

More Wild Flowers on Common Land?

Shamley Green was lucky to have a visit from James Hitchmough, Professor of Horticultural Ecology at the University of Sheffield on 21 April. His main research interests are the ecology, design and management of herbaceous vegetation. In the UK he is best known as a designer of the stunning Olympic Park meadows and is currently working on projects including Royal Horticultural Society meadows, the Knepp Estate in Sussex, and helping the Forestry Commission to plan for a rapidly changing climate. But he also works all over the world in many environments, both urban and rural.

Some members of the Environment Group walked around the greens with him. Strolling across the common land he pointed out plants we have never noticed though said that, as some areas have been heavily mown for many years, the seedbank will be very low. So while some species might eventually reappear with less mowing, many will not. He suggested we could increase biodiversity by adding plugs of different native species in suitable areas. We should use a spade to dig the space for plant plugs in small patches as a bridgehead, then hopefully they self-seed and metastasise out. Native bulbs - eg *Narcissus pseudonarcissus*, *Crocus tommasinianus* - would also be a possibility in many areas.

He could deduce from vegetation in each area what had happened in the past. For example, the Lords Hill Green triangle is in a better state than most of the rest as it has been mown less. It is an example of a wet meadow, now very rare in UK. Supplementary plug planting of native species such as Betony, Meadowsweet, Devil's Bit Scabious, *Sanguisorba* etc. could turn this into a good meadow habitat. The Bricklayers willow tree area is rich in nitrogen, possibly because horses used to be tied up when there was a forge, hence the nettles growing there.

On the Duck Pond Green he didn't think car parking for the village fete necessarily precludes wild flowers because we could choose plants that would flower and seed before mowing for the fete, and there's no need to mow very short. It might even help to keep dominant species under control. His suggestions for the green included Devil's Bit Scabious, Meadowsweet, Yellow Rattle, Ragged Robin, Cowslips, Meadow Buttercup, Sorrel, Pignut, *Centaurea nigra* and *Geranium pratense*. Plants on the edges of the ditches should spread onto the Green when it is mown less.



He also visited the village school to talk to the children about wildflowers and environmental issues. This was a great success. James told the children how he was helping the Shamley Green community to look at ways of improving the wildflowers in our natural environment. The children then asked him lots of interesting questions. Some were about wildflowers such as the structure of bulbs or why he liked to use Latin names, but he also talked about his visits to China and meeting a grizzly bear while plant collecting. The children then showed James the school grounds which included their herb garden, the sports field and borders (hopefully with wildflowers coming up), and the woodland habitat where they do forest schools and study nature.



His visit was particularly welcome because the children are going to be identifying and recording wild flowers and will be involved in trying to increase the variety and amount of plants that we have in Shamley Green as part of their partnership with SGEG. And on that we will draw on James' advice and prepare plans for planting in the autumn but will consult in the village and seek Parish Council approval before that.

Particular thanks to Claire Merriman for organising James' visit and to Sue Cory-Wright for the school visit.

Shamley Green Environment Group