



(TL009201) and went as far N as Bidwell farm and the Thorn road. The Downs were a sorry sight as the cloud had descended upon them; there was no life in the gliding club and not a single para-glider. Some ghostly, hopeful, kite flyers loomed out of the mist at intervals, but really this was not a day for aerial sports.



**The Gliding Club is shrouded and inactive. No para-gliders were leaping off the Downs**



At the northern end of the Downs, before ‘plunging’ down towards Dunstable, the Way passes Five Knolls (220 masl). These comprise several (seven) burial mounds dating from the late Neolithic or early Bronze Ages and, according to the plaque, have



been here for 4000 years. A skeleton was discovered in one of them in the 1920s – and the site has been used for public executions up to Saxon times and, probably, beyond. The way drops 50m and becomes what must have once been a cattle drove but is now a paved track behind rows of houses. At this point it is lined by 200 year-old beech trees which afforded vantage points to a couple of mistle thrushes filling the air with their delightful song. The Way soon emerges onto

farmland where the hedges, sombre in this light and at this time of year, gave a vivid display of lichens. Lichens are described as lower plant forms and are, in fact, symbiotic associations of algae and fungus and are commonly found as epiphytes on temperate woodland species (as well as in lots of other places).



**Foliose lichen (probably *Lobaria* spp.)**



**Crustose lichen (*Graphis* spp.?)**

The Way skirts Maiden Bower, a pre-Iron Age fortification said to be named after an eponymous young lady who showed that an army could be contained in an ox hide by cutting it into the thinnest of strips to encircle the men. It now comprises a circular bank some 3 m tall enclosing an area of 4 ha. (Ideal ground for noisy young motorcyclists). The path now descends to (and passes under) one of the remnants of Beeching’s myopia – the defunct Dunstable to Leighton Buzzard rail track. And enters the agricultural hamlet of Sewell a delightful Bedfordshire backwater, little changed, it would seem, for centuries. The hamlet is catalogued in the Domesday Survey of 1086 and Sewell manor was built in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Centuries.



**Maiden Bower bank**



**Sewell farm cottage (16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> Century)**



**Horse-drawn mower**

Many reminders of bygone ages remain – a well kept farm cottage, a horse-drawn mower so long at rest that an ash tree has grown through it, were just two of them. In the road bank one of the first harbingers of spring – the snowdrop – had decided to shed its winter torpor and show a welcome brave face. Another hardy winter flowering plant, spurge laurel (*Daphne laureola*) with its scented green flowers is also in evidence at this time of the year. The Way leaves Sewell by the manor house and skirts farmland, previously in need of drainage judging by the ditches lined with small reed (*Calamagrostis* spp.) and willow-fringed spring sites. And then it crosses the A5 at Chalkhill to continue along ancient field edges to Bidwell farm where the route develops an unloved complexion.



**Snowdrops in Sewell**



**Spurge laurel on Chalkhill embankment**



**Small reed (*Calamagrostis* spp.)**

Here the Way is ploughed out and loses its allure as boots accumulate kilos of sticky mud and reaching Thorn road is a relief (that's how frustrating it was!).

From this point the homeward route skirted the NW edge of the sewage works and returned to Watling Street (A5) and then back to the Downs. The sewage works outflow into Ouzel Brook must have some attractive qualities as it was there that a fat roach swam contentedly, face to the current to see what sustenance came by.

