

Butser Hill and Oxenbourne Down

in Queen Elizabeth Country Park

[Klaus Reiner's account of a visit in August 2006 by members of Eibenfreunde](#) is translated by Wim Peeters. Photographs by Christian Wolf

Our guide, parkranger Mr Steve Peach, started our visit with a presentation in the projection booth of the visitor centre. The subjects were: "The Yews of the Queen Elizabeth Country Park" and the claim that: "Yew is Hampshire weed."



The 1 400 acres of the country park are used in the first place for recreation with extended riding trails, cycling, glide slopes and lots of other play and picnic areas which receive 320 000 visitors every year.



The park contains on the one hand coniferous forests and beech afforestation planted in the 1930's and on the other hand it has Butser Hill with its chalk meadows and yewstands.



Butser hill is recognised as as SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) and has been a nature reserve since 1998, in the first place because of the 40 species of butterflies, 82 different lichens and 125 mosses, and with 45 species a square metre, a very high density of plant species. What makes this place interesting for the visitor is the alternation between forest, shrubbery and meadows. This rich landscape is maintained by sheep and cattle to protect the chalk meadows from bush forming and forestation.

In 1926, lots of areas in the Country Park which are nowadays covered with large amounts of yew were described as Juniper stands (eg. Butser Hill) – where the yew saplings could develop under protection of the junipers and later on shaded the junipers out.

Should yew be considered as part of the final stage of the forestation or maintained as a forest community – is yew a pioneer or is it situated at the climax of a natural forestation development?

During the subsequent short hike to the yew forest of Butser Hill past the new entrance road to the visitor centre, we passed the youngest yew trees that had seeded themselves together with the junipers in the bare soil of the embankment.

The yew stand we reached is a six to ten metres high evolving forest with mainly multistemmed full grown yews occuring with whitebeam, purple beech, hawthorn, blackberry and just a few still surviving juniper. Only where the light can penetrate through the canopy can single yew trees form real stems. At the edge of the wood, we could see free growing yew trees with a stem of more than 50 cm diameter. Before the area was protected it was under the control of the neighbouring farmers who used the yews partially for fence posts, thus explaining the reason why there are no older single stemmed yews to be found. If nowadays yews are used for the maintenance of the park, the rest of the wood is being used for handicrafts with children (part of the intensive visitors program) while the valuable parts are given to wood turners and wood dealers.



In a little valley located further away our guide showed us the different possibilities of keeping the plains open, respectively to turn it to rich meadows, when the succession is already far advanced.

The areas that are spontaneously afforesting are cut down and after clearing out the wood and osier, for ten years the land is mowed and cleared using heavy machinery , to eliminate all offshoots.

When starting from grassland, for two years no measures are carried out. In the next two years the grass will be annually mowed, and that will be followed by two years winter grazing with sheep.

In the other areas regular grazing will be carried out with sheep.

Mr Peach estimated the expense for keeping the plains open for his remote valley at € 25 for a hectare a year.

After the guided tour, some of the members of Eibenfreunde went to a part of the beech forest that was planted in 1930, to see the yew trees of the original vegetation. As the trees were protected by a fence, the yew had rejuvenated itself and formed normal stems in the half shade.

Besides the very interesting visit, Mr Steve Peach gave us in his own pleasant and witty style an insight in the English soul: "People in England love trees and yew trees have their special interest.". Many thanks Mr. Peach.

