

Swyncombe Down - Update August 2010

Our visit to Swyncombe this spring showed that Sam Fielden had successfully removed all the big bushes and trees from the Down. The whole hillside is now clear and some anthills clearly visible.

Last years joint effort to clear the invading thistles seems to have paid off as there were none to be seen. We were also pleased to see a great deal of Rock Rose, more than had been noticed in previous years.

We are also more confident in Sam's knowledge of handling the sheep for the best outcome on the Down, and are more optimistic than ever of the ecosystem on Swyncombe making a complete recovery. This goes to show the resilience of nature if the right conditions are nurtured.

We all agreed that no immediate intervention was required at Swyncombe, but that we would continue to make periodical visits for observation.

Vivien Williamson

Our trip to Swyncombe has sown the seeds of a trusting relation to the 12HT with Sam. He is watching and observing what happens to his land and shows great sensitivity to nature. His great interest is tree and he went on a holiday last year looking at Oaks and Pines in Mexico. He is always adding new unusual trees to his parkland. Chelsea flower show was a disappointment to him. He felt it didn't give him what he needed. Although he did find a modern labelling machine, he would have preferred to find labels like his grandfather made 50 years ago which are still there. He is labelling everything to educate himself and also for others who will come after him, very much the guardian of this land and very aware of a responsibility to do this well. He has a very long term view.

In removing the thistles from the steep upper slope we had the opportunity to see what is growing there and see how these thistles grow. When they get to this size just beyond easy weeding, their roots have pushed down well into cracks in the chalk. My visit a couple of weeks earlier showed much smaller thistles. Where they broke in pulling them a really juicy sap oozed from the broken stem. They obviously are able to powerfully suck moisture from the underlying chalk. I could see how quickly they wilted almost like impatiens when uprooted. Was it my imagination but did all the other plants perk up after removing the invaders? Possibly it was the time of day. For myself it was very heartening to see how the hillside is recovering, but our lack of knowledge of the process shows that we need to gather more information. The hillside's natural recovery would be through scrub to forest and this hillside is manmade many centuries ago. I can see the sheep have kept down the shoots of the cleared scrub and eaten the lower leaves of uncleared scrub. They hadn't eaten the thistles. Sam's intention in line with Natural England is that all the scrub is cleared from the hill. That is completely our wish too.

This hillside is rather like several of the chalk hillsides around the Chilterns like Whiteleaf Cross at Great Missenden and similar to those with White Horses cut in the chalk in Wiltshire. Kent also has this type of chalk hill. The steepness of the slope and the thinness of the soil does lead to bits of the overlying vegetation breaking away and heavy grazing can damage the hillside. When I have been wandering around these hillsides the majority of Gentians I found were on flatter bits of these steep hillsides and more scattered plants on the steepest parts of the slopes. Gentiana Amarella loves the steep south facing slopes. The Chiltern Gentian seemed to like longer vegetation around and wetter areas growing through moss as well as herbs and grass. This is purely personal observation of a few years standing.

At Swyncombe in the lower areas, the young Gentians were pushing through the mat of herbs and grasses. The ground cover was moist in spite of the hot sunshine. This dense interweaving of a wide variety of plants which love unimproved soil traps water from the dew as well as drawing up from the chalk below. The sheep had not been here and rabbits had not made a meal of the area in spite of strong evidence of their burrowing nearby.

Where possible I will keep observing this and other hillsides though Gentian flowers at its best when I am busy away doing other things.



Gentiana Amarella (Temple Ewell, Kent August 2002)

The Amarella has a proud straight upright stem. They are easiest to find lying face sideways in the grass and looking for this very straight stem unlike its surrounding low-lying companions. It has a square shaped stem with lance like leaves and the flowers neatly from the meeting point of stem and leaf . The cylindrical shaped flower is smaller than *G. Campestris*, the Chiltern Gentian, with the calyx relatively longer. The corolla is smooth. After the flower dies and the seeds are forming the flower closes and seals the developing seeds. Later the whole plant withers and dies protecting the tiny seeds which later fall around the plant or are scattered in the wind. As the whole plant dies it looks like a skeleton of its elegant former self



Gentiana Amarella (Queendown Warren , Kent Oct 07)



The Chiltern Gentian has broader less lance-like leaves. The plant is slightly larger and more bushy. The corolla of the flower is longer than Amarella and corrugated. The flower is funnel shaped. The sepals are shorter.