

BERGH APTON CONSERVATION TRUST – AGM, 22 September 2020, on Zoom
Chairman's Annual Report

What a difference a year makes. Covid-19 has caused us to cancel most of our social or collective activities this year. Our year certainly started well enough. After the last AGM, Professor Diana Bell of UEA gave us a widely acclaimed and dramatically illustrated talk on an important, if sombre, topic: her work on the alarming increase in wildlife diseases, especially of rabbits and hares. Her warnings about the lessons of Swine flu, SARS and MERS turned out to be horribly prescient as our lives were changed beyond our imaginings later in the year. We also had the first public viewing of our Silver Jubilee video, with Graeme Taplin of Drone Photography Ltd in attendance. Graeme has since produced an extended 'Directors cut' of the video that can be viewed from our website or at https://youtu.be/S9Z7Vi_yuOA. Things continued very well, with our perennially successful Fungus Foray, with Dr Tony Leech in his usual, tremendous form, and then the ever-popular Christmas party at Flint Cottage. Beyond that, there was a successful village litter-pick just before lockdown, and then a few admirable stalwarts led by Bob Kerry have managed some socially distanced work days on the reserve, not to mention several hedge survey sessions; sadly, many of us who have had to 'shield' could not take part.

That said, there has been one fantastically important development this year that relates to the very core of our existence – the imminent more than doubling in the size of our nature reserve, thanks to the far-sighted generosity of our neighbour and founding member Robert Waters. Robert offered to sell us 6 acres of land and donate a further 6 acres as a charitable donation, all adjacent to our Valley Marsh on the 'far' side of the River Chet. A fund-raising campaign during the year has been wholly successful, with generous grants from Bergh Apton Village Hall, Bergh Apton Parish Council, South Norfolk District Council and the Geoffrey Watling Charitable Trust. The land transfer has now been in the hands of solicitors inexplicably long but we anticipate the exchange of contracts very soon. This new acquisition is largely marsh, similar to Valley Marsh, with some wet woodland and scrub; we intend to name the area 'Welbeck Marsh' at the suggestion of Robert Waters. Many members will be aware that the value of a reserve for wildlife conservation increases much more than proportionately with its size, as 'edge-effects' and disturbance become less important, and the critical minimum areas for populations of particular species are reached. So, I cannot over-emphasize how important this third phase of our development is. The Trustees expect to have sufficient left in the coffers for the construction of at least one footbridge across the river for access to Welbeck Marsh. We will be redoubling our efforts to recruit more members who can embrace the varied challenges of managing the enlarged reserve.

The enhanced reserve is a keystone site for the other exciting development of the year - the Chet Valley B-Line, which I introduced to you last year. This is our local initiative to protect populations of bees and other pollinating insects that are declining at an alarming rate, in turn posing a significant threat to both conservation and agriculture. Sadly, our grand launch, scheduled for March, had to be postponed until next year, as were most of

our plans for a programme of citizen science and social engagement with land owners, schools, like-minded organizations and other stake-holders along the Chet Valley.

Nevertheless, we have continued to engage local people in planting trees, shrubs and wildflowers, or in modifying the management of their gardens and public spaces. With the help of graphic designer Kaarin Wall, we have produced three A1 interpretation panels, positioned strategically in Loddon, Bergh Apton and Poringland. Various locations along the valley, including Doctors' surgeries are now displaying the roundel signs with our logo to indicate their support for the project. We have lots more of these for other people who want to join in! I thank the other members of the management group, Matt Jones (Norfolk Wildlife Trust), Rodney Aldis, Andrew Milner and Bob Kerry for their unabated enthusiasm and work under difficult circumstance, in Matt's case even hampered by a period of furlough. You can expect to hear a lot more about the Chet Valley B-Line in the coming year and I urge you to get involved in any way that you can.

In conclusion I would like to pay tribute to two our retiring trustees. Stephanie Crome has not only been a valued Trustee for nearly 20 years but has served unstintingly and efficiently as Trust Secretary. We genuinely do not know how we will replace her. As many of you will know, Stephanie is retiring as a result of serious ill health. I am sure that you will join me in sending her our love and best wishes for the uncertain period ahead. Shirley Rimmer has also reached the end of her current 3-year term and does not seek re-election. Shirley has made a huge contribution as a trustee over the years, in a whole variety of ways, and we are very grateful to her for these lasting benefits for the Trust. Again, she will be missed.

The good news from lockdown was that many more people have discovered the reserve for a socially distanced walk, finding solace in nature. I am pleased to report that quite a few of them have come from further afield in South Norfolk, reflecting our growing role and influence. We look forward to the next year in the hope and expectation that, one way or another, by the spring the current nightmare will be more of a bad memory. We look forward to being able to report exciting progress with our joint main aspirations – tackling the management of our newly enlarged nature reserve and the B-Line. Not least, we will be planning a programme of events where we can meet for next summer.

Tony Davy