until by the time Focus Do-It-All closed down and was replaced early in 2008 by Laura Ashley, plants were no longer sold. In my mind, accurately or not, I caught the end of a well-respected traditional firm of landscape designers in the post-war period, just as the market and society changed during the sixties, ushering a much brasher, pushier and more extrovert design sense, in horticulture as in other kinds of design (e.g. Conran). Makes me quite nostalgic to think of it.

My thanks are due to John Warden of Parks and Gardens (PGUK) for help in the preparation of this note. PGUK is now well on its way to its 2009 target of 7,500 records, and at present already has 4,700 sites in its archive, of which 375 are in Buckinghamshire, (including English Heritage listed, locally listed and lost gardens). The local list system has stimulated awareness of a number of previously unrecorded parks and gardens, resulting in their becoming known to PGUK. At present, our council, South Bucks, does not hold a local list, and does not intend to establish one, pending the Environment and Protection Bill, anticipated in 2010.

The websites of PGUK and the Bucks Gardens Trust may be of particular interest to Society members:

[www.parksandgardens.ac.uk](http://www.parksandgardens.ac.uk)

[www.bucksgardenstrust.org.uk](http://www.bucksgardenstrust.org.uk)

*Jon Willmore*

# Maidenhead Rowing Club

The origins of Maidenhead Rowing Club are not clear, but records of Henley Royal Regatta indicate that there was an entry from The Star Club, Maidenhead, in 1840, and as the club's symbol is a green star, there may be some direct connection. The very first Rowing Almanack gives details of a regatta held in Maidenhead in 1860 and it is known that the present club was in existence around the 1870s.



The club recorded its first Henley Royal Regatta win in 1924 in the Thames Cup, and a second success followed in 1939, when they beat Tigre Boat Club from Argentina in the final of the coxless fours.

Notable past members include Bert Bushnell, winner of the double sculls at the 1948 Olympics, and William Grenfell, later Lord Desborough of Taplow who, among his many achievements, competed for Oxford in the dead-heat boat race of 1877, rowed the channel in an eight, became club captain, mayor of Maidenhead and was a notable punting champion (the Thames Punting Championships are still held to this day on the Maidenhead stretch). Somehow he even found time to climb the Matterhorn three times and the Niagara Falls twice, as well as later serving as chairman of the British Olympic Association. Lord Desborough is also notable for having his obituary erroneously published in *The Times* in 1920 (in fact, he lived until 1945). His portrait is prominently positioned in the club above the stairs leading from the reception area.

In the mid-1970s, the club admitted its first female member, Laura Lion (nee Jenkinson), as a junior – the club rules had to be changed in order

to admit her. Laura went on to represent Great Britain in several junior competitions and remains a member and active junior coach. Now, half the membership is female and the club currently has its first female captain, Keri Johnson.

The club's Henley Royal Regatta success continued in the 1980s with three wins, with Eric Sims (now director of senior rowing at Maidenhead and winner of five Henley medals) winning one of them in partnership with Steve Redgrave.

Until 1998 the club was located in a timber and corrugated iron structure sandwiched between the Thames Riviera Hotel and the A4 road bridge. This was last extended in 1926 and by the 1990s was in a poor condition. However, in 1998, with the help of lottery funding, the club moved to a large modern purpose-built clubhouse on the other side of the river in Taplow, between the A4 bridge and Brunel's railway bridge. Crews row on the stretch between Boulter's Lock and Bray Lock, a distance of approximately 3,000m.

The move to the new larger premises in Taplow allowed the club to actively recruit new members, especially from local schools. Membership has nearly quadrupled since the move and now stands at well over 300.

The club has now developed one of, if not the, most successful junior sections in the country, regularly appearing at the top of National Championships and National Schools Championships medal tables along with leading rowing schools such as Eton and Lady Eleanor Holles, despite much smaller resources and fewer athletes. In 2007, the club's women's junior eight won the School's Head (held on the Tideway over the Boat Race course), beating all the top rowing schools in a course record time – the first time that a club has ever won this event.

Traditionally in the UK we have been strongest at sweep-oar rowing (each person handling one large oar, on alternating sides of the boat). However, recent years have seen a huge growth in sculling (two smaller oars per person, one in each hand) and the majority of the rowing at Maidenhead is now in sculling boats, partly reflecting the fact that all juniors start with sculling. However, crews in traditional boats such as coxed fours and eights are still seen regularly on the Maidenhead stretch.

Despite the success of the club in recent years, the one notable absence in its catalogue of achievements had been wins at Henley Royal Regatta and Henley Women's Regatta. This was rectified in 2006 when two HWR medals were won by Ally Brooks and Louise Entwistle in the junior double sculls event, and by Natalie Trinder and Vicky Sims in the senior double sculls. In 2007, Phil Clapp, sculling in a composite quad with Henley RC, won the under-19s Fawley Cup, crushing the best Australian and domestic competition in the process and becoming the first Maidenhead HRR winner since 1994. Phil then went on to represent Great Britain in the final of the world junior rowing championships in Beijing – the first major event held on the Olympic course. Products of the club's junior rowing programme are now appearing on the senior international scene, with former junior (and now University of London student) Rob Williams winning a bronze medal in the men's lightweight quad at the 2007 world championships and travelling to the Beijing Olympics with the GB squad.

The club organises two events every year, the Maidenhead Junior Regatta in May and Maidenhead Regatta in early August. The Junior Regatta, brainchild of club member Piers Alington about five years ago, is specifically designed for less experienced junior rowers (for many it is their first experience of racing) and is held in a special Amateur Rowing Association-sanctioned format that gives crews plenty of opportunities to compete in appropriate categories using a repechage system, so that nobody's day finishes by losing in the first round (as is the experience of so many juniors at other regattas). This event is now a firmly established favourite with other rowing clubs and schools in the region and operates at full capacity (of around 85 crews) every year.

Maidenhead Regatta is a late season 500m sprint regatta that, traditionally, has been raced upstream on the Bray stretch of the river finishing just before the railway bridge. However, in 2007 river conditions necessitated a last-minute relocation to Dorney Lake and the experiment was repeated this year.

The success of the regular adult learn-to-row courses has been a major development in recent years, feeding both the senior and veteran competitive squads and the recreational squad. Learn-to-row has now been supplemented by a learn-to-cox course, as

coxes are always in demand. So if you are small, loud and bossy, there's a role for you at the club.

The clubhouse boasts a splendid clubroom that is available for hire and has been used for many wedding receptions and parties, with the large doors and balcony providing a magnificent view of the Thames. The clubhouse is kept in good condition, thanks to club 'work days' where all members are expected to lend a helping hand. It is always interesting to find out what other talents club members have – from carpentry to laying concrete, someone will know how to do it.

This June, the club celebrated ten years in its new clubhouse, with guest Maidenhead MP Teresa May attending the celebrations and presenting a special cake in the shape of a women's coxed four (in Maidenhead colours) to the relocation committee. The club's ambitions now are to revitalise its men's squad and to capitalise on the 2012 Olympic rowing regatta which is being held at nearby Dorney Lake. It is hoped that some current and former juniors will be competing in 2012 and the club hopes to host rowers or supporters from at least one competing nation.

The club's web site and details of learn-to-row and learn-to-cox courses can be found at: [www.maidenheadrc.org.uk](http://www.maidenheadrc.org.uk)

*Huw Jenkins*



# Mill Lane Riverside

When St Regis first announced their intention to sell off the Taplow Paper Mill site, with its 48 acres of land, local residents reacted with a mixture of relief (at last, no more recycling lorries and something will be done about Skindles) and foreboding (hideous over-development with all that that may bring). As details of the possible future of the site are gradually revealed, one aspect that is of particular interest to our society has emerged. The latest plans released by Watchword, the new owners, include ideas for creating new inlets with moorings, to be fronted by exclusive riverside homes; which means that our right, as the public, to moor boats and to access the riverside could be curtailed, or even lost.

The slipway just north of the bridge is particularly vulnerable. This is a public drawdock, sited where travellers on the old London-Bath road once crossed the river, before the first Maidenhead bridge was built. The slipway was used as a watering place for horses and cattle, as well as a launching and landing place for commercial river traffic and pleasure boats. Nowadays it provides a rare and valuable point of access to the river for heavy machinery, such as cranes. The approach road to the slipway, which is clearly visible on the map of the Taplow Enclosures of 1787, existed until just a few years ago. Sadly, the piece of land occupied by this road – which belonged to South Bucks – appears to have been subsumed into private ownership (it is now under the Windrush VW garage's car park) and there have been occasions when it seemed that the same fate might befall the drawdock.

Avid readers of this newsletter will recall previous articles highlighting the vulnerability of the slipway. In the spring of 2000, our front page showed Tissot's painting of a Victorian lady stepping up it, no doubt returning from a boat trip. The article accompanying it ends with these words: 'The slipway is at some risk from any proposed Skindles development and yet another public access point can be lost unless we are highly vigilant.' (This was long before St Regis sold out, remember.) In the same issue, Fred Russell wrote a passionate article drawing attention to 'the Windrush affair' mentioned above.

Subsequent events proved that these concerns were justified. In 2002, the Environment Agency were forced to protest against the chainlink fencing and padlocked gates that were put up, obstructing the right of free public access down the slipway. In that same year, they had to take up the public's case against the possible sale of moorings just south

of Maidenhead Bridge. No wonder, then, that we await the publication of Watchword's planning application with such trepidation.

It's not all doom and gloom, however. The good news is that local groups are marshalling their forces to ensure that any redevelopment of the St Regis site will have something to offer the whole community, not just the developers. Over the last year or so, a mutual interest group has been meeting to share their aspirations for the site. Bob Dulson, of the Maidenhead Civic Society, summed up their aims as 'trying to influence the planners and the new owners on this unique opportunity to regenerate the area, and through appropriate redevelopment, to realise its true potential to the benefit of all'. In addition, representatives from the parish council, the River Thames Society, Mill Lane residents and our own society, as well as the Civic Society, have been holding meetings with a community liaison group set up by Hunter Page, the agents for the new owners of the site.

The local groups are anxious that the development should recognise the site's Green Belt status and ensure that it is in keeping with the immediate environment and the nearby conservation areas. They have drawn attention to the need to retain period buildings of architectural merit and to find a solution to potentially dangerous and unwelcome traffic in Mill Lane. Notably, they have placed strong emphasis on the particular requirements of this as a riverside site. Earlier this year, Bob Dulson wrote to Jamie Lewis of Hunter Page, listing their priorities which included

- Enhancing public access and views to both Jubilee and Maidenhead Rivers
- Exercising caution over private riverbank ownership
- Emphasising leisure and recreational uses of the area
- Insisting that riverside business should be river-related
- Preserving and enhancing mooring and boatyard facilities.

He said: 'I hope your clients can see the potential for reaping a return on their investment not just in real estate but in a way which could realise the tremendous potential of this site as a river-based destination.'

Amen to that.

*Gill Holloway*

# Plans for the Paper Mill Site and Skindles

On 16 September 2008 the developers held an exhibition at the mill. They showed plans covering the area from the A4 at Skindles through to the northern end of the paper-mill site. It is still very early in the planning process so there was not much detail about exactly what the proposed buildings would look like, but the overall idea was fairly clear. The current plans are reproduced overleaf; we are very grateful to Hunter Page Planning for providing electronic copies in time for this issue and for allowing us to publish them.

Starting from the southern end, the main points are:

- Build a new hotel on the Skindles site
- Provide a new public footpath along the river side of the hotel, linking Mill Lane to the Thames Path
- Move the Mill Lane/A4 junction to the eastern side of the VW dealership
- Build a tennis club behind the VW dealership
- Keep the existing working boatyard but add some new buildings to the site
- Build a group of Live/Work units where the recycling yard now is, along with a central services building holding meeting rooms etc
- Enlarge the inlets from the Thames to form small marinas with housing around them
- Build a set of linked apartments along the Jubilee River above the intake weir

- Refurbish Dunloe Lodge and Glen Island House
- Provide new public footpaths to the northern end of the site
- Although not shown on the plans, there is the possibility of a footbridge to Boulter's Lock

The Live/Work units are an interesting idea: these would be houses where each has an attached office with its own entrance and facilities. There would be a legal structure requiring at least one occupant of the house to work in the attached office, and limiting the type of work to be done there. Apparently this is already working in a few new developments. This sort of thing should really help to promote working from home and zero-commute businesses.

The exhibition was well attended and there was ample opportunity to ask questions and express opinions. It is a positive start, though we must remain vigilant and make sure that local opinions are taken into account as the plans evolve.

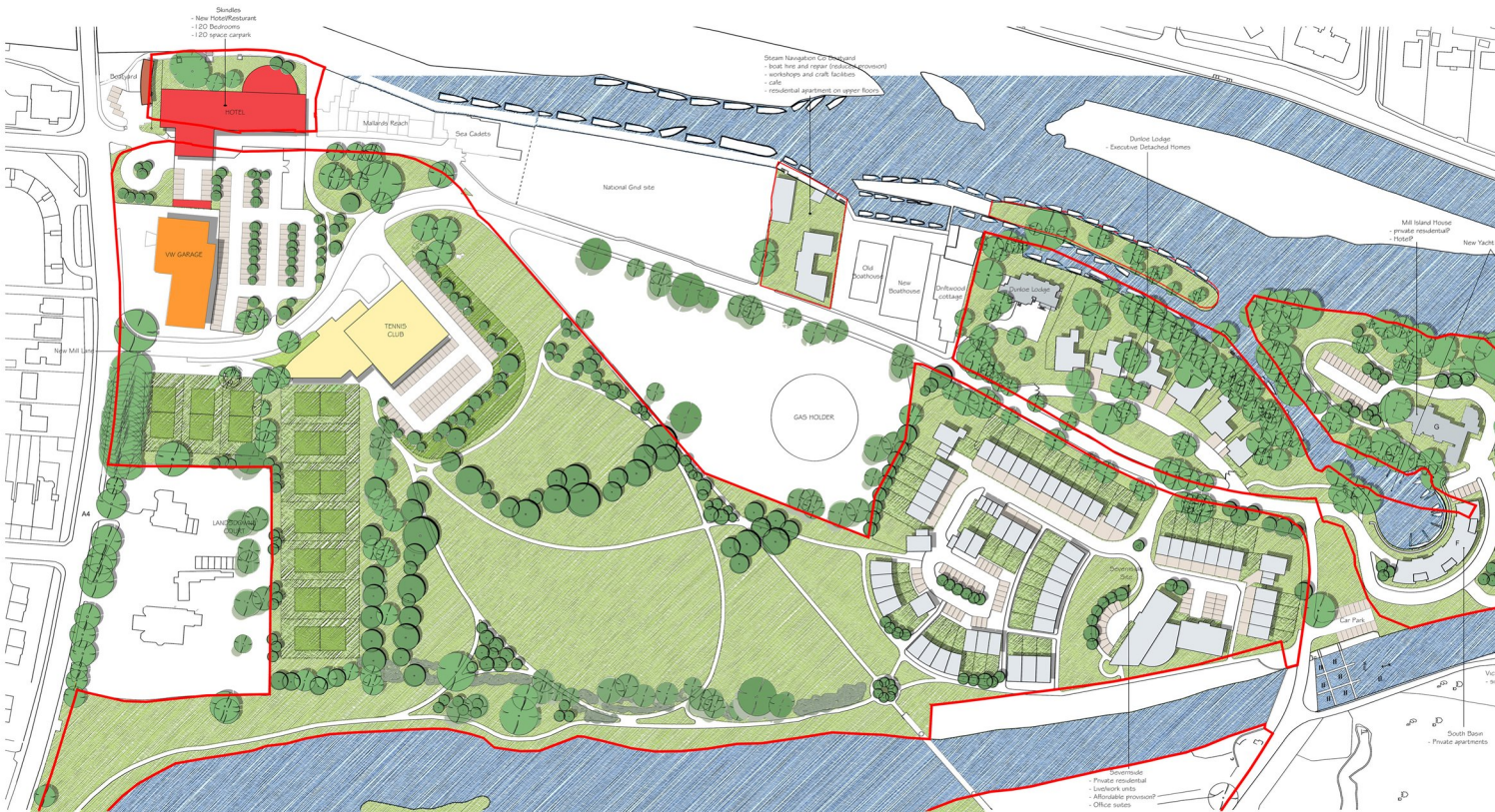
The Society will make formal responses to the plans as they progress through the system. Please help by joining the discussion in the Forum section of our website:

[www.taplowsociety.org.uk](http://www.taplowsociety.org.uk)

The Society needs to know your views!

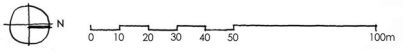
*Andrew Findlay*





EXISTING AND PROPOSED SITE PLANS





# Ettie: Lady Desborough

*Ettie: The Intimate Life and Dauntless Spirit of Lady Desborough*, by Richard Davenport-Hines. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 2008.

This is a good and interesting read with plenty of local history and information. It shows Richard Davenport Hines' admiration for her determination and courage, for the book is subtitled, 'the dauntless spirit' with good reason.

Orphaned at three years old, Ettie lost her brother at seven years, her two oldest sons in the war in 1915, and her last son, the baby of her five children, ten years later in a car accident. These are the more obviously devastating deaths, and Ettie also lost the generation of young admirers who represented the life blood at Taplow Court before the Great War, as well as suffering the early deaths of much-loved grandparents, aunts and guardian uncles who had provided the love and care of her young life.

Ettie married Willie Grenfell, later Lord Desborough, in 1887, the year of Queen Victoria's fiftieth jubilee. Both families were wealthy and influential. Both Ettie's grandparents came from very rich aristocratic families owning vast estates, described as quintessentially great Edwardian Whigs. The biographer presents mixed views of their lives, describing on the one hand rich and beautiful people living in sunshine, but on the other hand a story of a woman battling all her life against the depression she believed was congenital in the Cowper side of her family. This she dealt with by the strong religious conviction that the dead look after the living. She had seen her father as well as aunts and uncles collapse with grief and she is described by her son-in-law as determinedly overcoming the sorrow at the loss of her sons with sheer will-power. Some contemporaries suspected that her insistent optimism in the face of death was superficial, but most admired what they saw as magnificently heroic behaviour.

When Ettie and Willie, newly married, returned from their honeymoon, the biographer describes them being met at the old Taplow Station (on the Bath Road opposite the Harvester public house) by tenants and employees who hauled their carriage from the station up Berry Hill to Taplow Court as a gesture of fealty. Taplow Court had been left to Willie by his grandfather, the then MP for Windsor, together with 3,000 acres of Buckinghamshire and Berkshire.

The sparkling group of influential poets, politicians and literary figures entertained at Taplow Court, who became known as 'the souls' in London society, are described by Davenport-Hines as witty, clever and politically highly influential; both Balfour and Asquith were members and regular visitors, as was Churchill. Ettie was a dedicated letter-writer and reader, and her vast correspondence with such major personalities of the time provides one of the sources for this book.

In 1893 the Astors moved to Cliveden, and there followed years of competition between Ettie Desborough and Nancy Astor over extravagant Saturday-to-Monday house parties, although eventually the two women became friends. Willie became Mayor of Maidenhead in 1895 with mammoth local celebrations, and Ettie was an active and popular lady bountiful in the district, enthusiastically collecting piles of goods from friends with which to hold huge jumble sales.

During the Second World War, Taplow Court became a convalescent home for exhausted nurses, and for evacuated babies and their mothers, at least partly under the influence of Ettie's eldest daughter, who had been a nurse in the Great War. Now in her fifties, Ettie, described as still beautiful and still charming, continued to enjoy the company of bright young writers but was also still possessive of them. She became a courtier to Queen Mary, who had been a girlhood friend. This role continued for 28 years, during which time she accompanied the King and Queen on strenuous war work, and she was present with Queen Mary when George V died.

Willie died in 1944, aged 89, and was buried at Taplow with Ivo, his youngest son. The previous year Ettie had fallen and broken her hip, which never really healed and left her unable to travel, but she continued to entertain until her death in 1952. Interestingly, Skindles was left by Willie to his granddaughter, but her father thought it too disreputable to be owned by a 15-year-old-girl, and it was sold.

The book provides a fascinating insight into an impressive life a century ago. It is the only biography of this local, glamorous Edwardian hostess, a beautiful, rich, charming and clever woman of huge personal strength and will-power, who, despite great tragedy, utterly refused to become bitter.

*Esther Willmore*

# Village Shop

Would life in Taplow be better if there was a village shop?

In the 19th and early 20th centuries Taplow High Street thrived. The shops, which included a butcher, baker, grocer and livery outfitter, served the needs of the village and the demands of the large houses of the area such as Cliveden and Taplow Court. Sadly such outlets have long gone.

Imagine a small shop in Taplow today, owned and run by the villagers for the villagers. A place to buy essentials, or the occasional ice cream, or even a coffee and a fresh pastry along with the weekend papers. A place used regularly by those of us who live here and those who come to visit. Something in which we all have a stake and which brings to the village an amenity which most small communities have lost.

It wouldn't work of course. There would never be enough people willing to help out or sufficient money to make it happen. It would never be able to offer the same choice or value as the supermarkets down the road, or the extensive opening hours. Overall a daft idea, a fantasy.

Although... there is one in Sulgrave in Oxfordshire. I know this, because I went there. On a Sunday afternoon. It is very good – in fact the Countryside Alliance has voted it Best Rural Retailer in the southern region. Interestingly, and much to my surprise, there are over 150 villages with similar shops, which are owned and run by the local community. There are six in Buckinghamshire and Berkshire, two of which opened last year.

Villages with a shop are, apparently, more desirable places to live. The villages that have them claim that they offer more than mere convenience or 'top-up' shopping because they provide a meeting place and sense of community, perhaps in some ways like the French tabac. They provide a social benefit, through being both a place where regular users get to know others in the village and a way of creating an informal social support network. With more people wanting to shop locally and not always wanting the impersonal service of the giant supermarket chains, there is currently an active movement nationally to re-establish the village shop as a key feature of local life. In fact, there is so much interest and activity that a

charitable organisation has been set up to help. The Village Retail Services Association (ViRSA) was founded in 1992 in Dorset by the Plunkett Foundation following the successful start-up of a community-owned shop in the village of Halstock. It provides assistance for communities wanting to set up a village shop, covering all aspects of the venture including ownership, planning and what to sell. According to ViRSA, a typical community shop engages 25 volunteers, employs 1.3 equivalent full-time staff, is profitable and was supported by ViRSA during its start-up period. Start-up costs are typically financed from a mixture of loans, grants and money raised from the village.

For commercial shopkeepers, a village shop often provides low financial returns compared to what they would get elsewhere. However, a community-owned shop, whilst needing to be profitable to survive, can sustain itself with a different financial model. In particular, costs can be reduced by volunteer help (though most shops still have an employed full-time manager), with volunteers working 2-4 hours a week. In addition, because the villagers have a personal and/or financial stake in the shop, there is a natural incentive to use it and make it a success.

There may be a great deal of scepticism about whether Taplow could support a shop. Certainly, there would need to be a significant amount of work to test its viability and get the project going. On the other hand, the benefits would be equally significant. If the desire and support is there it would seem eminently feasible. Given that Taplow already has a strong community spirit (look at the village green party) and a well-educated and skilled population, surely it must be possible for us to make it work too – if we want to.

The Committee is wondering whether to take this further. The first step would probably be to send out a questionnaire in the near future to gauge whether it would be a viable idea. In the meantime it would be great to get your feedback and ideas. Any thoughts you have should be directed to [neil.blundell@sky.com](mailto:neil.blundell@sky.com) and headed 'Village Shop'.

For more information, see the ViRSA website at [www.virsa.org](http://www.virsa.org)

*Neil Blundell*

# Footpath 21

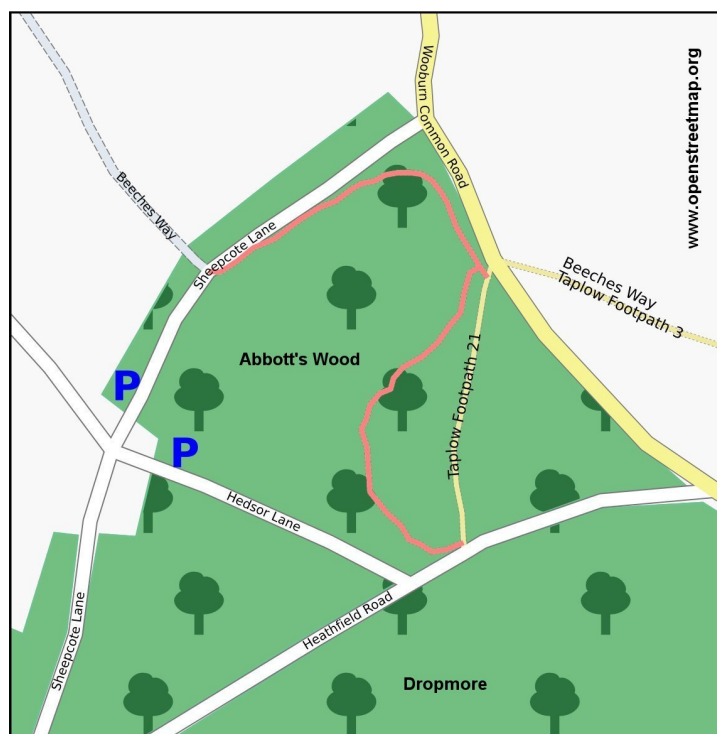
A new footpath has been laid out both extending and replacing part of Footpath 21 in the north of the Parish. The existing Footpath 21 crosses Abbott's Wood between Heathfield Road and Wooburn Common Road. It is thought to be the last remaining stretch in the area of a pilgrims' route from Kent to Woburn Abbey. The evidence for this supposition comes from early maps and the classic shape and dimensions of its cross-section.

From Heathfield Road the first part of the Footpath is a tarmac drive which runs along the side of the Abbott's Wood House, its gardens and outbuildings. Once the residential curtilage is passed it becomes an attractive but short, informal Buckinghamshire woodland walk before reaching Wooburn Common Road which, once crossed, joins the Beeches Way.

The current interest in Footpath 21 comes from two directions. The owners of Abbott's Wood have permission to replace the existing house with a large mixed architectural history show piece, prospective purchasers of which would be unlikely to be encouraged by the proximity of a public footpath. Opposition to any diversion of the footpath comes from the desire to keep a public footpath with a long romantic history. The Parish Council also has a policy of opposing any proposals to change footpath routes, a policy that results from local landowners' long history of terminating rights of way. This in turn has resulted in a Parish which no longer has an effective footpath network joining its northern and southern areas. Links with footpaths in surrounding parishes are also meagre and lacking in cohesion. There is, therefore, a reliance on rural lanes and roads and their verges as connections, a reliance that has unfortunately not been recognised by the Highway Authority who appear to do all in their power to attract rat-running traffic and increase its speed. This makes the verges both unattractive and in parts perilous for walkers.

To cut the Gordian knot produced by divergent interests, the owners have put forward an alternative routing for Footpath 21 and generously increased the length of the footpath to the west to allow a link between two sections of the Beeches Way, one coming

through Coach Farm Alley to Sheepcote Lane and the other starting to the east of Hale's Cottage on Wooburn Common Road. The new footpath routes have been laid out as permissive paths and can be walked by all who wish to do so, allowing a comparison to be made between the existing and the proposed.



The new permissive paths form a very pleasant woodland walk much longer than the existing Footpath 21. It is thought by some to be the most attractive footpath in the locality. The most obvious improvement at the Heathfield Road end is the section of footpath going south from the existing tarmac drive through pleasant woodlands. The landscape of this new section is great visual improvement on what is now just the access to a house and its associated outbuildings. The new link on the Beeches Way would be a very positive asset to the Public Footpath system as the current connections are along busy roads with no continuous verges for walkers' use. Further improvements, suggested by the Parish Council, include changing part of the alignment of the new route to include the wooded section of the existing Footpath 21 and moving the section paralleling Sheepcote Lane further from the road to reduce traffic noise.

If Footpath 21 could unequivocally be proved to be an ancient right of way, then it can be neither diverted nor lost but a more picturesque alternative could reduce or voluntarily end its use. If Footpath 21 cannot be proved to be an ancient right of way, then it could be the subject of a modification order application whose success would be dependent on the improvement offered to the existing route. The footpath would still have to start and end at the existing place and the modified paths would have to be statutorily registered public footpaths and not permissive or permitted paths which could be closed by the landowner.

The next move belongs to the owners who have held widespread consultation with relevant bodies to garner reactions to the proposal. The

possibility has also been raised that some of the woodland could be donated to the Parish Council. HTS members are encouraged to visit the north of the Parish and walk the new paths. If followed on to the Beeches Way eastward, walkers are faced with the dilemma of choosing between the Jolly Woodman and the Blackwood Arms. Braver souls can dice with the traffic and turn west on to Wooburn Common Road to the Royal Standard!

*Mary Trevallion*

*The new paths do not appear on printed maps yet, but they are on the web at [www.openstreetmap.org](http://www.openstreetmap.org) and we have printed the relevant section here. The new paths are shown in red and the easiest places to park are marked with blue P symbols. - Ed.*

## Trees in Peril

Is there a conspiracy of silence about the current unsightly plight of our horse chestnut trees? Responding to a telephone enquiry, a South Bucks District Council spokesman said he knew nothing about it but after consulting a colleague he returned to say there was no need for concern since the trees would undoubtedly recover.

It appears that the grub of the horse chestnut leaf miner – a tiny thing – is one of the culprits and entered the country as an unwelcome immigrant some six years ago. The horse chestnuts are also being attacked by another assailant in the form of a disease called bleeding canker, which appears on the trunk. This is caused by a bacterium that flourishes due to the recent spate of mild winters and wet springs.

The Forestry Commission say that the disease is currently affecting some 75% of all horse chestnuts in the South East and the result may be the death of the trees. Those infected by leaf miner alone are at serious risk because the whole tree is severely weakened when the leaf-fall is accelerated as if it were an early autumn. So why is there a total lack of media interest when Dutch Elm disease was major headline

news? There has been virtually no newspaper comment about this current blight other than a trivial piece in the Telegraph, lamenting the dismal future for 'conkering' children.

Taplow and Hitcham have many major horse-chestnut trees which are now suffering severely and looking extremely sorry for themselves. Many are in areas where the developers who own the land would welcome an excuse to remove them.

Perhaps the South East of today, with its vast urbanisation programme, has replaced tree huggers with tree shruggers; who cares about messy, inconvenient, leaf- and branch-dropping, soil-sapping, shade-creating old trees anyway?

I do, for one!

*Fred Russell*

*A local expert has suggested that we could help our horse chestnuts by collecting up and burning all the fallen leaves. This would reduce the population of bugs trying to invade the trees next spring. Worth a try perhaps - Ed.*

# South Lodge Pit

Were you aware that on your doorsteps sits a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)? Do you have any idea what lies behind the grey fencing on Mill Lane, close to the Jubilee River? No? Well, you're not alone. The site in question is an old abandoned chalk quarry called South Lodge Pit. It is one of only 11 SSSIs in Buckinghamshire that are listed for their geological importance.

The South Lodge Pit was first noted as an important site in 1951 and granted SSSI status in 1975. The site is owned and managed by the Taplow Court estate, but the responsibility to protect the site lies with Natural England. In 1999 a significant clean-up occurred and the quarry faces were cleaned and undergrowth removed. However over the last nine years the vegetation has grown back to the point where many of the features are no longer accessible or visible.



On 31 May, the Bucks Earth Heritage Group, a small but enthusiastic group with an interest in conserving and promoting geology within Buckinghamshire, organised a quarry clean-up. Together with local volunteers and staff from Taplow Court they spent the day removing shrub and buddleia growth from the quarry faces and improving access.

South Lodge Pit first appears in the scientific literature in 1891 when Mr A Strahan was examining some rock samples from the quarry that had been sent to the Museum of Practical Geology in London. He recognised the unusual character of the chalk and he subsequently visited the pit.

In records from the time, South Lodge Pit was already referred to as an 'old quarry', possibly being abandoned for some time. The chalk was most likely extracted for the manufacture of lime for building and for agriculture. Quarries like South Lodge Pit, close to the Thames, may well have been the source for lime used in the early construction of London. There is documentary evidence of mineral extraction and quarrying since the 16th century. In the Hampton Court account books for the 1530s there is a record of burnt lime and bricks being transported down the Thames from a Taplow quarry.

To understand the significance of the pit we need to understand how the chalk formed. During the Late Cretaceous period (The Age of the Dinosaurs, 100-65 million years ago), sea level was up to 250m higher than present day. There were no ice caps and the planet was much warmer. The oceans spilt over on to the continents and most of Britain including, most importantly for our story, Buckinghamshire, was submerged below the sea. The Taplow chalk formed in these shallow marine conditions through the accumulation of the microscopic skeletal remains of millions of marine plankton called coccolithospheres. The process was very slow and it is estimated that chalk formed at an average rate of about 1 to 3 cm every 1,000 years. The low percentage of other minerals in the Taplow chalk is explained by the vastness of this Cretaceous Ocean and the distance the Taplow area was from any land at the time.

The occurrence of phosphatic deposits within chalks of this age is well recognised in

# AGM

The Annual General Meeting of the Hitcham and Taplow Society will take place on Friday 31 October at the Village Centre, High Street, Taplow, starting at 8 pm. A detailed agenda is included with this edition of the Newsletter.

north-eastern France, but South Lodge Pit remains the only site in southern England where these deposits are well developed and their age can be clearly determined. The deposits contain abundant brown granular phosphate, largely consisting of phosphate-filled and coated foraminiferal tests (the shells of another microscopic marine animal), phosphatised macrofossil fragments, faecal pellets, phosphatised intraclasts and vertebrate remains.

In 1905 Mr Harold White and Mr Llewellyn Treacher published an extensive paper describing the Taplow pit, the phosphatic deposits and the fossils found there. They recognised the beds of chalk were dipping more steeply and in a different direction to rocks from the surrounding area. Although their interpretation of the presence of folded rock strata was wrong, their observation of increased bed dips was correct. It is now thought that they represent the sides of a submarine channel feature called a 'cuvette'.

So where does the phosphate come from? Phosphorus is abundant in living organisms; for example a average adult male will have approximately 700 grams of phosphorus in their body and will intake and excrete approximately 1 to 3 grams per day. In the marine environment, phosphate is supplied predominantly by the breakdown of marine organic matter, plants and animals. The accumulation of a phosphate deposit requires the maintenance of specific conditions for

extended periods of time. The cuvettes, or channels, provided this environment. The surrounding marine conditions encouraged marine life, in particular burrowing creatures which brought sediments into their burrows, resulting in preservation of material that would otherwise be quickly destroyed on the sea floor. The cuvettes became important as a means of concentrating the phosphatic materials as the finer chalk particles were transported away by the channel currents.

Were the phosphates ever extracted? As far as records indicate, the Phosphoric Beds at Taplow were never exploited commercially, even though, during both World Wars the government analysed the deposits in the quarry and found 5-20% phosphate. The interest was probably related to the use of phosphorus in the manufacture of munitions. However, they didn't mine it – possibly because it's limited to an area of about 300 by 1500m and presumably uneconomical.

More work on South Lodge Pit will be required and the group will be planning another clean-up activity in 2009 and a geological visit later in 2008 subject, of course, to permission from Natural England and the landowner. If you are interested in learning more about the local geology, why not come and join us?

*Graham Hickman and Roisin Lakings*

## TVAP Raffle

The raffle at the 2008 Village Green Party was in aid of Thames Valley Adventure Playground. It was very successful, raising £628.50.

Nicky Hutchinson, the Donations Manager, said, "This is a truly magnificent sum and we are, as you can imagine, just thrilled to have been the beneficiaries, and most grateful to all those who supported us so generously."

# A Silent Summer?

Many years ago, a perceptive and caring lady called Rachel Carson noted the impact that the spreading use of DDT was having on the environment and wrote a seminal book on her observations called *Silent Spring*.



Michael Kiely

Today, in parts of Taplow, we have what appears to be a silent summer descending upon us in that our small songbirds seem to be rapidly disappearing from our gardens and fields. The reason appears to be the growing local population of a species of birds generally labelled as raptors, notably peregrine falcon, red kite and sparrowhawk.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) negotiated protection for these birds of prey on the grounds that they were being hunted to extinction. As usual, when man decides to take a hand in the natural balance of nature, he lacks the deep knowledge necessary to maintain a new balance. For instance in Scotland the increase of raptors has resulted in the virtual extinction of grouse and plover.

The RSPB 'experts' claim that the growth of the raptor population is a vital element in controlling the population of the '...weakest members of the prey population which weeds out the sick, infirm, starving and often genetically unsuitable members and thus helps to keep a viable, healthy prey population'. Well, tell that to the robins, blackbirds, sparrows, starlings, finches and tits which the 'experts' consider to be members of the 'prey population' and which used to play out their brief enough lives in our gardens.

An average raptor needs 70–100 grams of food a day, which is equal to about two blackbirds. A few breeding pairs of these admittedly beautiful creatures can quickly decimate the small bird population.

The RSPB 'spins' its reporting of the impact on the small bird population arising from protecting the raptor by placing most of the blame – to the fury of farmers – on changes to agricultural practices and the consequent destruction of small bird habitats.

So, RSPB, how do you plan restore the true balance of nature between the needs of the raptor and the survival of their prey population to secure the return of our songbirds?

*Fred Russell*

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Unless otherwise stated, the views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the Society or its Committee.

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