

Iford Estate News

J & H Robinson Iford Farms Ltd – est. 1895

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Our Forest School Site

Ged Robinson

Progress with this has been slow during the past year as our tree surgeon Matthew Stuart was concerned that several of the trees growing on the slope in the spinney were unstable. Matthew and his team have worked hard over the winter to ensure that the site was safe for small people.



So we were very pleased to welcome this summer a nursery school from Newhaven led by Lucy Hill, the families and youth work leader from the Sussex Community Development Association.

This February and March we are participating in the South Downs National Park's 'Dark Skies Festival' with three workshops followed by shadow puppet performances.

Farm Report Ben Taylor, Estate Manager



As we head into this exciting new year it is perhaps useful to reflect on the previous year. In many ways 2018 was one of the most challenging I have experienced in my career. It started with the 'Beast

from the East', then led into an exceptionally wet spring, followed by the long hot dry summer. I fully expected harvest to be a disaster, but thankfully the chalk that underlies the farm seemed to provide enough moisture to the growing crops to bring them to a sensible yield. The grass growth was much reduced, but a reduction in cattle numbers due to the TB outbreak I reported last time, along with an extended autumn, has left us much better off than many, with enough fodder to last into the new season.

Winter is a time for planning, but the uncertainty of Brexit has made this very challenging. Like most industries we rely on 'just in time' ordering and, with many of our key inputs coming from Europe – particularly fertilisers and agrochemicals as well as veterinary medicines – we are being forced to stockpile these key items in anticipation of shortages. On the other side of the coin, many of our products are exported, as is much of the agricultural produce in the South East, and the prospect of trade barriers and tariffs is daunting to say the least. For example, most of our malting barley – one of our staple crops – is shipped

by boat to Europe. Our bread-making wheat, which has previously gone to one of the few local domestic outlets, Rank Hovis in Southampton, before they shut down, will in future most probably be taken to Avonmouth or Tilbury, both much further away and involving significantly more cost.

Of course, in time we will change and respond to market demands, but the long production cycles of agriculture make this a slow process. From planning a crop now to selling it takes at least two years and, when it's part of a wider crop rotation, it can take five or six years to change direction. Livestock are even worse: a calf born this spring will take two years to fatten and, if you are planning to keep her for breeding, it will be another three years before her offspring produce a return.

There is no doubt that agriculture is in a challenging place at the moment. The combined effects of Brexit, news trending about the impact of eating meat on climate change, regulation imposed on us but not on our international competitors and the potential loss of agricultural support payments all have the potential to combine into a 'perfect storm' of disastrous returns on food production.

This makes it all the more important that we maximise our non-farming activity, be it lodges, workshops, shooting, fishing or anything else that ties in with the vision of the South Downs National Park, to ensure that the farm thrives long into the future.



Bird talk



Above: A wild bird seed crop will provide a rich source of winter food.

Right: Hobby in flight

Avid readers of the Estate News will recall the report in the last edition from Gamekeeper and RSPB Project Officer Jamie Horner of his time at the Iford shoot in 2017, and listing the bird species seen on the Iford hill which numbered 63.

I'm pleased to be able to update Jamie's report and reveal that the 2018 list totals a massive 74 species of birds, including 34 rare and endangered species "of conservation concern". We were particularly pleased to have several pairs of English Partridge breeding on the farm as well as a return visit from the Stone Curlews, although, despite two hatchings, they failed to fledge a chick this year, probably due to predation. Also of note was a nesting pair of Turtle Doves, of which there are thought to be only 500 pairs left in the UK. These 'big three' of farmland birds indicate that the habitat

provided on Iford and Swanborough Hill is exceptionally good for farmland birds and is due in no small part to the amount of bird food crops that the shoot plants each year. We are also undertaking a program of supplementary feeding this spring to fill the so called 'hungry gap' when the wild food runs out and the new season's food isn't yet available, so we are hoping for even better results next year.

With the plethora of farmland birds also come the higher end species such as Merlins and Harriers (Marsh, Hen and Pallid), Tawny, Short-eared and Barn Owls as well as Peregrines, Hobbies and Red Kites, to name but a few.

Jamie is back next year and is very keen to share his passion for birds with anyone who is interested. We discovered this year that organised walks are tricky, as it was wet and windy on the chosen day and little was seen, but if enough people are interested I will be happy to organise a trip round the hill, hopefully in dry, calm weather!



Then and now

The old photo on the left shows Iford in the Early 1920s. Below, the same aspect today.



UPDATE

Cyclepath progress

You will be aware that the Egrets Way extension we built as part of the lodges is only partially complete. We have been waiting for the wheels of bureaucracy to turn and give us permission to complete the 'crossover' on the C7. The path also needs further consolidation to improve the surface, but it is otherwise complete and open for all to use. We hope to have the finishing touches and the C7 crossing completed by the Spring.

By the time you read this newsletter I hope to have submitted a planning application for new farm buildings on the main farmyard site, marking the latest part of our development plan. It will allow us to consolidate all our farming activities onto one site, as well as provide a new entrance onto the C7, meaning that all lorries and the vast majority of the farm traffic will no longer need to use the village road through Iford.

It has become increasingly difficult to get larger equipment through the village, and the HGV traffic detracts from the peace and tranquillity of both Iford and Swanborough. Also, our ability to farm cost-effectively is hampered by the outdated and, in many cases, dilapidated farm buildings that were erected in the 1960s and '70s when machinery was smaller.

The new buildings will make us fit for the 21st century and hopefully improve the character of the villages by removing a lot of the traffic. Of course farm buildings are, by necessity, big and utilitarian in appearance, but over time they do blend into the landscape, and the planting scheme we have designed will hopefully screen the bulk of the buildings from view.

Swanborough Lakes Luxury Holiday Lodges update

Most of you will have seen that Swanborough Lakes Lodges is now open for business, having been completed at the end of September, about five minutes before the first guest arrived! I'm pleased to report that, so far, we have been much busier than we anticipated with a full house most weekends, even in the quiet winter months. Guests particularly love the views from the site and

the beauty of the surrounding countryside. It is easy to become blasé when you see it every day, but talking to guests and hearing their enthusiasm for the area and its scenery makes you realise what a special place we live in.

We are now turning our minds to Phase 2 which will add the final five lodges to the park. We hope to have

these in place for this coming September.

If you have friends and family coming to visit, but no room to accommodate them, we are able to offer residents of the parish a discount on the price of lodge. Give the reception a call on 01273 036851, but please don't leave it too late as availability may be a problem.

"This place is absolutely without a doubt, the BEST place I have ever been to. It's amazing, every part of it and I will 150% stay there again. Great work by the teams who put it together and I'm not surprised it's completely sold out all the time! Don't even second guess this place. Trust me when I say it is amazing. It truly is"

(Online review, January 2019)



Ben presents a bottle of champagne to our first Lodge guests Cerie and Cody Rowley, who had travelled from Cardiff to celebrate their first wedding anniversary here.



In the last issue I told you about Charlie 'Steady' Pettit, his wife Elizabeth and their family of four boys and four girls who lived at Harvey's Cross, at the western end of the estate overlooking Saltdean and Rottingdean, during the first half of the last century. Steady and Elizabeth were very hospitable to friends and family alike and there are many snapshots from the time when their children were grown up and with families of their own, often in large gatherings with the children playing happily outside the little flint cottage at Harvey's Cross. The family hid a dark secret though.

The Story of Harvey's Cross Part 2

John Robinson

Their youngest daughter Dorothy was not their daughter at all but actually their granddaughter. Another of their daughters, Edith, had had two children before she eventually got married. She never revealed the father's name and, at the time, this would have brought great shame on the family if it had become public knowledge. One of the children was a boy who was reputedly given to gypsies to bring up. The other was Dorothy (above) who Edith entrusted to her parents to raise as their own.

Dorothy spent most of her life at Harvey's Cross. She attended school in Rottingdean, walking there and back everyday. Anyone making that walk today, even in fine weather, will appreciate the immense effort required as she had two steep hills to negotiate each way.

When her schooldays were over, Dorothy stayed at home to look after her 'parents'. Her 'mother' Elizabeth died when Dorothy was 23. Steady was by now about 60, and they lived together until war was declared when the military served notice on them to quit. The pair moved to a bungalow in Woodingdean but their time there together was brief as Steady shortly developed cancer of the eye and subsequently died. Dorothy was now alone but independent at last. In 1942 she married a tailor from Lewes who was many years her senior. They had two girls, one of whom still lives locally.

Many thanks to Douglas d'Enno for providing much of the above information



Above: Charles and Elizabeth Pettit. c.1938

Top: Dorothy Pettit with her dog tending sheep on the hill

At the end of my last article I said that I had heard a rumour that the cross at Harvey's Cross, which had fallen into disrepair and been replaced in 1999 and subsequently vandalised, might be replaced a third time. I am happy to tell you that, thanks to the efforts of Douglas d'Enno and the funds of the Harvey family, it has been replaced again and a small party was held on site on September 2nd to celebrate its inauguration. The second cross was made of white marble which may have been the reason it drew unwanted attention and subsequently became vandalised. The new cross, as the photo shows, is made of a more natural looking stone and hopefully will escape being vandalised. Next June 20th will be 200 years since Colonel John Harvey's untimely death and, no doubt, there will be another gathering on the Downs overlooking the sea to remember the event and also the Pettit family and their long-gone cottage and the happy and sad times they spent there.

