

BERGH APTON CONSERVATION TRUST – AGM, 28 September 2022

Chairman's Annual Report

The important development in my last report was our third major land acquisition, which we have named Welbeck Marsh. Our main focus this year has been building on this major opportunity. The first issue was access: as this 12-acre extension to our nature reserve is on the far side of the river from the existing area, we needed at least one bridge. After protracted frustrations in trying to find a suitable contractor, we decided to build two of our own, in order to create a circular walk. This team effort proved a great success. Steve Whitby designed the structure, procured the materials and prefabricated the main elements. The bridges were installed and constructed over two workdays in March and April 2022 by an army of volunteers, notably six on a 'volunteering' day from Aviva, who heroically dragged unbelievably heavy timbers across the marsh. We are very grateful to Stuart Dann and his team. Finally, a generous grant from Bergh Apton Parish Council defrayed the considerable cost of the materials. The new bridges, constructed entirely from rustic green oak timber have now weathered-in nicely.

After the dark shadow of Covid restrictions, it was a delight to have combined a celebration on 10 September 2022 that marked three things. Sixty members and guests gathered on Valley Marsh, by the Chet Bridge on a sunny afternoon for the formal opening of Welbeck Marsh. The Chairman pointed out that this extension is important because the conservation value of a reserve increases disproportionately with size. Because the area increases as the square of circumference, the edge-effect disturbances are reduced. Furthermore, the broader the base of plant producers, the greater are the other levels of the ecological pyramid that can be supported, up to apex predators. Lorie Lain-Rogers, founding Trustee and the first Chairman, reflected on our origins and historical development, before cutting the ribbon. We were very pleased to welcome representatives of our main benefactors, in particular John Fuller (Leader of South Norfolk District Council), David Skedge (Chairman of Bergh Apton Parish Council) and several members of the Bergh Apton Village Hall Committee.

It was also the poignant occasion for unveiling a bench seat in memory of our erstwhile Trustee, Honorary Secretary and friend, Stephanie Crome. We thank Richard, Will and Ben Crome for donating this beautiful piece of local craftsmanship in oak. It now resides for the peaceful rest and contemplation for members and visitors overlooking the new pond, one of Stephanie's favourite spots.

Finally, we celebrated the achievements of our award-Winning B-Line project, which is coming to the end of its current funding this year. These were briefly reviewed by the Chairman and Matt Jones, the Living Landscape Officer of the Norfolk Wildlife Trust. Then there was along overdue opportunity to socialise and network, whilst enjoying the refreshments. We are grateful to John and Bridget Hemmant of the Chet Valley Vineyard for donating so many bottles of their delicious, locally produced Skylark sparkling wine. Tasty snacks and cakes were kindly provided by many members and friends.

The next priority after establishing access to Welbeck marsh was to start active management this autumn. We knew that an extra 12 acres were going to be a challenge for our small regular workforce. In conformity with what has been so successful at valley marsh, we wanted to reduce

standing biomass of dominants to diversify the vegetation. Happily, we have had a lot of help. Paul Hemmant kindly brought a big tractor and topper to cut the marsh north of the main dyke (some 4 acres). Frankly, we could not have done it ourselves. Then last week we had two more brilliant Aviva volunteer teams to rake-up the cuttings, with each group of nine raking for a whole day. We are immensely grateful to Jonathan and Erika and their respective teams. In the longer run we aspire to grazing this area with cattle for a few weeks each year - ecologically better and much less effort. However, among other things, we will need a lot of expensive fencing before this could be a reality. The whole reserve was surveyed by Samantha Browne of NWT in June, with a view extending the area that has County Wildlife Site status (and reaffirming the existing one). We should hear the result later in the year.

As mentioned previously, the Chet Valley B-Line has continued to engage with local communities, offering advice and practical support to landowners and other stakeholders in providing pollinator friendly habitats along the 17 km of the river. This year we have reached out in particular to local schools and planted 180 m of new hedge in Bergh Apton, on our February workday. I thank our many supporters and the members of our management committee for another year of very productive work - in particular Andrew Milner, who is retiring after three years of being our stalwart secretary. We will be seeking future funding for our mission to save pollinators.

The trust is slowly returning to some semblance of its pre-Covid activities. The highlight was a return of the excellent fungus foray led by Dr Tony Leech on 25 October 2021, which was well attended and much enjoyed as ever. In contrast, our pond-dipping afternoon on 21 May 2022 was hardly attended at all, despite much preparation by Shirley Rimmer (among others) and decent weather. After a long hot summer, even the weather failed us for the Bat walk led by Christine and Ben Hipperson-Jervis of *Bench Ecology* on 8 September 2022; however, 17 people enjoyed an engaging talk in the Church and some intrepid bats were detected. Rodney and I manned exhibits for the B-Line and BACT, respectively, at the Wildlife Activities Afternoon organised by South Yare Wildlife Group in the Jubilee Hall and adjacent sports field on 21 August 2022.

We have been striving to improve our communications with the membership and other interested parties. The Chairman has been sending out monthly email newsletters since November 2021, but the real revolution was our belated entry into the world of social media this summer. Thanks to Rosie Winn you can now follow our activities on an almost daily basis on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).

At the last AGM, Jacquie Ratcliffe retired as a trustee and we record our great gratitude for her long service; Michael Moore was elected and Annette Ford and Tony Davy were re-elected as Trustees. At the first Trustees' meeting of the year, Tony Davy, Rodney Aldis and Bob Kerry were re-elected Chairman Secretary and Treasurer, respectively.

Tony Davy