

Cumbria Organic Gardeners and Farmers



Keeping in Touch – March 2025



A beautiful photo of a winter wonderland in a member's garden

From the Editor

Thank you to a member for sending in some dramatic photos of the snow in his garden (see one above). See also page 8 for advice on his recommended bird food source – and one of his gardening jokes (he says he has better jokes, but they're not gardening ones!).

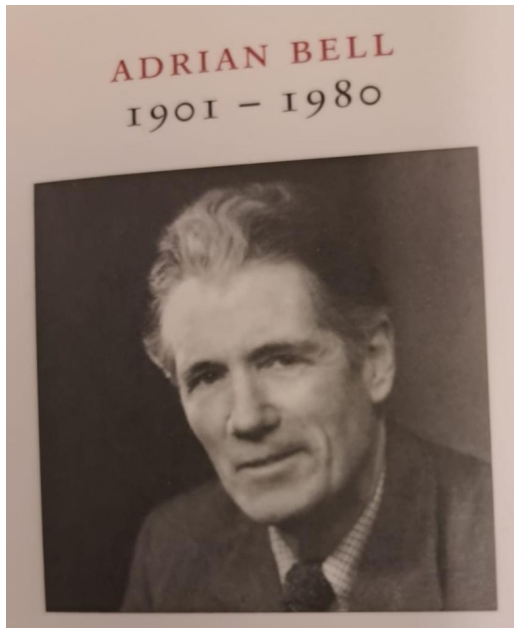
We have more advice on slug control and what to do with the slugs once collected is a problem I have. Any suggestions welcome for members with no hens or ducks!

The Committee are looking for help with the stall at the Plant and Food Fair at Hutton-in-the-Forest on 11th May. Please contact a member of the Committee if you can spare an hour or two.

See two exciting events coming up in May and July (see pages 9 -11).

Apologies for an error in the past editions of KIT for Carlisle Farmers' Market day – which is the first Saturday of the month, not the first Friday as stated. Also, apologies for not including Houghton Farmers' market, which is the second Saturday of the month (see page 11).

Adrian Bell – Prose Poet of the English Countryside



Adrian Bell (1901 – 1980) was born into an urbane, cultured family, and spent his early years in London, and at the public school Uppingham. When he was twenty, and by his own account a rather listless and aimless young man, he was apprenticed to a Suffolk farmer to learn the business of farming. That year on a large and well-run arable farm in West Suffolk, at Stradishall, set the course for the rest of his life, and he spent the next sixty years or so in the countryside, either farming himself, or closely observing and recording the rural life around him.

After the failure of his first farming venture (the familiar problem of how to make a farm pay caused financial problems), he wrote a book about his year-long apprenticeship. This book, 'Corduroy', was an immediate success, and led quickly to two more books that documented his early years farming on his own account.

These books formed a trilogy that describe a way of farming that was about to be swept away by mechanisation; a world of small farms, relatively small fields, Suffolk horses and a system where muck was still the key to crop growing.

His writing style is often described as Prose Poetry - lyrical descriptions of rural scenes, with philosophical and sometimes spiritual or religious musings on the simple, everyday things and events of the working countryside.

After the trilogy, he wrote steadily until the war, some works were almost novels (but not quite), others were fictionalised non-fiction.

During the war, he bought another, larger farm, and worked this using horses and a tractor, doing what he could for the war effort, with the aid of a full-time farm worker, plus prisoners of war and members of the Land Army. The experience of wartime farming seemed to energise him, but he was also very aware of the compromises that he had to make – using artificial fertiliser, for example, which really went against his ideals.

Out of the war years came two of his most popular books, 'Apple Acre', which is a beautiful elegy to English rural life, then at terrible risk from invasion and obliteration in the desperate months of 1940, and the more forward-looking 'The Budding Morrow' written as the war drew to a close. Both books are full of insight and beauty, with the latter book gently pointing the way to a better farming tomorrow, with the hope of returning soldiers finding their own little farms, and

living in productive peace on their own land. Things did not work out in quite that way, of course, but the vision remains.

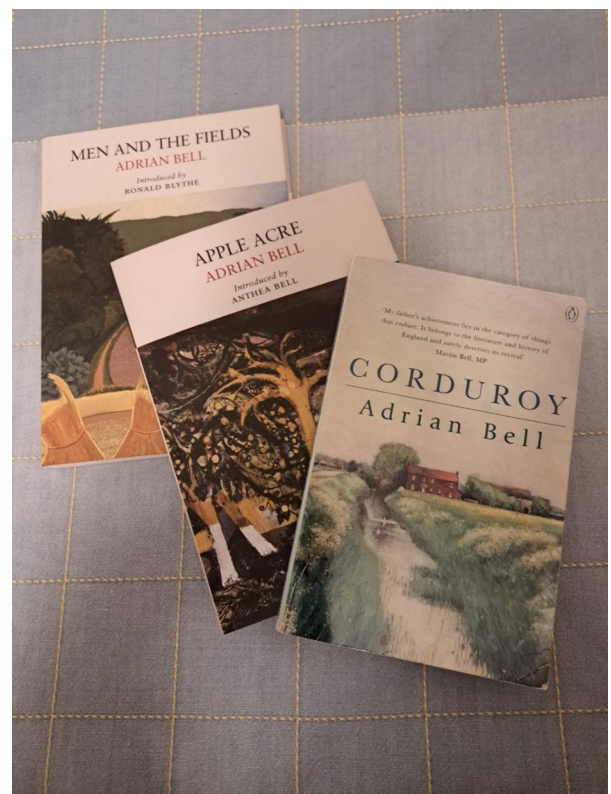
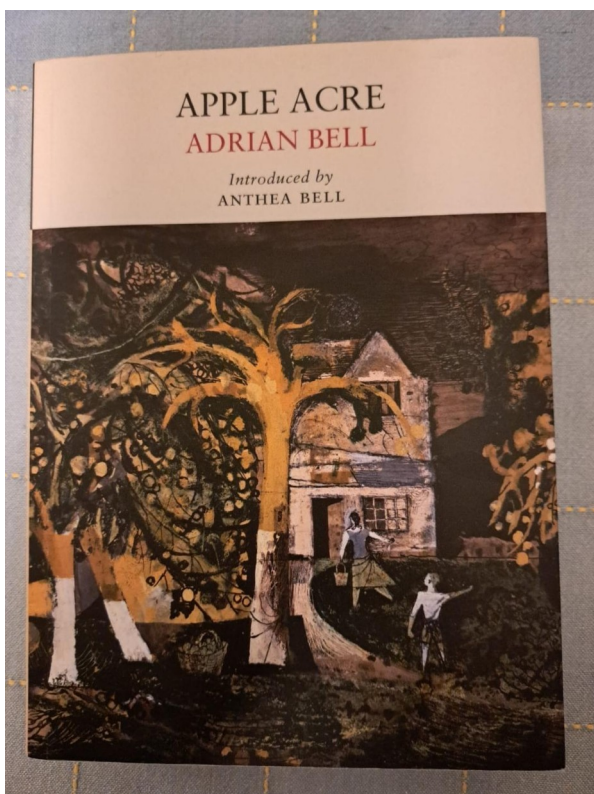
Although Adrian Bell wrote almost exclusively about farming and rural life in Suffolk, he did leave us a fascinating insight into the life and work of a small farm near Tebay. His book 'Sunrise to Sunset', came about from his experiences visiting his evacuated family in the early part of the war.

He found the contrast in farming styles, and also in general culture and outlook to be both deep-rooted and stimulating, and even at this great distance of eighty or more years, we can recognise the essential wit and philosophy of the native Cumbrian in his writing. He was astonished at how relentlessly hard the small farmers of Westmorland worked, and how great their capacity for tea and cakes was (some things really don't change).

Adrian Bell believed firmly in organic agriculture, in more, and smaller farms, in a thriving rural economy with room for the village thatcher, woodsmen, blacksmiths and the like. He loved to find wild flowers and birds about the fields, wanted everyone to have access to good and wholesome food, but understood that this would mean a simpler life, and a life based around work and community, rather than the promised future of leisure and entertainment.

He continued writing through the 1970's, when he was involved in the nascent Ecology Party (which evolved into the Green Party). When he died in 1980, almost all of his books were out of print, literary fashions having turned away from nature and country writing at that time. Since then, his work has seen something of a resurgence, and at the time of writing (early 2025), several of his books are in print, as well as collections of his weekly columns 'A Countryman's Diary'.

His books are widely available second hand, and I do recommend his work not just to anyone who loves the countryside, but to all those who seek to look beyond and deep within the fields and hedges we see before us, and love also the long tradition and culture that has carried our farm lands through the centuries.



Wildlife gardening

There is nothing like leaving one garden and starting another to concentrate the mind on what is desirable in a garden, what to grow and what is the right way to do it. I am currently between allotments, giving up my full-sized plot and taking on a half-sized one. I need to downsize, have become rather bored with growing vegetables and want to have a garden for fruit and flowers and somewhere I can sit and just enjoy being there. I may have started to abandon all the good planet-caring aspects of vegetable growing but I have begun to be much more focused on gardening for wildlife.

Wildlife gardening feels like a totally contradictory activity. Gardening is about control, manipulation, exclusion/inclusion for the wishes and purposes of the gardener. Wildlife is what happens anyway, if we just leave it; perhaps it could be termed feral. Wildlife gardening has to find a satisfactory place where these two ideas can overlap. Whatever we come up with it will be unsatisfactory; humanity has changed natural environments forever. Perhaps the answer is to stop gardening altogether and just enjoy long grass, wild flowers and abundant hedges. This is good but it's not gardening.

I cannot be alone when I say I cannot contemplate not gardening. I live in a city and need my space for growing plants for food but also for pleasure, recreation and peace of mind. If I must garden, then I need to try to grow and garden as harmoniously as possible with Nature, and if and where possible to try and provide environments where wildlife can thrive and prosper and which will go some way to rectify the harm humanity does. COGF members already do this; we look after the soil, we don't use herbicides and pesticides. I'm sure many of us also feed the birds, provide woodpiles for small beasties, dig ponds, let grass grow long and a myriad other things which help our gardens with pollinators and pest control. Gardeners and Nature are good neighbours.

All this seems good until it's thrown into the context of allotments. Allotment tenants learn very early that good neighbourliness with other plot holders is essential. There are issues here which are exercising me! They also have a wider bearing on humanity's relationship with Nature. I have outlined some of them here, all criticisms and discussion gratefully accepted.

Feeding the birds - Bird food attracts rats, mice and pigeons. These can all be classed as pests on allotments, particularly mice and pigeons. Is it neighbourly to encourage "pests" on to your plot which may then hop next door for some veg related food?

I am also concerned about cleaning bird feeders and putting out food on flat surfaces like bird tables where bird viruses can proliferate and be passed on. I would love to encourage the birds on to my plot but think I will need to do this with naturally occurring bird food. Is it right to artificially feed the birds? Especially if our activities lead to spread of bird viruses.

Letting grass grow long- for the benefit of invertebrates. There are many perennial weeds which are a scourge for veg growers – couch grass, mare's tail, ground elder. If grass grows long (as in no-mow May) it will also encourage the rampant growth of allotment horrors such as these. They will proliferate even in one month and could spread to other plots. As long grass is not advisable, as an alternative I have been growing a patch of wild flowers with no grass in between – yarrow, campions, foxgloves, teasels, lady's bedstraw, scabious with an understory of buttercups and plantains. This doesn't quite cut it, the stems are not quite sufficiently abundant and there is no underthatch. It feels artificial and more like a perennial bed than a meadow. And the micro beasties (other than slugs) don't seem to appreciate it.

You'll note as well that this mix does not include ox eye daisies. I love ox eye daisies but they are designed to grow in a meadow. Take them out of a grassy situation where they don't have

to compete and there will be nothing but ox eye daisies as far as the eye can see. I have been ruthlessly culling them for years ... This is a weird gardening situation. I've also tried a no-grass lawn – a mix of low growing creeping plants. This didn't get the attention it needed and now will have to be abandoned. I may try it again. This also does not seem to encourage invertebrates like grass does.

Hedges - I would love a mixed native species hedge with lots of flowers and fruits and ivy in the bottom. Hedges are enclosing and will grow big and take light and fertility from neighbouring plots. I might just get away with it if I keep it low. I have been saving stray tree seedlings for about three years and would love to plant them up as a hedge. And how would this fit with a fence?

Fencing - All the plots are fenced against rabbits which really are an athema to veg growing! I haven't seen a rabbit on the allotments for several years since the flood banks were built, though in the past they have reached biblical plague proportions. I would like to take the fence down and encourage hedgehogs on to the plot but a hole big enough for a hedgehog would also admit a small rabbit. And how can I take down a good fence which still has life in it in case the next tenant needs it?

I'm sure everyone has similar dilemmas. However, once established on my new plot, I can and will have another pond and replant the wild flowers and set up the dead hedges and bug hotels and myriad other things. Everything we can do will help; my wildlife garden will reflect my situation. It does not have to look like all those exemplary ones in books and on websites. And I will still grow a few vegetables to help with food miles. I haven't even touched on the guilt at not growing vegetables when I could ...

**Editor's note: In response to Elizabeth's piece on wildlife gardening, which includes a reference to feeding birds naturally, listed below are some of the better known plants, shrubs and trees that can feed the birds, either directly from their fruit or seeds, or by attracting insects and grubs that the birds can eat.*

For fruit:

Berberis	Holly (female, for berries)	Ivy (<i>Hedera Helix</i>)
Hawthorn	Honeysuckle	Rowan
Cotoneaster	Blackthorn	Guelder Rose
Dog Rose	Pyracantha (sometimes known as Firethorn)	
Crab apple		

For seeds:

Sunflower	Teasel
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Wildflowers to attract insects that the birds will feed on. The debate on whether these should be native or not continues.

More on slugs! - from one of our members.



Slug traps set with the rim close to soil level can act as pit traps which catch ground beetles and other beneficial insects. If the rim is at least 2 cm above soil level then slugs will still climb in but insects should not be able to do so.

A rough rim can deter slugs. I've found that a glass jar is better than most plastic pots except in winter as a hard frost can break the glass. Improvise a cover to stop rain diluting the contents.

Most fermented liquids attract slugs; it doesn't have to be just beer as it's the yeasty smell that matters most. Brown sugar dissolved in warm water with a pinch of dried yeast added will start to ferment. This can be supplemented with dregs of fruit juice, beer, cider, jam and over-ripe fruit. All of these will also ferment and add to the yeasty aroma.

If your method is to stroll around at dusk and collect any slugs you find then I recommend using an old set of sugar tongs. The problem is I then don't know what to do with my collection.

Bean Survey

Garden Organic is running a new project called 'Build a better veg planner'. Dr Anton Rosenfield, the Research Manager with Garden Organic, is asking people around the UK to grow a crop of their own favourite climbing French Beans, then record some of the key dates when things happen (e.g. planting out, first flower, first pod set, etc.)

This work will allow Garden Organic to get a better picture of regional variations for growing crops. They will use the data to improve their veg growing calendars. They will also repeat the work as a longitudinal study so they can look at any longer-term trends due to climate change.

If you are interested in signing up to the project, information of how to do that is here: <https://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/what-we-do/citizen-science-and-research/members-experiments/build-a-better-veg-planner>

*Editor's note: *On the subject of beans, a member recommends runner bean "Sunset", not just for its beans, but for its lovely peach coloured flowers (see below).*



Critique of the film “Wilding”

I expect several of you will have seen this film; I wonder what you thought of it?

I found it very romantic and pretty (within the limitations of digital photography). The land concerned is Knepp estate, near West Grinstead, W. Sussex, and the family is “upper middle and higher”. There is a strong suggestion that this rewilding is an environmentally sound, thrilling and lovely thing to do.

But is it?.... While briefly acknowledging the concern and opposition of local farmers the film never addresses the issue of food production, simply stating the land was too degraded by chemicals to viably produce food crops, and “wilding” was conceived as a viable alternative. Wild? What wild? Right from the start the careful management was described. The concept was not for wild land at all, but for a natural looking landscape with man the top predator, culling and organising to keep the balance between animals, plants and the rest of nature.

Beautiful landscapes were conceived and their creation set in motion, with longhorn cattle, Exmoor ponies and Tamworth pigs, that would tread the ground and keep the vegetation in check. It soon became apparent that appropriate open areas, scrub and woodland were forming naturally with this kind of management. After a long wait they got permission to introduce beavers to control and extend the streams and create their unique wetland, and there was description of the permission and planning process needed to allow this. Wild birds, some rare, were soon nesting in the thickening wood and shrublands, small creatures abounded and the whole was presented pictorially as a kind of garden of Eden.

Beautiful landscapes, yes, but not wild, more like a little English safari park. So, forget about the loss of land that could have been managed as farm and wildlife together, and applaud the careful and considerate replacing of lost English landscape. We need both don’t we? To feed our bodies and spirits? After some years there is plenty of wildlife alongside the domestic animals, with glimpses of semi-tame fallow deer, bird song, vistas full of diversity and life, the meandering river – all for our well-being and for the wildlife that can be welcomed to share it.

At the end of the film it was apparent, though never stated, that long term planning has led to a very lucrative business, with hoards of visitors (whose very presence makes a mockery of the notion of “wild”).

Having said all this, I enjoyed the film and would recommended you see it if you have not yet done so, and make up your own mind about its message. It’s a pity the soundtrack music often smothers the spoken word when birdsong or wind noise might be better.

There is also a book by Isabella Tree, that I’ve not read, which I’m told covers more of the economics, tells of sixty four holiday cottages, explains the attitude to food production, and gives a lot more detail about planning permissions, grants etc. That background would give a more balanced overall picture; if I can raise enough interest perhaps I should read it.



If you have seen the film, could you tell us what you thought of it?

Bird Foods

We, like most gardeners, have been feeding our birds ever since we moved here 40 or so years ago. For a long time we got all our bird food, feeders and other equipment from CJ Wildlife (www.birdfood.co.uk) from Shropshire. They have a fantastic range of products and very high quality foods.

In recent years we have tried to get most of our bird food from firms that are a bit more local and not quite so expensive. We now get the fat products (fat balls and birdcake) from a firm, Winston Wilds, in Shildon, Co. Durham (www.winstonwilds.co.uk). The birds love these because they are soft and not at all like those hard fat balls (which often contain sand would you believe?), which pet shops and agricultural merchants sell.

As for peanuts and feeder seed, we now get them from a small firm in Haltwhistle called Poltross Wild Bird Foods (poltross.com) telephone: 01434 321111. They deliver free to North Cumbria on Fridays, but being a very small firm, you can't order online. You have to ring them on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday (10am - 5pm) or Saturdays (10am - 1pm). We certainly can recommend them.



Gardening joke:

Garden visitor: "What do you do with that manure?"

Gardener: "I put on my rhubarb."

Garden visitor: *"That's unusual, we have custard with ours."*

Report

Seed Swap and Winter Social, Sunday 2nd February

The event was preceded by a COGF Committee meeting.

Attendance was very disappointing, with few members arriving in addition to the Committee.

There were plenty of seeds on offer, lovely tea and cakes brought by members and an excellent quiz.

If you have any alternative suggestions for future events early in the year, do let us know.

Future Event

Three Gardens on the Solway, Saturday May 3rd 11.00 until 4.00

An opportunity to visit three very different gardens sharing the climate and conditions of the Solway Plain but taking individual routes into organic gardening.

The day will be divided into three sections of around one and a half hours at each garden with time for travel by car between the three gardens.

Garden 1: Weathered from the South West, wild and wonderful.....

Tea, coffee on arrival...

A truly wild garden that was a football pitch! I planted lots of trees and shrubs and a small copse in the middle of the wildflower meadow. The trees included a black poplar and a sweet chestnut, two scented poplars, apple, pear, 'plumzon', and quince (which never does much). Herbs but no veg (something eats them!) and mown paths.

Garden 2: An evolving and mixed approach to plants

Over 48 years since the original farm was stripped out and its surrounding land was used to spread the spoil from a River Board gutter widening, the 'garden and orchard' around East Farm has evolved through family food, football, tennis and ponies together with dogs, rabbits, hens, geese, ducks and goats.

With Solway winds which have lifted entire greenhouses and a subsoil of glacial boulder clay and a high water table through the winter months we have learned to grow 'with' our environment and to treat the layer of topsoil with care.

The evolution of the pottery here has influenced the garden, as has a late change of career into garden design. Our story of trying ideas, learning from good and bad decisions and enjoying the many and often surprising gifts of the garden continues.

Please bring packed lunches if you wish. Tea/coffee and biscuits provided indoors. Toilet on site.

Garden 3: Self sufficiency in vegetables – in action

You can explore our garden close to the house and the main vegetable plot at the bottom of a small hay field. The random mix of vegetables, fruit and flowers has developed organically over 40 years without the use of fertilizers, insecticides or herbicides.

We start most of our vegetable plants from seeds and under cover and make good use of hardwood shavings for paths and, when decomposed, for mulching and compost. The garden suffers from wind and can get very wet so we use a variety of methods to combat this.

Tea, coffee and cake afterwards.



Garden 3

Future Event

Threave Gardens, Sunday 6th July



Threave Gardens and Estate is owned by the National Trust for Scotland. It is situated near Castle Douglas in the Dumfries and Galloway region. It has several different areas/gardens including a rockery, a secret garden, a walled garden and more. There is also a very pleasant café on site.

If there is sufficient demand, we will arrange a bus at a subsidised cost of £10 per person, with pick ups in Wigton and Carlisle, times to be arranged. Otherwise we will try to organise car sharing.

If you have a National Trust card, entry is free to the Gardens. For others, the group visit cost will be £6.70 each, payable on site.

Cumbrian Farmers' Markets

- . **Brampton** – last Saturday of the month
- . **Brough** – 3rd Saturday of the month
- . **Carlisle city centre** – 1st Saturday of the month
- . **Carlisle Borderway** – 2nd Saturday of the month
- . **Cockermouth** – 1st Saturday of the month
- . **Egremont** – 1st Saturday & 3rd Friday of the month
- . **Houghton** – 2nd Saturday of the month
- . **Kendal** – last Friday of the month
- . **Keswick** – 2nd Thursday of the month
- . **Milnthorpe** – 2nd Friday of each month
- . **Orton** – the second Saturday of the month
- . **Penrith** – 3rd Tuesday of every month
- . **Sedbergh** – every Wednesday
- . **Ulverston** – 3rd Saturday of the month

Organic produce can also be ordered from the Open Food Network's website:
<https://openfoodnetwork.org.uk/cumbria-farmers/shop>

Diary of COGF Events in 2025

Saturday 3rd May from 10.00 am until 4.00 pm

Visit to three gardens in the Solway

Sunday 11th May, from 10.00 am until 4.00 pm

COGF at The Plant and Food Fair, Hutton in the Forest

Sunday 8th June, from 11.00 am until 5.00 pm

COGF at Open Farm Sunday, at Susan's Farm, Houghton; Low Stanger and Low Netherscales near Cockermouth

Sunday 6th July

Visit to Threave Gardens, Dumfries and Galloway

Tuesday 9th September, 2.00 pm

Visit to HMP Haverigg

Sunday 28th September, 10.00 am until 4.00 pm

COGF at Apple Day, Hutton-in-the-Forest

Sunday 16th November, 2.00 pm

COGF AGM



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