

## **West Wycombe Hill – reclaiming a historic landscape**

The first signs of West Wycombe Hill's (WWH) make-over were evident all around us as we gathered for our site visit on a mild March day. At the bottom of the hill, large areas of scrub had been cleared by volunteers.

When part of the West Wycombe Estate, this famous beauty spot, a steep-sided hill that dominates the rolling countryside around, consisted of open grassland planted with yews and an avenue of sweet chestnuts. Its slopes were a favourite spot for grass sledging. John Willson, (Commons Network Chairman), has fond schoolboy memories of this. "In the summer holidays, people came from miles around with trays or sledges. We used to make them out of chairbacks and put beeswax on to make them run faster."

The Hill is topped by an Iron Age fort, a church and an imposing 18<sup>th</sup> century mausoleum, which houses the ashes of the Dashwood family. The family donated the land to the National Trust in 1927. Now the Trust is embarking on an ambitious programme to restore the landscape by reclaiming the yew trees and grasslands from encroaching scrub.



As Neil Harris, the Trust's Gardens and Countryside Manager responsible for the site, explains,

"some 40 or 50 years ago there was a fine view of the mausoleum from the mansion house, Wycombe Hall, framed by the yew trees. We'd like to restore that, and reintroduce cattle grazing in summer to manage the grasslands sustainably. We'll have to crown-lift the yews so the cattle don't eat them and put in cattle grids or fencing (unless we can find a volunteer herdsman!)" Neil will choose stocky breeds like Dexter or Belted Galloway which thrive in hilly environments.

All these initiatives come with a heavy cost and need a great deal of consultation. So far, there has been a positive reaction from the local community. Historically, this was common land where villagers had the right to gather firewood. Now they are being encouraged to see it as 'their space'. The restoration plan is awaiting approval from Natural England, after which full consultation will begin and Higher Level Stewardship funding will be sought.

Our guided tour reached the top of the hill, to see magnificent views of the surrounding countryside, kites wheeling overhead and yew pollen blowing like smoke in the wind. Neil told us that the open grassland areas there (probably the legacy of grazing in past times,) yield a fantastic display of orchids in spring.

Nature and Man have together created a fascinating and beautiful open space. Neil, we wish you well in your efforts to restore it and we hope you find your herdsman!

*Pam Rumfitt, (Friends of Studham Common, Guest Writer!)*