

## EWG - The Church Field – Progress Report 2023



I would like to take this opportunity, on behalf of our EWG committee, to update our members about the progress that has been made on the Church Field. Many of the small bits of information regarding the Church Field are posted on Facebook so we wanted to make sure that those members who don't use Facebook are better informed.



We began our management of the Church Field in 2020 in the year EWG formed, and of course, year one of the pandemic. At that time the field was basically a grass field in poor condition, mown each year and occasionally used by children and dog walkers. It was of very little value to wildlife and very uninteresting for those people who walked it, it was a green desert.



Today we have a thousand square meters of meadow, some scrub and shrub areas, a nice collection of specimen trees including a Queen's Oak, planted to commemorate her Silver Jubilee, and some long grass areas. The hedges on the north east of the field have been allowed to thicken and extend out. Wildflowers have been introduced in areas on the boundary with the burial ground and of course in the seed planted in the meadows. A path was cut around the meadow to create more interest for visitors. Recently we have added a new path on the side of the field that runs through the long grass areas and past the Jubilee tree. We are looking at putting a bench here, somewhere, and have been asking people to provide feedback when they discover it moving its position around the field.

For the Church Field our aim was to improve not only its value to the community as a recreational area but also take actions that would improve the numbers of plants and animals that could be found here. In other words, improve its contribution to the local area biodiversity. All this at a time when the world is looking to make new positive connections with nature, to reduce the impact of climate change and improve our mental health.

### **So, what has been the impact of EWG management to date?**

There are no formal statistics to support what comes next. Most of the comments are based on observation and some discovered through trapping, identifying and releasing. Surveys carried out include small mammal trapping and yearly visits to catch and record insects like grasshoppers etc.

There is no question in our minds that the Church Field is now used considerably more than it used to be. There are those who add it into their daily dog walks and those who walk the paths every day as part of their exercise and mental health regime. Children play and families enjoy picnics.

Solitary walkers skirt round the meadow path to take in the beauty of a thousand Oxeye daisies in the late spring. The breeze on a summer day moves through the meadow shaping paths of light and movement using the many different species of grass. In the summer large numbers of Hedge and Meadow Brown butterflies come to settle on the daisy flowers, their night time refuge. A little poetic you might say! Well, these are just the sort of things that help us bring sense to a chaotic world, reconnect us to nature and help us keep a strong mental health.

Now, in terms of the improvement in biodiversity here are our observations.

### Small Mammals



*Left to Right: Yellow Necked Mouse, Field Vole, Common Shrew*

The long grass areas around the play/parking area support nearly every kind of British **small** mammal. We know this, because we have seen them and caught them. The tunnels of field voles are evident in most areas. Thankfully, the long grass areas are a refuge for the many voles displaced when the meadow is cut each year. One afternoon while catching grasshoppers I came across a young vole curled up on a grass bed sleeping in the sun. We have also caught and released bank vole, yellow necked mouse, pygmy shrew and common shrew. The only other species we could have, are Water Shrew and Harvest Mouse, though I believe for obvious reasons (in the first case) we do not have the habitat to support them.



### Large Mammals

Moving up the size scale, we have recorded scats from badgers and foxes. Hedgehogs do visit but we have never seen one out and this is probably because we don't tend to walk it at that time of night. We disturbed a rabbit this year as we inspected the meadow before cutting. There looks like an aborted effort to dig a burrow in one area of the meadow. Grey squirrels seem to get everywhere and their hazel nut caching has produced quite a number of young hazel trees in the field margins, adding to the development of the scrub. Scrub is a much-maligned habitat but essential to support many types of plant and a broader

diversity of wildlife. Scrub provides the nesting site for Long Tailed Tits and a feeding place for warblers like Blackcap and Chiffchaff for example. This year, an early walker reported a single muntjac deer on the Church Field and that did surprise us!

### Bats

There are at least 3 species of bat that now hunt over the meadow. The trees in the surrounding gardens, and those that border the field and burial ground are often the hunting ground for Noctule bats. The smaller Pipistrelle bats (Soprano and Common) are regular visitors during warmer months. We know their primary food source is insects, in particular moths, so we assume that the much wider variety and sheer number of insects now to be found on the Church Field must be helping them.

### Amphibians

Frogs and toads have been recorded and there are ponds not far away for them to breed in.

## Birds



We have seen an increase in raptors with a record of our first barn Owl at Christmas last year, no doubt taking advantage of the large number of voles on the field. It was seen hawking around the field perimeter looking for rodents in the long grass. Tawny Owls are frequent visitors at this end of the village so we can assume that they too are enjoying a new food source. On more than one occasion, in the spring, we watched a female kestrel heading over the meadow with a vole tightly clasped beneath it, on route to feed hungry chicks. Buzzards are regular visitors and, in the winter, will sit patiently, in the early morning, and wait for earthworms to appear above the grass.



*(Young Tawny Owl Left, Buzzard worming right)*



In the last year we have also seen Red Kites, only very occasionally, flying in the area.

Smaller birds like summer warblers and finches are regular visitors to the hedges and trees around the field. Goldfinches will come to the thistle flowers that grow in the wilder borders.

Blackcap and Chiffchaff have always had a presence locally and occasionally we get Willow and Garden Warbler on passage. I believe that once our hedges expand out and some natural scrub develops, we will see more of these small birds, like Long Tailed Tit and Whitethroat. Swallows and Pied Wagtails are often found hunting insects both above and on the mown grass respectively.

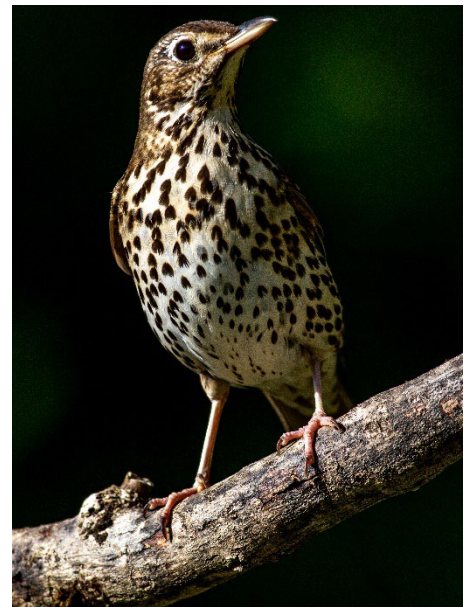
*(Blackcap right, Red Kite above)*



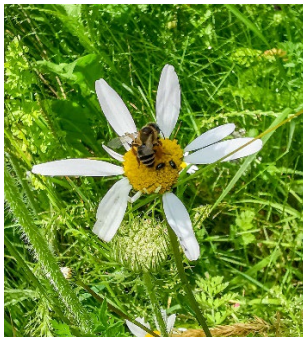


Crows, Rooks (*image left*) and Jackdaws are frequent visitors collecting nest material in the spring. They will take insects to their young, and later in the year will pick out leatherjacket larvae from the grass. In the autumn Jays arrive to feast on the acorns on the large oak at the bottom of field. Some are eaten and some buried. They are, apparently, very good at remembering where they bury the acorns (unlike squirrels with hazel nuts) but always miss a few. It is said that England would be devoid of oak trees if it were not for their work! Apparently, the young oaks won't grow when they fall beneath the parent tree. The Jays very conveniently carry them further afield. There are one of two small oaks appearing on the field!

Other regular visitors include: Mistle and Song Thrush (*image right*), Redwing and Fieldfare (winter only), Nuthatch, Great Spotted and Green Woodpecker, Chaffinch, Goldfinch and Greenfinch, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Coal Tit.



### Insects

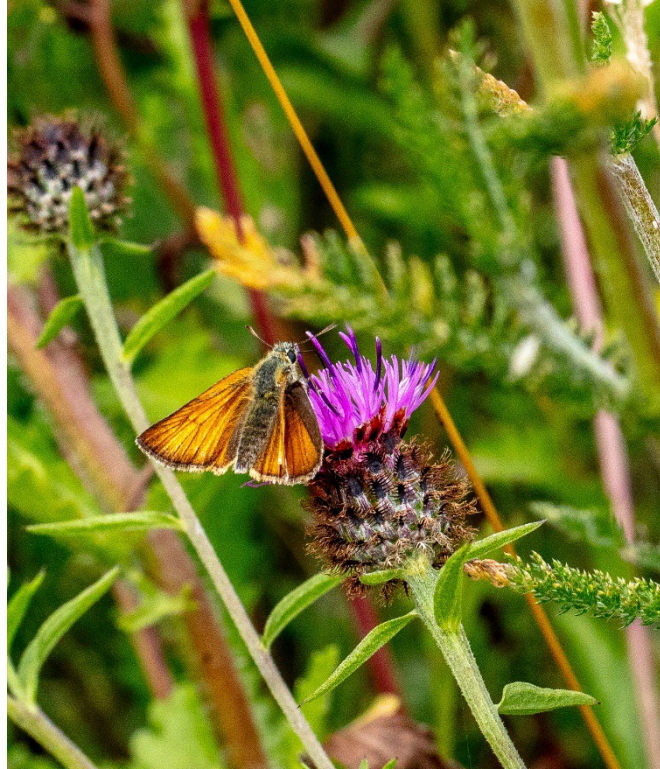


Let us first of all talk about the insects we can easily see, the butterflies. There is no doubt that those species heavily dependent on managed grassland have increased in number, in particular Meadow Brown and Wall/Hedge Brown. Butterflies in general seem to have had a good year but watching the increase in numbers of these two species in

particular has been a feature of our developing habitat on the Church Field. Other species have arrived in smaller numbers most notably Gatekeeper, Small Skipper and Ringlet. These butterflies often rely on grassland habitats for various stages of their life cycles, including egg-laying, caterpillar feeding, and food from plants in the adult stage. Maintaining and preserving grassland ecosystems is crucial for the conservation of these butterfly species and their biodiversity. Comma (*right*), Small Tortoiseshell and Red Admiral are common visitors.

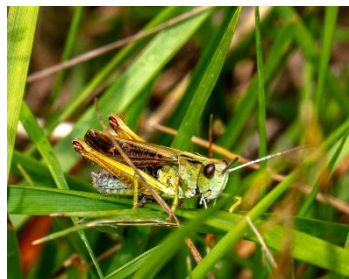


Now, let's get down on our hands and knees. We have cut two experimental areas of long grass this year to see if we can encourage a little more biodiversity by over sowing with fresh wildflower seed. This process was supported by a small group of children who made seed bombs to launch into these areas. But, whilst cutting these areas, what was extremely obvious, was the large number of ant nests that now occupy the margins of the field. There are also a few in the meadow as well. We know that there are large mounds created by meadow ants in the neighbouring field and gardens. These mounds regularly attract ground feeding Green Woodpeckers, a bird which is locally scarce! Our ants are probably yellow meadow ants, but we definitely need to look harder and find out more about our developing colonies of ants.



*Right: Skipper on Black Knapweed*

In year one we didn't find a single grasshopper on the church field. In year two we were **delighted** to welcome back our first, the Field Grasshopper (*opposite*). This is a rather brown and quite large grasshopper, well camouflaged. The abdomen can be dark with light stripes separating the sections. This year we have recorded 3 species of grasshopper and one species of groundhopper.



## Plants

When we decided to plant the meadow, we didn't choose a glitzy flower seed mix with all sorts of bright flowers aimed at pollinators. These seed mixes often include plants that are not native to the UK.

Instead, we chose a meadow mix of grasses and wildflowers that would be most in keeping with a Shropshire meadow, perhaps one that you might have walked through, fifty years ago.

On the whole we are delighted with the progress of the meadow. Remember these types of habitats take many years to develop. The National Nature Reserve at Motte Meadows just down the road at Wheaton Aston took over 700 years to become a national treasure! We are hoping to speed our meadow up a little!

The village residents have enjoyed walking around the meadow and field particularly in the late spring when they were greeted by a sea of shining white flowered Oxeye Daisies. There also seems to be a good traffic of Newport residents walking the canal path and the cross-field path to Edgmond. Many of these are now including a detour around the meadow.

The continuing proliferation of Yellow Rattle (the meadow maker) is greatly encouraging. Black knapweed with its purple thistle-like flower heads is a favourite with butterflies, including Small Copper and Wall. The wildflower areas have done well. Members grew wild flowers grown in pots and then transplanted them into areas on the field.



We have a far greater variety of grasses on the field now. Look out for Sweet Vernal Grass in the meadow. This is the first grass to flower in the late spring. It is known as a chewing grass and was apparently favoured by native Americans. It has the slight taste of vanilla. Other grasses include Cocksfoot, Broome, Yorkshire Fog, Meadow Foxtail, Crested Dogs-tail, and various tickling grasses (fescues).

The different types of managed grass habitats are of vital importance for insects and thereby support the lower end of the food chain. The grass seed also supports our voles and in turn the voles provide for animals higher up the food chain, like buzzards, owls, kestrels etc. Many of our native butterflies include grassland in their life cycle, one way or another. The grassed areas are home to beetles, grasshoppers, earwigs, ants and many other invertebrates and provide essential food for our insectivorous small mammals, shrews.

Grasses are not to be under-rated in the natural world, and here on the field and in the meadow they are underpinning the development of our varied habitats, and fostering greater biodiversity. So, if you do walk the Church Field, find time to stop and check them out! See how many you can identify!

## Recent News

This year we cut the meadow in mid-August and turned the hay as best we could in changeable weather conditions. This turning of hay helps the drying and distribution of seed. Members participated in the final turn and the hay collection. This year we were delighted to be joined by a group of children from St Peters Primary School. They had an important job to do! First of all, they created seed bombs to launch into the newly created wild flower field margins. Then they joined the adults, collecting and dragging hay to be piled up by the gate. I am certain they had a great time jumping in the hay at the end, and we were more than delighted to have them with us. Neil Furniss arrived the next day to load up the hay and take it away to his farm.



However, the job was not finished. We had decided to make some wildflower additions to the meadow and had purchased a selection of seeds. To ensure the best chance of germination we decided to cut the meadow for a second time leaving more space for seeds to find bare soil. In addition, we marked out nine circular areas with flour and these areas were further scarified with rakes. We have chosen 9 different wildflowers one for each of the prepared circles. Hopefully, if all goes well, as you walk around the meadow next year you will see some changing patterns of colour, including the pinks of Campion, Wild Mallow, yellow from Kidney Vetch, Meadow Vetchling and Bedstraw, purples and blues from Knapweed, Vetch and Geranium. We

finished up by scattering the seed of Wild Carrot (*image above left*), also known as Queen Anne's Lace, over the whole meadow.

Near the top of the field, we have also sown some wild orchid seed. Wild Orchid seed germination is a tricky business but I won't go into that here. Just keep your fingers crossed for the next five years!

I know it isn't possible to cover everything in this report but hopefully I have given you a flavour of how things are progressing. Remember, none of this is possible without your support. Thank you.

Jon Lloyd October 2023





