

Nature lovers go back to the future

Sussex conservationists have been able to take a step back in time thanks to a unique set of wildlife diaries written 120 years ago.

The diaries, written by Charles Hibbert, give a detailed snapshot of the wildlife around the village of Binsted near Arundel in the 1890s – cataloguing bird and butterfly sightings, botany and the creatures living in local freshwater streams.

Mr Hibbert's grandson is the renowned Sussex wildlife writer, Richard Williamson, who was able to use his grandfather's records as a backdrop for a guided walk in the area earlier this month (May 13).

The ancient woodlands around Binsted have attracted nature lovers for years – a survey by the local conservation group, MAVES recently highlighted its importance as a home for dozens of rare birds and flowers, and 13 species of bats.

Mr Williamson was invited by MAVES to lead the walk along the same paths taken by his grandfather more than a century ago.

"It was a pleasure to have Richard lead such a fascinating walk and I believe we all learned a huge amount from him," said Mark Hunt who organised the event.

"We had chance to see the Binsted area through Richard's eyes... and through the eyes of his grandfather all those years ago. It was a unique opportunity which provided a useful context to wider environmental trends and concerns.

"He pointed out the meadow pipits, skylarks, goldfinches and green hairstreak butterflies accompanying our walk. When we came to a shady dell with early purple orchids among the bluebells, he explained why they were called 'Orchis mascula', the phallic 'long purple' flower stems having underground parts to match, as mentioned by Shakespeare.

"Under the shade of a 400 year old oak tree we learned about the history and wildlife of Binsted Park, before descending to the famously eerie Madonna Pond. We learned about its history as a fishpond - and its apparently bottomless depths!

"Richard also spoke about his grandfather's collection of snail shells which he had brought to an earlier MAVES talk in Walberton Village Hall."

Mr Williamson, who was manager of the Kingley Vale nature reserve for 30 years, is well known for his intimate knowledge of the environment and his varied publications, including regular, and popular, articles in the Chichester Observer.

The Binsted walkers were also joined by licensed dormouse surveyor, Ian Powell and MAVES member, Mike Tristram who both have detailed knowledge of the area. All money raised by the event will go to fund future MAVES surveys and buy necessary equipment for the vital work we undertake.