

BERGH APTON CONSERVATION TRUST – AGM, 27 September 2023

Chairman's Annual Report

The major theme of our activities this year has been developing the management of Wellbeck Marsh, as we aim to establish more natural vegetation and hydrology. There are two strands to this: removal of 33 huge Cricket-bat Willows from the southern part and the introduction of conservation grazing to the northern part.

The willows had been planted as a crop and will fulfil their destiny of becoming cricket bats, now we have sold them to the English Willow Company. Felling and extraction are still in progress; we thank our neighbours Martin Holl and Jamie Key for their cooperation with access and timber storage. The willows will be replaced with native species to form more diverse communities, largely we expect by natural colonisation. Their removal is generating large quantities of waste timber and branches, which we have decided to leave in piles along the southern boundary to decompose naturally. Rotting logs provide habitat for fungi, reptiles and invertebrates, notably beetle larvae, and these of course support wildlife higher in the food chain.

The marsh vegetation will require periodic biomass removal to allow a greater diversity of less competitive species to become established. Notwithstanding the brilliant help we had last year with cutting and raking, we recognise that this is not a practicable long-term solution for us. Consequently, we have embarked upon an exciting experiment: we have agreed with Will Mack of Surlingham for five of his Belted Galloway cows to graze the marsh for a limited period each year. In pursuit of this we have bought 'No-fence' collars, which employ GPS and a 4G phone signal to confine the cows to an area designated on a website. The cost was defrayed by an unexpected grant of £2,500 from the Enterprise Holdings Foundation; our grateful thanks go to Ed Stocker of Norfolk County Council and Chris Whatling, Business Development Manager of Enterprise Holdings. The arrival of the cows for the first trial is imminent.

In February we received the excellent news that Wellbeck Marsh has been designated part of our County Wildlife Site (no. 2222, previously comprising Church Plantation and Valley Marsh) after survey by Samantha Browne of NWT the previous year. She gave it 'improving' status and the management recently deployed is designed to facilitate continuing improvement.

Rosie Winn opened new opportunities when she became our Social Media officer in 2022; BACT joined [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) (X). Overall, Facebook has proved to be the best platform for our work as we can easily connect with local organisations to promote events and work on the reserve, whether local environmental groups and schools, or members of the public enquiring about visiting. It did not take long for the word to spread to our members and a variety of interesting and informative content for posting began to arrive, along with well-shot photography. The popular posts are educational, e.g. content about poppies as pollinators, or the 'walkthrough' film of the marsh. The majority of our members have accounts. A recent post about the Wildlife Activities Afternoon reached 2,896 of people resulting in an exciting afternoon at the Jubilee Hall in Loddon (see below). Twitter, despite our low number of followers, enabled an invitation by film-maker 'Greg's Wildlife' to interview and film some of our members on the marsh during the summer (the video is online: <https://youtu.be/qcZ35LINz1Y>). Instagram has been a useful platform although more appropriate for reaching organisations further afield.

In another excellent development, Julia Franklin has taken on the role of Membership Secretary, relieving Bob Kerry to concentrate on being Treasurer. As our archive of photos and documents is increasingly online, Bob has relinquished responsibility for our physical archive and has deposited it with Bergh Apton Local History Group (BALHG).

There were several important visitations this year. We welcomed two groups of volunteers from Lotus Cars in February to help with management of invading sycamore on Church Plantation. On Sunday 9 July we hosted a meeting of the Norfolk & Norwich Naturalists' Society, to explain the Chet Valley B-Line and showcase our nature reserve. A group of the recently formed Waveney Volunteers for Nature came in August to share our experience of practical conservation in the community. We manned exhibits for the B-Line and BACT, at the Wildlife Activities Afternoon organised by South Yare Wildlife Group in the Jubilee Hall and adjacent sports field on 21 August 2022. We were delighted to receive a visit from the young 'Ents' of the Wheatfen Forest School. They greatly appreciated an introduction and tour of the reserve from Bob Kerry and carried out some conservation work to help us. We look forward to their return to become more involved, preferably under cooler conditions.

The resumption of our own meetings continued. The legendary public fungus foray led by Dr Tony Leech on 23 October 2022 attracted 32 members and visitors, despite torrential rain and a couple of crashes of thunder. After a lapse of two years our much-loved Christmas party was resurrected; the event, hosted by Lorie Lain-Rogers at Low Common Barn, Hellington on 10 December 2022 was greatly appreciated. Thirteen members enjoyed congenial company at the summer-solstice BBQ on a balmy evening on 24 June. The revival of our wildflower walk and survey of the reserve on 23 July was enjoyable and productive, with many flowers recorded by a small but enthusiastic group. We would love to see more members at our Saturday work days!

The Chet Valley B-Line has continued to engage with local communities, offering advice and practical support to landowners and other stakeholders. Two pollinator-friendly hedges were planted under its auspices: one at the Bergh Apton Village Hall and the other at Albion House retirement housing complex in Poringland. Enthusiastic pupils from Alington and Bergh Apton School came and planted hedging they had sourced themselves at the Chet Valley vineyard. The chairman sought to spread the word of our work in talks to two local groups, the Chet Valley PROBUS and the Icenic Microscopy Group. So many of you registered your gardens/land for the map on the Buglife website that now we have most of the 'red spots' for Norfolk! We were delighted to welcome Hugh Porter to the management group.

At the last AGM, Lorie Lain-Rogers and Lisa Flatman retired as Trustees and we thank them for their long and devoted service to the Trust. Julia Franklin and Steve Whitby were elected, and Bob Kerry was re-elected, for three-year terms as Trustee.

Tony Davy