

Park Farm Community Cherry Orchard Group.

'People Power: Community Action in Green Spaces.'

by Mike Phillips.

Projects Officer, Mid Kent Downs Countryside Partnership.

The Mid Kent Downs Countryside Partnership has, over the years, been a source of support and advice to the Park Farm Community Cherry Orchard Group in Lynsted. Indeed, the Project may not have got off the ground in 2004/5 had it not been for its help with producing an effective grant application for Heritage Lottery funding. So it was with great pleasure that the Group welcomed MKDCP Projects Officer Mike Phillips to give a talk on the work of the Partnership. This was presented on the evening of the Group's AGM on 23rd February.

Mike explained that MKDCP was a semi-autonomous group that belonged to, but did not receive funding from, Kent County Council. The Partnership was just one of a network of similar groups that, between them, covered most of Kent. It works jointly with, and has helped to develop, many countryside projects throughout the central Kent Downs area.

The sheer range of projects surprised many in the audience. Traditional orchard projects had been initiated at Lenham, Stockbury, Milstead and Sheldwich (Lynsted with Kingsdown's own project had launched itself independently, and earlier!). But Mike was also involved with a range of woodland and wildlife projects of all shapes and sizes. A striking example was at Boxley Warren, on the North Downs escarpment north of Maidstone. Here fly-tippers and off-road vehicles had made the Pilgrims' Way a no-go area and threatened seriously to damage the chalk grassland habitat. As a last resort, the lane had been gated off to keep out vehicles. A group of volunteers had removed the trash, and the area was now returning to the natural tranquillity that had formerly been enjoyed by walkers and horse riders. This stood as a fine example of the effective application of 'people-power' for the greater good! Another initiative was the 'Orchards for Everyone' project that had promoted a network of community orchards and their produce in our Kent heartland of fruit production.

There were often volunteers available to care for, and 'claim some ownership' of, such 'green' areas: all that was needed was a little coordination - and funding. On the latter subject, Mike pointed out that grants were now becoming more readily available, since the competing demands from the Olympic Games were past their peak, people were buying more lottery tickets and the government was supporting its own 'localism' policy.

The skilfully illustrated talk was brought to a close with examples of volunteer activities, such as learning and applying husbandry techniques, running unusual events (breakfast in the orchard?!) and applying simple internet methods to create 'heritage maps'.

The chairman, thanked Mike for his stimulating and eye-opening presentation, and assured him that note had been taken, by the Group, of the ideas covered.

Bob Baxter.

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