

BERGH APTON CONSERVATION TRUST – AGM, 26 September 2024

Chairman's Annual Report

This year is the 30th anniversary of the acquisition of Church Plantation and the founding of Bergh Apton Conservation Trust. It seems like only the other day we were celebrating our Silver Jubilee, but so much has happened since then, one way and another. I prefer to focus on the Trust more than doubling the size of the nature reserve and our bold, new management initiatives.

When I reported to you last year, we were still in the throes of having the over-aged Cricket-bat Willows felled and extracted from Wellbeck Marsh. This proved more difficult than anticipated, because it coincided with the beginning of what turned out to a long period of high rainfall. By the time the contractors finally left, we had sold 38 huge trunks to the English Willow Company to become cricket bats. This achieved our primary objective of kick-starting a restoration trajectory back to open marsh vegetation by removing the shade and evaporative water loss associated with the tree canopy. We now also have piles of dead wood sufficient to support fungi and invertebrates for decades to come, with obvious benefits for wildlife higher in the food chain. Unfortunately, the short-term legacy was a landscape reminiscent of the Battle of the Somme, notwithstanding the conscientious work of the contractors in recontouring the site: heavy machinery, peaty soil and incessant rain are not a helpful combination. Recovery is now eventually under way as the colonising sedge and grass is stabilising the substrate, and we are working on reinstating the main path.

This new path required bridging of a recontoured drainage channel. This has been achieved thanks to a much-appreciated grant from South Norfolk District Council, courtesy of John (Lord) Fuller, which allowed us to buy 25 recycled hardwood railway sleepers; happily, these have also been used to improve the muddy main access to Valley Marsh.

The other big management innovation last year was the introduction of grazing by Belted Galloway cattle wearing 'No-fence' collars, enabled by GPS and 4G technology. Last year's experiment had to be terminated earlier than hoped because the site became too wet for the welfare of even such hardy cattle. However, the indications were encouraging and when it finally stopped raining this summer, Will Mack kindly loaned us another five cows. Two of these have proved to be escape artists and have gone home in disgrace but the remaining three appear to be doing a good job as they continue to roam widely on Wellbeck Marsh. Light grazing is a more natural way of reducing the competitive potential of the dominant species and thus allowing a greater diversity of plants to thrive; the alternative, cutting and raking, is also scarcely viable for us on such a big area.

Conservation grazing has been a steep learning curve for us but we are now well-placed to pursue it, assuming the outcomes remain beneficial and Will is happy to loan the cattle. The Enterprise Holdings Foundation have made a further generous donation which is supporting this.

Rosie Winn continued her fine work promoting our activities to a wider audience on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) as Social Media officer, standing down only to prioritise her new responsibilities: we congratulate her on becoming a mum! We are very grateful to her and to Bridget Hemmant, who has stepped in to continue this excellent work.

Another development this year has been the Village Nature Photography competition, initiated by Christopher Meynell. This attracted many entries of a very high standard and culminated in a memorable exhibition in the Village Hall. We congratulate all concerned, especially our former trustee Lisa Flatman who was runner up. Many of these stunning photos have been assembled in a 2025 calendar, designed by member Amy Robertson, that will brighten any household for the next year, while showcasing both local wildlife and photographic talent. It is a snip at only £10 – and half the profits will come to support the Trust's work. Orders to c.m.meynell@gmail.com.

We continue to benefit from enthusiastic volunteers who enjoy working on the reserve. The young 'ENTs' of the Wheatfen Forest School, led by Rose Hoare, have become regular visitors to the reserve this year to enjoy nature in the open air. They are now providing a substantial and valuable contribution to our volunteer base. Recently we had an equally welcome return visit from Aviva, when five energetic volunteers helped us break the back of this year's raking on Valley Marsh; they also heaved into position the railway sleepers across the drainage ditch on Wellbeck Marsh. It would be good to see more members at our Saturday workdays.

Meetings, although not as frequent as erstwhile, are still regarded as important for the delivery of our mission and the social cohesion of the membership. The public fungus foray led by Dr Tony Leech (29 October 2023) was, as ever, acknowledged as a highlight of our year. Some 50 members, guests and visitors turned out and the recent rain had ensured that it was a bumper year for fungi. There was similarly pleasing attendance at the pond dipping (1 June 2024), with more than 20 youngsters and accompanying adults brandishing nets and jars to scour our ponds, dykes and river for aquatic life. As a bonus, children were very excited to see grass snakes and slow worms, some for the first time. Our thanks go to Shirley Rimmer, Jacquie Ratcliffe, Lorie Lain-Rogers and all our dedicated helpers.

For the second year our traditional Christmas party was hosted to much acclaim by Lorie Lain-Rogers at Low Common Barn, Hellington (16 December 2023). The summer-solstice BBQ (22 June 2024) in the garden at Flint Cottage was blessed with a rare warm summer evening. Some 15 members of BACT and BALHG cooked, eat and talked late into the night.

The Chet Valley B-Line has had a low-key year while we seek renewed funding, but we continued to engage with local communities, offering advice and practical support to landowners and other stakeholders.

At the last AGM, Dennis Moye and Rodney Aldis were re-elected to serve as Trustees. At their first meeting of the year, the Trustees in turn elected Tony Davy, Rodney Aldis, Bob Kerry and Julia Franklin as chairman, secretary, treasurer and membership treasurer, respectively. The Trustees were pleased to hold a reception on 18 August 2024 in honour of Dennis Moye, who has given notice of his resignation as a Trustee after many years of distinguished service.

Tony Davy