

# CARDIFF NATURALISTS' SOCIETY

Founded 1867

A large, elegant cursive logo consisting of the letters 'C', 'N', and 'S' intertwined. The 'C' is on the left, the 'N' is in the middle, and the 'S' is on the right, all written in a flowing, black script.

NEWSLETTER NO.61

MARCH 2004

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## **Presidential Amblings February 2004**

Sometimes something to which one has long looked forward turns out to be a bit of a damp squib but fortunately the opposite also seems to happen. In December I suddenly found myself with canine mate – free for most of the day on the North Norfolk coast.

I knew the area a little from previous family day outs and a week spent with the then Cardiff Extra Mural Department. At Snettisham I'd once timed it well to see the vast flocks of waders that criss-cross the sky as the tide turns and they are disturbed from the mud flats – but despite being close had never visited Titchwell – the RSPB reserve just 5 miles from Hunstanton. I arrived before the staff and was delighted to find that as the main trail is a public footpath – Taff did not have to stay locked in the car - which would have spoiled the day for me. For those who love dogs it is hard to spend a day out enjoying the countryside while dog is left behind although I appreciate that there are areas which they must avoid.

It was a crisp December day as trailing telescope and lead I started down the path between the scrapes of the reserve and the original marsh. Almost everyone we met was local and delighted to point out specialties – these started with a splendid male marsh harrier swooping above the dunes. There are three lagoons- freshwater, brackish and tidal and all yielded delights. Never before have I seen so many golden plover, estimated at 4000, resting quietly on the islands in the lagoons with occasional small groups rising and reforming. Around the plover were about three hundred lapwing – although these were much busier and moving around. On the various lakes were good numbers of ducks - teal patches of sun catching their brilliant colour, widgeon, shoveller, pochard and mallard as well as mute swan and brent geese – these last in lesser numbers than we see at Whitford. Waders included redshank – one an albino-curlew and oystercatcher and the lone stray black winged stilt ‘Sammy’ who has been at Titchwell for the last ten years. The path stretches to the dunes and shoreline. Here as the tide was out the views were distant but goldeneye, turnstone, dunlin, grey plover and a number of black tailed godwit could be identified. I would need a closer view to be sure of the long tailed duck which were just off the tide edge. I have only seen this elegant duck in the Orkneys in Winter.

Dawdling back to the car I was torn between the excellent smell of home made soup or a visit to the feeding station – all the common garden birds were visiting – including a willow tit but not the siskin and redpoll who had been around the previous day.

Long may we all have the opportunity for such unplanned hours.

Joan Andrews

Field Meetings March to June 2004.

Sunday March 14<sup>th</sup>  
Start time 10.00 am

Coed-y-Bwl

A morning guided walk by the warden around this small limestone reserve owned by the Wildlife Trust, to enjoy the spring flowers etc. We will be meeting outside Blackhall Farm – parking on the grass verge here, which is 100m south west from the reserve {SS909751}, 1 km east of St Brides Major.

Saturday April 17<sup>th</sup>.  
Start time 10.00 am

Cowbridge.  
Packed lunch.

This walk guided by CNS member Roger Milton starts at the Cattle Market carpark in Cowbridge and will have a total round trip of 5 or 6 miles. The free carpark is just off of High Street, next door to the Mason's Arms public house. Along the way expect to see well established badger setts, remnants of 18/19<sup>th</sup> century quarrying activity, woodland and hedgerow flora and fauna and a sympathetically engineered fishery development. Be prepared to share your packed lunch with *Oncorhynchus mykiss* and enjoy the waving seas of *Primula officinalis*!

Saturday May 15th.  
Start time 8.30 am (museum)

Stack Rock.  
Packed lunch.

A coach trip to the spectacular Pembrokeshire coast where we expect to see a good number of seabirds plus the wonderful flora that occurs in this area. Our guide will be CNS member Phill Blanning.

Trip times and pick ups are as usual.

A booking form is included with this newsletter.

Sunday May 23<sup>rd</sup>.  
Start time 10.00 am

Nature Study Day.  
Packed lunch.

Wednesday June 2<sup>nd</sup>.  
Start time 7.00 pm

Hamadryad Park.  
Public Walk.

For our first public walk of the season we shall be taking an evening stroll through the park bordering the eastern bank of the River Taf looking at the flora and fauna. We will continue to walk out towards Cardiff Bay and out to the newly created wetland reserve. We hope members will attend to encourage any guests to join the society. Meet by the entrance to Hamadryad Park at the bottom of Clarence Embankment road.

Sunday June 12<sup>th</sup>.  
Start time 10.00am

Gwent Levels.  
Packed lunch.

A summer guided walk to this reserve to look at the plant and insect life – as well as the birds – on this relatively new reserve.

Sunday June 20<sup>th</sup>.  
Start time 10.30 am

Nash Point.  
Packed lunch.

This trip will be a combined trip with members of the Merthyr and District Naturalists' Society to reciprocate for their hosting our visit to Taf Fechan last year. Further details will appear in the next newsletter.

For all field trips it is expected that members will have read and agree to comply with the Field Meetings Safety Code.

It is useful to know who is coming on the trip especially if you are willing to give a lift to those without transport. Please contact me if you need a lift and hopefully I can arrange one.

Contributions towards drivers' petrol is appreciated.

For coach trips acknowledgements will only be sent if an SAE is included. Refunds are not possible unless there is someone to take your place. Please contact me if you are unable to attend. Watts coaches will be used starting at Bonvilston, main pick up at the museum and outside the school at Whitchurch. Alternative pick up points can be arranged if reasonable.

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## MAIREAD SUTHERLAND 1923 –2003

The death of Mairead Sutherland on 30<sup>th</sup> December 2003 has robbed the Society not only of one of its longest standing members but also one of its most ardent supporters and colourful characters.

Mairead was born in Dublin City, County Dublin, Ireland on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1923. Her father was T.J.O'Connell, Head of the Irish National Teacher's Organisation and leader of the opposition party to Eamon de Valera at the time of Home Rule. She was educated at Loretta Abbey, Dublin and then University College, Dublin. After qualifying as a radiographer (no mean feat for a single Irish woman in those days) she moved to Swansea in 1947, where she met her future husband, fellow Irishman William (Bill) Sutherland, and then to Cardiff where she soon began her 50 year membership of the Society.

After the commencement of her membership of the Society in 1953 she became increasingly involved in the Society's activities and in 1962 began her first term of office as both the Membership Secretary to the Parent Society and a committee member of the Biological and Geological Section. For the next 30 years she served the Society and its sections in numerous official roles. She was President of the Society 1979-1980, General Secretary 1991-1992, Membership Secretary 1962-1965 and a Council Member from 1965-1970 and 1981-1990; Vice President of the Ornithological Section 1972-1973, its President 1973-1974 and a member of its committee from 1969-1972 and 1974-1975; Honorary Secretary of the Biological and Geological Section 1971-1973 and a member of its committee from 1962-1967. Out of the limelight of these official positions she worked tirelessly on the Society's behalf over the years and in recognition of this outstanding service was given Honorary Membership in 1990.

We remember Mairead as a regular lecturer to the Society but it is interesting to note that her first talk did not take place until November 1969 when she gave the first of many talks to the then Junior Section. Her well informed, witty style and excellent slides made her a popular speaker and her services became increasingly called upon by both the sections and the main Society so that she became a regular contributor to the Society's programme. She was a great supporter of the Junior Section seeing the success of this as the key to the success of the Society in years to come.

Her first love was ornithology and she was very much an ornithologist in the true sense of the word. She undertook a long-term study of the kingfishers on the Glamorganshire Canal the results of which she happily disseminated widely. Many of her findings were used by other research workers, sometimes without true recognition, much to her chagrin. Her natural history interests were broad and she got immense pleasure from travelling to ever more exotic localities around the World to savour new habitats and species. She only started these overseas trips in 1969 but between then and the end of her life managed to visit every continent except Antarctica. No doubt, that was next on the list. Her adventures abroad often formed the subject of many lectures but few may have been aware of the lengths that she often had to overcome in order to raise funds to finance these trips in the first place, especially in the latter years. Her first trip was to East Africa, which she financed by working in the local butcher's shop. On her return she wrote and which sadly was never published, *Safari on a Sausage*, a book that she hoped might help fund her next trip. Once her mind was set on a destination any problem could be overcome in order to achieve her aim, even the increasing problems with mobility that she suffered in her later years.

Despite her exotic overseas trips Mairead still had an avid interest in the natural history of the world much closer to home and became involved with many other local groups and societies, including the Merthyr Naturalists' Society and the Friends of Fforest Farm. She and Kay Collings were at the forefront of the battle to establish the Glamorganshire Canal Nature Reserve, an area with which she had a great affiliation, and she was heavily involved in numerous other local conservation issues. Her many years on Council and vast experience of rules and procedures made her a valued asset especially in the later years as the Society gradually lost the core of its experienced membership.

Mairead was saddened to witness the Society's gradual decline. However, having worked for the Society when it was at its height she felt that standards should be maintained no matter what its size and had the knack of letting you politely, but firmly, know if she felt that things were not as they should be. She did not suffer fools gladly and was an extremely articulate and determined adversary, as many a member of Council could bear witness too, but no matter how big the argument never held a grudge. She had a great and at times cutting wit and had that marvellous ability to see the funny side of any situation. No matter how much of a calamity she might find herself in, and there were numerous hair-raising examples, she always managed to shrug these off as minor inconveniences and concentrate on regaling you with the funnier side. She also had a great faith and worked tirelessly for the Church both at home and abroad. There are not many people who, in their 70s, would drop everything at short notice to help out at a mission in the South American rainforest. Her faith certainly helped her through the harder periods of her life and is no doubt reflected in her genuine concerns for those less fortunate than herself.

Personally, I will always remember her as a great raconteur, a valued mentor and an extremely considerate and loyal friend. She brightened up many a day (and also gave me earache at times) and will be sorely missed. Our thoughts go out to Eleanor, Fiona and Liam.  
Stephen R.Howe.

### Editorial

You will have noticed this month's newsletter is printed in A5, this has been done for a few reasons, to make it easier to carry and read, improve the quality of print and be able to add colour illustration at reasonable cost.

Royal Mail have submitted a request to regulator Postcomm to replace its weight-based system with a price structure fixed by package size. An A4-sized envelope would rise from 28p to 46p, this would increase our postage costs by about £30 per issue.

**Copy for the June newsletter by 15<sup>th</sup> May please,**

Ed.

## CARDIFF BIRDWATCH 11 January 2004

Squally showers with hail and a chilly blustery wind were not ideal conditions for birding but there were sunny intervals too and plenty of wildlife to observe for the thirteen hardy souls (plus a dog) who assembled in Wild Gardens Road. Water levels were exceptionally high as the brown silty Nant Fawr stream gushed into the northern end of Roath Park Lake. We set off on a clockwise circuit of the lake while observing the diving behaviour of Pochard and Tufted Ducks and the dabbling of Mallards which appeared to be sifting seeds from the surface. These seeds may have fallen from the overhanging Alders.

At least 22 Cormorants and a single Grey Heron were roosting on their usual island although most were on the ground rather than high in the trees. A raft of 18 Shovelers (mainly females or immatures) was snoozing near the islands. Only a single



bird was feeding and showing off its large spatulate bill. These ducks rarely visit the lake so were a pleasant surprise, as were the three Gadwall seen later both swimming and in flight. The Wigeon with them could have been part of the pinioned collection like the Red-breasted Goose but Barnacle, Canada and Greylag Geese were definitely fully-winged. Grey Wagtail, Kingfisher and Little Grebe put in all-too-brief appearances while six Great Crested Grebes entertained with half-hearted display.

Black-headed Gulls were abundant but we managed to pick out a few Common, Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls among them. A count of at least 66 Mute Swans was notable and the number of wretched white Domestic Geese also seems to keep increasing. There were few passerines in the trees but some of the group watched both Treecreeper and Mistle Thrush.

Water cascaded down the outflow of the lake but one could see clumps of Canadian Waterweed stranded on the rim. Over-enrichment of the water, both from the Nant Fawr and from all the food proffered to the lake's birds (which convert it into abundant guano) has caused an unwanted explosion of these water plants. Quite a problem for the Parks Department! However, two of the park employees were dealing admirably with a shoal of small Carp (2 or 3 inches long) which had become stranded on the concrete bank near the boathouse by recent flooding. Each gasping fish was carefully returned to the water and it appeared that most had survived the ordeal.

From the lake we drove north to Longwood Drive and after a brief stop for "elevenses", made a circular tour of the Forest Farm Reserve starting with the Glamorgan Canal. Small birds were much more in evidence - Great, Blue and Coal Tits visiting the usual feeding stations and parties of Long-tailed Tits gleaning morsels from the twigs. Equally acrobatic were Siskins and Goldfinches busy extracting seeds from the Alders. Raucous Jays created a commotion in a thicket of Holly and Ivy on the far bank of the canal. We hoped for a glimpse of a Tawny Owl but whatever the Jays were mobbing remained unseen.

Some fungi continue to thrive through the winter. Clusters of fresh Velvet Shank toadstools with glutinous orange caps and dark stipes decked one ivy-covered tree while a fallen trunk sprouted brackets of Silver-leaf Fungus and a dead Elder branch was decorated with flabby growths of Jew's Ear. Signs of spring included fully-extended Hazel catkins and the songs of Robin and Dunnock.

From the hides where we ate our packed lunches we had excellent views of a foraging Water Rail as it probed the mud with its long red bill. There were Little Grebes on the pools and some members enjoyed watching a Green Woodpecker. A large flock of Chaffinches together with 2 or 3 Greenfinches and Reed Buntings took advantage of seed scattered near the Sand Martin wall. There were Blackbirds and a single Redwing here too.

As we made our way towards the River Taff, Joan's patient dog, Taff, had fun chasing a Grey Squirrel which quickly headed for the trees. The river was a swollen brown torrent supporting only an intrepid swimming Cormorant and two Black-headed Gulls swooping to pick items from the surface. Radyr weir was an awesome sight while nearby swirling water from the Melingriffith feeder cascaded back to the river. Well-satisfied with our observations, we made our way at a faster pace back to our parked cars and, after thanking Rob for leading the walk, dispersed before the next threatened shower.

*Linda Nottage*

## Llandaff Cathedral and surrounds.

Ten CNS members braved the drizzle on November 22<sup>nd</sup> last year and joined Steve Howe at Llandaff Cathedral Green. Our introduction included explaining how, during the early construction phases of the cathedral, the limited and generally poor standard of land transport had resulted in the use of mainly local stones in the construction of the cathedral, as these could be transported to the site by sea and river. This explained one reason for the cathedral being sited where it is - at the highest point of the tidal river.

We started by looking at the old Bishop's Palace and the varieties of stone blocks used in the construction of the building, many of which would be our reference for stones we would see used in the construction of the surrounding buildings and the cathedral itself. The mixture of stones included large, regular blocks of Blue Lias – a blue/grey coloured muddy limestone - which had been brought up river from the Glamorgan coast. A number of the blocks contained fossil shells. These muddy limestones vary in quality and hardness some being much harder wearing than others as shown by some blocks of a much more nodular nature, which had probably come from outcrops along the Ely valley, which were now starting to crack up.

River cobbles have been widely used in the main mass of walling many of which are brown, rougher sandstone cobbles, which originate from the coalfield. They were formed about 300 million years ago in the channels of large deltas. Elsewhere, neat trimmed blocks of similar looking grey, brown and green Pennant Sandstones could be seen. Also conspicuous were blocks and cobbles of Old Red Sandstone which had been deposited about 400 million years ago in hot desert conditions when Wales lay to the south of the equator.

Inside the main gateway our attention was drawn to the large, neat dressed blocks of grey coloured Sutton Stone from Ogmores-by-sea. This limestone, which is of a similar age to the Blue Lias, contains rounded pebbles of harder rocks which drop out as the rock is weathered giving it a characteristic holed appearance. The Sutton Stone was highly valued as it was the only local 'freestone' available to the builders. The importance of a freestone is that it can be cut in any direction and can therefore be carved and shaped. It has been extensively used in doorways and windows and, due to its value, was often re-used in later building phases. A few pieces of Quarella Sandstone from Bridgend were also used in the arches of the palace.

Evidence of improved transport links is shown in the widespread later use of 'Bath Stone' from the Bath area. These pale yellow/cream limestones were laid down during the Jurassic period 160-170 million years ago in conditions similar to those found on the Bahama Banks today! They contain many ooliths – egg-shaped pellets of lime deposited around pieces of broken shell - and are called oolitic limestones. They are another 'freestone'. Some of the earliest of these limestones to be used came from Dundry, south of Bristol.

We then looked at the Victorian houses on the other side of the Green. Some contained re-used stone while the arches used dressed blocks of Bath Stone. Many of the houses contained a lot of Radyr Stone in their construction. This stone is unique to Cardiff and was extensively quarried in the Radyr area of the city. It is a red coloured stone full of sub-rounded pebbles of mainly dark grey Carboniferous Limestone. These rocks had been formed under hot desert conditions when Cardiff lay to the north of the equator in a similar position to the Sahara today.

In the centre of the Green is a statue of James Rice Buckley sitting on large blocks of highly fossiliferous limestone but surrounded by a plinth of man-made 'granite' blocks. True granite, containing large, pink feldspar crystals, was used for the World War I memorial, which came from Shap in the Lake District.

The Lych Gate to the cathedral was composed of grey Forest of Dean Sandstone mixed with dressed blocks of Radyr stone. The walls down to the cathedral are of dressed blocks of Radyr Stone on the south side and river cobbles on the north.

We then started to look at the construction of the cathedral itself – a real mixture of stone types. In the west front of the cathedral we could see the use of Sutton Stone and Dundry Stone on the right hand side while the Jasper tower on the left, constructed in the time of Henry VII, used Blue Lias from a mixture of quarries. It was possibly constructed by stone masons from Somerset. Again the characteristic yellow Jurassic limestones were evident in the pillars. On the righthand side the much younger Pritchard tower is a mixture of Jurassic limestones including many blocks from Chipping Campden in the Cotswolds. Set in niches on the tower side are white statues made from Beer Stone from Southeast Devon, which were deposited less than 100 million years ago.

Grave stones around this area were made from large slabs of Pennant Sandstone while in other areas a variety of granites had been used including some from abroad. One gravestone had been constructed using Peterhead red granite - now such red granites are usually imported from Sweden and elsewhere. Carrera Marble from Italy had also been used for some of the gravestones. There was also an example of a more local gravestone – a cross made from Radyr Stone.

The slates on the roof of the cathedral came from Penrhyn in North Wales and Borrowdale in Cumbria but there are indications are that some of the original slates had come from Pembrokeshire. Slate is composed of baked and squeezed clay. At the back of the cathedral Blue Lias and Radyr Stone had been used in the wall construction, the Radyr Stone often occurring in odd courses at different levels. This may reflect breaks in construction of the walls due to lack of funds, the Radyr Stone being used to cap the unfinished sections.

In the south choir aisle doorway shafts of rounded Radyr Stone had been used in the door arch. In order to get this shape the stone had been placed in the doorway the wrong way round and so had weathered badly causing it to crumble. Elsewhere in the nave wall was evidence of the rebuild after bomb damage. We did not have time to investigate the variety of stone used inside the cathedral.

My thanks go to Steve for his guidance plus my apologies for arranging a date that clashed with the Rugby World Cup Final – at least Steve's daughter let him know the result by mobile phone!

Tricia Wood.

## WEATHER REPORT 2003

Month	09.00GMT	Max	Min	Total		Rain days .01" +	Millibars
	<sup>0</sup> C			Inches	MM		
January	3.4	7.4	1.0	4.67	116.5	18	1019
February	3.6	7.3	0.7	1.97	50.5	16	1022
March *				2.20	56.0		
April	12.5	17.5	5.5	3.34	84.5	10	1018
May	13.0	16.1	8.2	4.59	116.0	22	1019
June	19.1	24.0	13.3	3.08	78.0	10	1022
July	19.5	23.0	14.4	4.15	106.0	14	1021
August	20.3	24.8	14.4	0.69	17.0	5	1026
September	15.9	20.2	10.4	1.11	27.5	6	1025
October	8.7	13.1	5.6	3.63	91.5	13	1019
November	5.9	9.7	3.4	5.28	133.0	16	1008
December	4.3	8.0	3.0	7.12	181.5	17	1022
	11.5	15.5	7.3	41.83	1058.0	147	1020

\*Figures not available except as shown

Whatever the reason for the warm days weather in 2003 the bare facts are that 18" less rain was recorded than the average for the ten years from 1992 to 2001 and there were 51 less rain days than the average for the same period. It was the fourth warmest summer on record for England and Wales and on 9<sup>th</sup> August a temperature of 37.9 (100°F) was recorded in one or two places. It was also a good year for planets, but more of that later.

The early part of January was cold and frosty with minimum temperatures at or below zero on ten of the first twelve night The lowest temperature of the year of  $-5.5^{\circ}$  C was recorded on the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> and the lowest daytime temperature of  $0.0^{\circ}$  C on the 31<sup>st</sup>. After the initial cold spell milder conditions prevailed for most of the remainder of the month. Average temperatures did not drop below  $-3.0^{\circ}$  C. The low level of rainfall was not unusual for February with lower amounts having been recorded in 1995 and 1993. I can offer no comment about March as we spent most of the month enjoying the glorious sunshine of the island of Cyprus. By way of a hint of things to come April was generally fine and warm. There were a couple of frosty mornings in the early part of the month and wet conditions for the last weeks but between the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> it was exceptionally

warm for the time of year and the hottest ever April temperature nationally of 26.9<sup>0</sup> C was recorded in Cardiff on the 16<sup>th</sup> of the month. May was a disappointment being mainly cool and wet with a much higher than average number of rain days. The only consolation was that on six occasions the rain fell overnight.

Conditions improved again in June with very few days when the temperature did not exceed 20<sup>0</sup>C and ten mornings when 20<sup>0</sup>C had been reached or exceeded by 09.00 GMT. A fine spell beginning in the second week continued to the end of the month interrupted only by thunderstorms on the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>. This trend continued until the middle of July culminating in a 3day spell of sultry conditions with top temperatures of 29<sup>0</sup>C, 31<sup>0</sup>C and 31<sup>0</sup>C. Cooler, showery weather followed and accounted for most of the month's rainfall.

August was hot with temperatures reaching 25<sup>0</sup>C or more on fifteen days between the fourth and twelfth of the month, temperatures of 27<sup>0</sup>C, 28<sup>0</sup>C (twice), 29<sup>0</sup>C, 30<sup>0</sup>C (twice) and a staggering 32<sup>0</sup>C were recorded the latter on the 9<sup>th</sup>. Fine warm conditions continued for most of the month and on the 28<sup>th</sup> when Mars was a mere 35 million miles from Earth we were fortunate to have an excellent view of the planet while on a brief visit to Berkshire. On returning to Cardiff numerous fine, clear evenings made further sightings possible well into the autumn. The warm, dry weather lasted throughout September with no hint of autumn rains. There were just six rain days and on only one of these was an appreciable amount of rain recorded. It began to get colder in October and towards the end of the month there were fine frosty mornings and the overnight temperature dropped to zero or below on six occasions. However it was still mainly dry and over half of the rain fell on just two days.

November was generally mild but again there were some frosty nights towards the end of the month. At last rainfall near to the average was recorded. December is usually the wettest month of the year and this was the case again this year. The rainfall on the 12<sup>th</sup> amounted to 2" making this the wettest day of the year. In spite of the rain there were a number of days when fine weather continued into the evening leading to a night sky spectacular. This started with a brilliant Venus in the western sky from twilight to early evening; Mars was still plainly visible for much of the night; Saturn was overhead at mid-evening and a prominent Jupiter appeared in the eastern sky from late evening, all this against the backdrop of the usual winter constellations.

To summarize :-

The lowest pressure at 09.00 GMT was 981 millibars on 31<sup>st</sup> October and the highest was 1040 millibars on 17<sup>th</sup> February.

No gales were noted.

Thunder was heard on 1<sup>st</sup> March, 21<sup>st</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> June, 5<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> August and 2<sup>nd</sup> November.

Rainfall in excess of 1" was recorded on 1<sup>st</sup> January (1.2"), 27<sup>th</sup> April (1.12"), 30<sup>th</sup> October (1.35") and 12<sup>th</sup> December (2.0").

Frost was observed on 4<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> January, 12<sup>th</sup> January, 5<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> February, 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> April, 20<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, and 26<sup>th</sup> October, 23<sup>rd</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> November and 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> December.

Snow fell on the 4<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> January and 19<sup>th</sup> February,

Stan Jones

## CARDIFF BIODIVERSITY ACTION FORUM

I continue to represent CNS at these meetings although I missed the one in September because it clashed with our AGM. Volunteers from local groups as diverse as Friends of Howardian Reserve, Organic Gardeners and Glamorgan Moth Recording Group together with staff from Cardiff County Council, CCW, Caerphilly Mountain Countryside Service and the Wildlife Trust make up the Forum.

The most recent meeting, on 28<sup>th</sup> January at County Hall, was chaired by Vaughan Grantham the County Ecologist even though he was still recuperating, having broken his shoulder at the start of the year. This made the loss of Melissa Moore to a job at the Environment Agency at the same time a sorry blow to the department. However, Vaughan will soon be taking up the reins again with the help of short-term appointees. On a lighter note, the only other bad news was that promised refreshments did not materialise because the coffee machine had broken down!

The Council deserve credit for some wetland improvements: Fairwater pond, which had dried out due to invasive *Typha*, has been dredged and there are plans to restore also Hendre Lake and the Business Park pond at St. Mellons and Thornhill Primary School pond. A new pond is planned at St. Fagans Museum as an additional home for newts which frequent the Tannery pits there. Wetland creation has been successful at Waterhall Plantation and especially in Cardiff Bay where large numbers of Snipe have found refuge.

Chris Powell reported that Cardiff is trying to upgrade some of its parks, including planting wildflower areas, so that they meet Green Flag criteria. The tunnel air-vent site at Transh-yr-Hebog where we found a Marbled White butterfly on our Nature Study Day has been strimmed by Mike Wiley to cut back invading bramble. We had asked for another nearby grassland site to be opened up but unfortunately this was deemed too small. Vaughan has tried positioning Mammal Society approved Dormouse tubes in woodland where nibbled nuts have been found but no sightings yet of the actual animals!

Although it is noted in Mary Gillham's book on the Garth Countryside, I was unaware of the presence of Lesser Horseshoe Bats in a cave on the Little Garth. Further surveys are needed by experienced cavers/bat workers before changes to the quarry workings can proceed. Nigel Ajax Lewis made reference to a rare blind spider which is also found there (and featured in Mary's book). Incidentally, Nigel reported the appearance of Frogspawn as early as 10<sup>th</sup> January. If you have a garden pond, you may wish to participate in Cardiff's annual Amphibian survey which contributes to the city's system of Biodiversity Indicators along with an audit of Garden Birds provided by the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch.

There is soon to be a review of the designated Sites of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCIs) in the light of new criteria. Some existing sites such as Cefn Onn Park may not match up to a more rigorous framework apart from the grassland area with its rare Pink Waxcaps. New sites such as Cors Crychudd Reen will merit designation and possibly Grangemore Park with its Skylarks and Grayling Butterflies. If you have any suggestions for potential new SNCIs in Cardiff, please let me know before the next Forum in May.

Linda Nottage

## National Polecat Survey

On 1st January 2004, jointly with The Mammal Society, we (The Vincent Wildlife Trust) are launching a new three-year Polecat Distribution Survey of mainland Britain (this is a separate exercise from the annual autumn road casualty monitoring). The aim is to produce a new 10km square distribution map to track any changes since our last survey finished in 1997.

The survey will be based mainly on people collecting bodies (e.g. road casualties) and sending them or photos of them to the VWT. We shall also be recording feral ferrets. The bodies (or photos) are needed so that we can identify specimens as true polecats or ferret hybrids. As in the previous survey in the mid-1990s, specimens will be donated to The National Museums of Scotland where they will be made available for research. For example, we plan to undertake further work with the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology at Monks Wood on the rodenticide burden in a sample of polecats collected during the survey.

If you find a relatively undamaged polecat, feral ferret or polecat-ferret hybrid during the period 2004-2006 please keep it cool and 'phone the VWT on 01531 636441 (or email me) for guidance on what to do. Please note that, so as to spread our effort as evenly as possible, we aim to collect no more than two specimens from each 10km square.

Johnny Birks  
Vincent Wildlife Trust

## An Open Day at Sker House in September 2003.

As part of European Heritage Days this year it was agreed, in the summer in discussion between the Civic Trust for Wales and the Buildings at Risk Trust, engaged, for some years in restoration work there, to open the house for visitors who applied, beforehand, and who wished to come and see over it. Mr. David Cox of the Civic Trust made the arrangements for this, to take place on September 14<sup>th</sup>, in four parties to come at intervals of 90 minutes that day. It was anticipated that less than 100 could be expected. But the response was almost overwhelming, with applicants filling their cars with friends and neighbours with 80 or 90 in each of the four parties. Mr. Thomas Lloyd, Chairman of the Buildings at Risk Trust asked John Blundell if he could welcome visitors, from the front door-step, before they entered, give them a quick run-down on history and generally assist in making the visit a success. This he did for three of the four groups that came. Here is the text of his address:-

"Ladies and Gentlemen, Welcome to Sker House, This is one of the oldest continuously inhabited houses in the whole of Wales. It was built originally, before 1200, as a farm-house for this Cistercian grange farm, at that time consisting of some 700 acres close to the sea, by Margam Abbey and sold not long after to Neath Abbey. My name is John Blundell, and I have been asked by Mr. Thomas Lloyd, Chairman of the Buildings at Risk Trust which has been carrying out the restoration work here, to give you a quick run-down on history, and also to exercise some crowd control. So I see myself as something between a clergyman and a sheep-dog with a flock to look after. I was born in 1923, so I will give you a 'potted history', starting some 2000 years ago and ending last month. Long ago I was at Cambridge University and gained an engineering degree.

Many peoples from overseas have come this way and each has left traces of themselves behind, if you know where to look, and what to look for, and then passed away into history. One after the other they came, the Romans, the Vikings, the Normans and then the Cistercians and their abbeys. The Romans left coins behind at a location overlooking the coast on this farm. Perhaps they had a watch tower or signal station there. Certainly they had holes in their pockets or purses. Roman roof tiles were built into the Norman walls of Kenfig castle close by. The Vikings left behind names along this coast, Hash, Tusker, Sker, Swansea, Tenby, Skokholm, Skomer, and others. There are also a large number of field names in west Gower of Norse origin, suggesting that Norse seafarers married into

Welsh farming families there in the centuries before the Normans came. The Normans left their castles and their surnames, the Gistergians their abbeys and their farm granges. The abbeys in south Wales included Whitland, Neath, Margam and Tintern. There were 54 monastic farm granges, or thereabouts, in Glamorgan. Those close here were Sker, Nottage court, 2 miles east of here, and Ty Tanglwst, near Cornelly. All these granges were devoped by the abbeys on land given to them by the great Norman landowners, who had stolen this from the former Welsh owners. The Welsh did not welcome the abbeys and their people, so the granges operated in a very hostile environment indeed. The abbeys soon 'came self-sufficient in food, leather, and wool for clothing and, most likely, rope. And Neath engaged at their abbey, or a grange, in the production of attractive decorated glazed floor tiles passing them or selling them to other monastic houses. The granges, in the first 200 years were worked by lay-brothers, unpaid, but fed, clothed, given bedding and shelter, and taking a vow to remain illiterate, celibate and worship God. But raids by the Welsh on abbeys and granges, with much theft, arson and creating injury and general mayhem, resulted in all abbeys and most granges having a tall defensive wall around them, usually with a single entrance and gatehouse to give security within. That at Sker contained around 2.5 acres with all outbuildings, gardens and the farm-house within. A small section of this wall, about 18 feet high, survives next to the south west corner of the house. In the years just prior to 1348/49 a series of extra cold winters brought bubonic plague, also known as the Black Death. Rats, looking for warmer accommodation migrated into human habitations, of all kinds, and their fleas carried this infection with them. This took out one third of the population, right across society, in south Wales. So with all these vacancies to be filled, in the space of a year or two, practically all the lay brothers left the granges to go into paid work and learn new trades, in the villages and towns. Enormous losses of livestock resulted. The abbeys tried paid labour to replace them, but failed to make this system work. Almost all granges thereafter were let to lay people to farm, and pay rent in kind or in money to the abbeys. My own ancestors, the Loughers, were tenants of Neath Abbey at Sker from around. 1450 to 1565, or close to that date, when a Lougher daughter married, a Turberville son. For by 1540 Henry VIII had dissolved, the abbeys and shut them all down, and much abbey land, taken by the king and passed, on to his supporters, was changing hands in that century. With this over-supply, relative to demand, much went very cheaply indeed, It was at that time that the Turberville family bought Sker farm, with its early two storey house and the mediaeval outbuildings from monastic times. At that time, also, the Lougher family bought Nottage Court grange to the east, cleared the whole site, and re-used, the stone there and the former precinct wall around it to build. Nottage Court, around 1600, a smaller house than Sker but with many similarities. The same process, but retaining much of the old farmhouse within the new one, took place at Sker. They also erected new barns and cattle sheds and some of these still stand today. So I descend from the welsh Loughers as well as the Turbervilles and Knights. All of these families took on former monastic land then or later, by purchase, inheritance or marriage. I was born at Nottage Court and lived in that house until 1990. The

Blundells originated in Normandy, were at the battle of Hastings in 1066, on the winning side with King William. They have remained in the U.K. since that time.

Nottage Court land abounds the old boundary of Sker Farm on the east. New Park Farm lying south of the road from the M4 to Porthcawl, was originally part of Sker Farm, as was the area now used by the Royal Porthcawl Golf Club. So we have always tried to be good neighbours to the Evans family farming at Sker. They came in there in 1930 as tenants of the Margam estate. My late father, who had a concept that we are all in this world to help each other, which I have inherited, visited the Evanses at Sker, one day in 1930 to introduce himself as a neighbour. Was there anything they needed? They replied that they were over-run with mice, and needed some kittens of a good mouseing strain, please. So a few months later in May, I was 7, my sister 13, the two of us walked the 2 miles to Sker with weaned kittens in a basket. They were travel sick on the journey. We were welcomed in, given cups of tea and cake, and walked back home. But that evening, towards dark, there were pitiful sounds outside the back door of Nottage Court. They had walked home..... My father took them back the next day, and they stayed. It was the start of a good friendship between the families, with trivial help to start with, kittens, and more serious help in later years.

There is a fundamental question to be asked. Why did the Turbervilles build this great house on this exposed and lonely spot? There has, somewhere, to be a commercial reason. This has been found when delving into the details of local, monastic and family history. The Turbervilles had also married into the Herbert family, related to the earls of Pembroke, of Cogan Pill on the Ely river just north of Penarth. That family had a small ship, the Green Dragon, in late Tudor times, and her main cargo each autumn was the export of grain to the continent, but without the formality of the required export licence for this. They could hardly return empty, could they? So they built up a flourishing trade in 'duty free' casks and bottles in Gwent, Cardiff and east Glamorgan. For reasons that are not entirely clear, the Cardiff customs officer did not appear to know of this activity. There was a clear need to extend this clandestine business into west Glamorgan and Sker would have made as good a base as any for this. Wine tasting gatherings will have taken place in the upstairs hall to increase and promote this trade. Without commercial activity backing a house of this size and position could never be supported by the farm production alone. As the covert trade diminished, as it had eventually to do, the house was doomed to decay and dereliction. As neighbours we watched in dismay as it deteriorated. We all thought it was lost, like so many others before it.

In 1929 there had been a seriously high tide and storm which breached the shingle bank, and narrow dune protecting the low-lying land between the house and the sea, forming a salt water lake, flooding the farm roadway and coming close to the house. This destabilised the south pine-end wall which cracked away from the rest of the structure. Some 25 years later it fell to the ground, with more to follow it later. The Margam estate had carried out some sea defence work in 1930, to prevent a recurrence.

The local authority, about 1970, declared the building unfit to live in, and so it was vacated. Owls and vandals moved in. The Council wrote a letter to GADW to say that a closing order had been made, and they proposed to demolish and clear the site. Did GADW have any objection? Fortunately they did. Some 10 years ago the Buildings at Risk Trust started a file on the house. After much prolonged delay the Council issued a compulsory purchase order, so that the Trust was able to buy it from them and start renovation work once National Lottery and other grants had been obtained, as well as a low interest loan. It was a brave decision by the Trust and we all owe them a huge debt of gratitude for saving this very special house. There were some formidable problems that arose. Each one had a solution, eventually to be found and executed. Dogged determination, over a long period of time, won through in the end.

When I was a young man there was a lovely circular stone-lined, saucer shaped farm yard pond, for cattle or horses to be watered, and, no doubt fed from the rainwater off the roofs of buildings or house, led into channels or drains in centuries gone by. But in 1960 the Evans family had several very small children, and one fell in and was nearly drowned. But he was rescued in time. So one can sympathise when they decided to fill it in with soil and stones, for it all to grass over and disappear from view. Last August I asked Mr. Thomas Lloyd if he would agree if I offered to bring in a large tracked excavator I had operated myself on the family land for more than 30 years. I explained to him that I had become skilled in precision work with it and I promised that I would not damage or displace a single stone of the original structure, finishing it off with a builders' square shovel and yard broom. He agreed and offered to pay for the low load to bring it there and take it home. So over 5 days at the end of August and early September the work was carried out, and the spoil removed a little way off site using a tractor and tipping trailer. It is a fine example of a mediaeval stock-drinking pond from many centuries ago, in a high state of preservation.

Please feel free to ask questions as we go round the house

## Answers to “A question of logic” in the previous issue

First Position- Great Crested Grebe, Shellduck, Spoonbill, Little Egret, Oystercatcher, Red necked Phalarope

Final Position- Spoonbill, Ostercatcher, Red Necked Phalarope, Great Crested Grebe, Little Egret, Shelduck