

# GROWING TOGETHER

The Self-Sufficiency Group  
November 2023  
Newsletter



*GROWING TOGETHER Self-Sufficiency group exists to enable and encourage its members to practice self-sufficiency and self-reliance, and maintain a "sustainable life style" in a fast changing worldwide environment*

View this newsletter at:-

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

Indoor meetings are held at 19.30 on the  
2nd Wednesday of the month in the:-

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**Here is my final offering.....**

**On Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> November**

**Our talk:** Alan Williams from the RHS, whose talk will be called From Plot to Plate. Says it all I think...

**December** Christmas Party... which I shall not be arranging!

**And here is my penultimate report.**

**Resume of October talk** by Matt Phelps from the Knepp Estate.

What a good speaker! No wonder he has been chosen to take over from head ecologist Penny (now too busy) to give talks. He is also a Safari Guide, taking about 100 tours a year.

When Charlie Burrell took over the Knepp Estate in the early 1980s he was fresh out of agricultural collage, full of enthusiasm and convinced it was just a matter of applying all the modern farming techniques he had learnt about to turn the fortunes of the Estate farm around. Ehhh, 20 years later he was defeated by the land which just refused to play ball. Mainly arable, but included a 600 strong dairy herd. 6 months of the year the 300 metre deep clay made the fields and lags very wet and often flooded.

By the end of the 1990's the farm was over a million pounds in debt. Charlie and Isabella asked themselves what they were doing. Constantly fighting the landscape and stopping nature do what it wanted to do. Damaging wildlife. And not successfully producing food. So began the journey to explore the idea and practicalities of rewilding, learning a great deal from The Netherlands very large rewilded area, and from discussions with wildlife experts, nature charities and lots more. Sifting through all they read and heard. And so they began. Internal fences were removed, woods and scrub began to grow and over that first five year period the land began to heal.

The animals came:

Tamworth pigs, the nearest to the wild boar, and safe to be around, unlike the boar! They route around happily, and their routing results in seedbeds being created for new plants.

Docile Long Horn cattle: they are in place of the auroch which I believe is now extinct.

Exmore ponies, again the nearest we have to the ancient wild horses that lived here. Now a Rare Breed, probably only about 600 left in Britain.

And Deer: Roe, Fallow and Red. The odd unwanted Muntjac.

The Red Deer is now the biggest land mammal in Britain, and the ones at Knepp are the biggest anywhere.

The herd of Fallow Deer are the 6<sup>th</sup> healthiest herd in Europe.

The Deer hold back the tide of advancing woodland, helping to keep the landscape varied and available for many different species.

This is low density. They have 5 pigs; 1 pig can use 200 acres. 100 breeding cows. 35 Exmore ponies, 27 Red Deer, 650 Fallow Deer....

In the true wild all these animals would have a top predator, killing the old and sick: no wolves here and not likely to be.....so we, Man, has to be the top predator at Knepp, culling when necessary, constantly aware of the animals state of health. In the Netherlands initially they got it wrong, not realising humans needed to be the top predators not understanding the balance nature would provide if wolves were allowed, and animals became too many in numbers so some died of starvation and were left in place....feeding of coarse so many animal species which rely on dead creatures, but upsetting for the humans who came across them...

Much of the land has gone from poor arable to wood and scrub in just a few years. Species are coming back. The nightingale for one. 9 out of 10 are gone in the UK, mainly through habitat destruction; there has been a 92% decline in 48 years, and 11% of that number in the last ten years. Knepp has 58 singing males this year. ( Penny the head(?) ecologist is licensed to ring birds.) The Turtle Dove has declined by 98% in 48 years, and 82% of that figure in the last ten years. 13 different types of bats: 38 species of butterfly including the much lorded Purple Emperor. Thirty different types of Dragon and Damsel flies. I fifth of the Adder population of Sussex. The birds and beasts, insects ect keep the land in a constant state of movement. Scrub does not inhibit the growth of trees like the Oak. They will happily push up through it.

Helping the soil to recover is the Dung Beetle! A most important little creature, becoming scarce on our farms due to the wormers given to cattle on a regular basis and pesticides/herbicides. Our soil does need to recover; it is said by many scientists we only have 60 harvests left if we carry on as we are at present... world wide

The controversial reintroduction of the Beaver! Extinct in Britain for 3 – 4 hundred years. They are now enclosed and doing a great job....in more ways than one. Not only helping to stop flooding by slowing down the pace of water in a river, but they had babies this summer! The first in Sussex for 500 years.

The first attempt at the reintroduction of the beaver was a total failure. They left....but have since been recaptured. They weren't happy...why not? well, they are like us; just because one was a boy and one was a girl didn't mean they were going to like each other...and they didn't. So the silly humans had to learn; get a bonded pair!!!

They are known as a Keystone species, radically changing for the better the landscape, creating wetland , slowing down river flow, halting wild fires.

Storks!! The White Stork was hunted to extinction 600 years ago in Britain. Being social birds it is difficult to establish a flock, but after 4 or 5 years the first nest appeared. This year there were 11 nests and 26 young. I was one of the 50,000 visitors this year to see the nests and hear the young! So alien to me....isn't that sad....nothing much bigger than a rook around here.

This year has seen the launch of the walled garden project, which is being rewilded on a Mediterranean theme. Open centred flowers for the insects.. 15 hummingbird moths spotted. Shame the ponies got in.... opps

Regenerative farming; links are being made with James Bard (?) from Climping. He contacted the estate to talk about a corridor to the sea.. which will help migratory birds as well as other wildlife its going well... The Weald to Waves project.

Eco tourism... Knepp has a campsite! Plus safari tours, a shop selling meat and a cafe.... and wonderful walks.

Podcasts are available and Isabella Tree has a new book out The Book of Rewilding. This is a large manual on how to.... from tiny projects to huge estates. Charlie Burrell has recently bought some land in Cambridgeshire and Linconshire. Mmm, interesting.

This is a flavour of the talk. Nothing can beat going there. It is so unlike anything else here. The "Managing" of it is so unobtrusive that you don't notice it, and it is strange to us who are so used to the British countryside, be it farmed or "natural"

(not) that it takes a bit of getting used to. It also brings home just how man has put his stamp on every aspect of life of every living thing in Britain.

When you see an old tree in the middle of a ploughed field, stop and realise the plough is slowly killing the myriad of roots that live near the surface.

Unlike most nature conservation sites in Britain, Knepp is not “target driven.” They don’t know what it will look like in 20 years time...this is “process led” conservation...the old adage “time will tell” really does apply.

Dru

**One more write up to go!** I will not be writing up each and every talk/walk/ meeting in future as no longer talks sec after Feb, and I will not need to come to every meeting. You have been spoiled! If you didn’t come to a meeting you were able to get most of the info if not the atmosphere, the following month!!

Dru

### The Compost Bin

**Those flopping cucumbers:** I could have kicked myself when I discovered the reason for this, particularly as I also suffered from it a few years ago. It was nothing to do with the horizontal support wires being too high... no, I later found the bottom of the main stems had been partly chewed through at soil level. Presumably the work of a slug or snail. So the plant was constantly gasping for water, poor thing!

**The seasonal urge:** in the same way that something inside us stirs us into sowing the first seeds in the spring, so this is the time of year makes us want to get outdoors on a dry day and tidy up, ready for a fresh start in the spring. The courgette plants were the first to go – how enormous they had become! – and they were soon joined by the other tender vegetables. In a way, removing the climbing runner and French beans was the most satisfying clearance: chopping the stems off just above soil level so that the roots can continue producing a tiny amount of nitrogen, then stripping the canes and removing them for storage in bundles under the roof of the shed. If, like me, you set up your supports by using two horizontal canes (above and below the cross-over points) which are strained

together with cable ties to make a really sturdy structure, do remember that when the time comes to take them down you can re-use the cable ties almost indefinitely by jamming their tiny ratchets with a small electrical screwdriver - as I’ve explained in detail many times. Please don’t discard them; I’ll gladly unlock yours at a meeting.

**Sweet pea sowings** should be well up by now, with the tiny plants just big enough to stand the winter in an unheated greenhouse or frame. I have always wondered whether to try chipping the seeds with a sharp knife (always a risky process!) or soaking them overnight to allow the entry of moisture through those tough coats, but this year I followed the instructions on a Thompson & Morgan packet by laying them on a moistened pad of kitchen-roll on a plate. I also doubled the ends over on top for added effect. In two or three days the seeds had visibly swelled and one or two split, and I then sowed them in small, tall pots of peat-free compost on the kitchen table where they soon grew sufficiently to move them into the greenhouse. I had decided there’s no point in plugging in the propagator when the kitchen was at exactly the right temperature!

**I shouldn’t have** complained about the effects of the dry weather on our crops. October has more than made up for it: already, up to the third week we’ve had 156mm. That’s 197% of the October average here of 79mm, in other words nearly double. But sadly, in some other countries, the drought continues.

**The generally warmer summer** favoured many outdoor crops, but I have come to one conclusion. I won’t bother to plant outdoors any surplus chilli pepper plants: not one flower developed. Global warming may have favoured some crops, but chilli peppers belong in the greenhouse. But maybe in another three or four years, when we’re really sweating, things may be different...

**If we complain** about pests in the garden here, it’s nothing to the perils lurking around our old mountain farmhouse in Spain. During the summer, the local wild boars dug up and chewed the pipe which supplies water from the track under the ground to our main storage tank as in this photo:



The drought out there continues, and the water mains is only turned on for one day per week – hence the need for the 1,000-litre tank.

**News from previous members:** it was suggested at the AGM that it might be interesting to hear about earlier members who had moved out of the area (sometimes to gain more land), and I offered to look into it. I've received the first positive reply, from Mark and Sheilagh Isted in the west country, and I'll include their piece next month. There must be many others – can you think of someone you remember who might be interested in telling us about their lives? If so please drop me a line at [fry.alec@gmail.com](mailto:fry.alec@gmail.com) and I'll see if I can track them down – though if you have any contact details, that would be even better.

**Energy saving:** I have found that it pays to investigate the variable tariffs from electricity companies (and gas, if you have it) that are now available as alternatives to the previous government-imposed fixed arrangement. Once I had decided to change, my supplier Octopus even suggested lower monthly payments and arranged a prompt refund of the balance now being built up – and it's easy to change back if conditions change. Everyone's circumstances are different and it's worth making your own comparison.

*Alec.*