



Middle Marches Community Land Trust: A Review of 2020

Introduction

It has been a productive first year for the Land Trust. We have made significant progress in a short time, and it gives us great confidence and positivity that there is support for and a place for our organisation. As we form together we have also learnt lots about how we want to proceed and also how we can do things better and be more effective. This review summarises this and sets the scene for our first General Meeting in January.

The background to the establishment of the Trust

There has long been the vision for a connective project between the Stiperstones and the Long Mynd. Five years ago Natural England (NE) and the National Trust (NT) produced a Scoping Study for a 'Stepping Stones Project' to make this a reality. The project envisioned incrementally creating landscape Stepping Stones made up of strategic nodes and corridors for wildlife.

One of the original objectives was to do this in perpetuity, which in effect means acquiring ownership of key areas of land and would require the foundation of a new independent Trust to hold this asset. In 2016 a report was commissioned on 'The creation of a new landowning organisation able to hold land in perpetuity' at the request of NE and NT. Much of the feasibility work was completed by some of the current Middle Marches Community Land Trust (MMCLT) founding Board.

It is just two years since six of us first got together to form an interim Board to make this a reality and only eighteen months since our inaugural public meeting. A lot has happened in that time.

After much research the organisation was launched as a Community Benefit Society, owned and controlled by a group of local shareholders. There are now 75 shareholders, mostly from the local area, who help shape and steer what MMCLT does.

What we were set up to do

The Middle Marches Community Land Trust (MMCLT) was launched in April 2019, to provide the vehicle for local ownership of land, but also to fulfil a wider agenda. We want to act as a catalyst that helps unlock new ideas and to find practical solutions that can sustain our landscape, its wildlife and our communities into the future. We also see our role as helping develop a dialogue and debate to explore ways to make the transition we need happen, part of this is by developing an information hub. MMCLT is certainly not here to duplicate or repeat the work of others, but to add capacity and value to the existing set of organisations, communities and individuals working across the area.

The Middle Marches is centred on the Shropshire Hills, but extending into Wales and along its borders. Within this area we would like to create a better connected landscape; for wildlife, our communities, for food and farming. In practice this means creating and linking areas of heathland, flower-rich grasslands and broadleaved woodland via a network of wildlife-rich hedgerows, road verges, hillsides and wetlands. This can provide a haven for wildlife, better connectivity between habitats, but also to promote regenerative agriculture and stimulate local food and wood production and simple direct supply chains.

What we have achieved this year

Over the last year we have made a significant start, most particularly by acquiring three pieces of land that can deliver our mission. This seems to prove that there is real tangible and practical support from our community.

Cudwell Meadow

Working with the Stretton Wetlands Interest group on an appeal to buy a three-acre field on the edge of Church Stretton. It hosts 141 plant species, and 45 different types of insects, and provides bio-diverse habitat, which is all the more precious when 90% of UK wetlands have been lost in the past 100 years .

The appeal raised £25,000 in under four months and virtually all the donations were given by local people.



Nind

We are obtaining a lease on a 10 acre site just north of Bishops Castle, which has not been intensively managed for over 20 years. Part of the ground will be fenced off to allow for brief periods of mob-grazing to break up the turf and allow more plants to germinate. The rest will be rewilded.

MMCLT has a five-year renewable agreement with the Linley Estate. Working with the farmer and estate the changes in biodiversity and soil fertility will be carefully monitored. It is hoped that we can assess how grazing and meadow management mesh together. MMCLT hopes that this model of land management will prove to be of interest to other farmers.





Norbury Hill

Norbury Hill is a real Stepping Stone, sitting between the Stiperstones and Long Mind, it is an important part of the Shropshire Hills landscape.

Bidding to buy half of the 94 acres up on Norbury Hill was successful. The other half of the land will be owned by one of our shareholder members. Our offer has been accepted and the purchase is moving onto completion in early 2021. Securing it means that Norbury Hill will become the largest 'Stepping Stone' for nature between the Long Mynd and Stiperstones.

Plans for its conservation are being drawn up, and we hope to enable Curlew to breed over the coming years. It is also a stronghold for the Small pearl bordered fritillary butterfly and many unusual wetland plants.

We intend to do a full ecological survey in 2021 and hope to work with our partner and also a local farmer on a comprehensive management plan.

Marches Grow Local (MGL).

Over the last year MMCLT has supported an active steering group who have been exploring ways to develop a new food landscape, linking producers with consumers more directly, establishing short supply chains, help existing growers and encourage new entrants. The MGL steering group started by undertaking a lot of research and undertaking and evaluating an extensive consultation exercise (with over 300 responses), we want to make sure that the project works to support and add value to local businesses, not in competition or to duplicate other work and especially to improve access to local, healthy and properly produced food for consumers.

First projects are being developed, and this includes a pilot food hub around Bishops Castle. More news to follow.....

Working with our partners

Core to our mission is to work alongside our partners and add value to their work rather than to just create more complexity and confusion.

We maintain contact with the Stepping Stones Partnership, especially the National Trust and Natural England, the AONB Partnership, Community Wildlife Groups and a number of landowners, farmers and local estates.

We are developing a live example of partnership working with the Linley Estate. We have already agreed the lease of land at Nind, mentioned above, and we hope to work with the gardener at the Estate's organic vegetable garden to hold short courses and training events for those interested in improving their organic vegetable growing skills. We have already held one short event at the farm

which is part of the Estate. Our hope is to deepen our partnership with the Estate and learn from other aspects of their management of the land.

One interesting development has been a possible collaboration with the Arvon Foundation at the Hurst near Clun to establish a new centre, perhaps a home for MMCLT, but with the shared aim of finding ways to communicate complex issues around our ecological and climate crisis effectively and inclusively.

Acting as a Hub

At a time of great change in the countryside and the way it will be supported in the future we want to help disseminate information, increase understanding, add to the debate and generate solutions. Our hub helps to do this by running events, undertaking training and stimulating discussion.

Coronavirus 19 has changed so much this year, but we held a number of successful demonstration events in 2019 but have had to suspend these in 2020 after the lockdowns started. We have since shifted our emphasis to on line webinars and videos. These have a great function but we do really miss the face to face interaction.

Part of our work is building a community around our common purpose, and this has begun through the green pages that promotes local skills and businesses, trades and products. It also is increasingly working to highlight and support businesses that provide the specialist support, skills and innovation we will need to support our future landscape.

What we have learnt this year

Our organisation is very new and still developing, but we are mostly pleased with our evolution. We see the potential to do so much more and are confident about our ability to make a real local impact, but we also want to learn from our experience so far.

- **There are many local people who are interested and keen to help buy, support, maintain and use land in a sustainable way.** We need to enlist support from local people to help move our projects forward.
- **We can be confident that there is local support for our purposes.** There is proven support already but we need to also find out more about what local people would like us to do.
- **We have met local farmers and landowners who are sympathetic to our objectives.** We need to find out what we can do to involve them further in our work and talk to their fellow landholders.
- **We are beginning to develop good relationships with important local stakeholders.** We must develop our contacts and existing relationships with local and regional stakeholders through a stakeholder analysis.

- **Our events have been well supported and have generated understanding of our objectives.** We need to revive and expand our networking activities and training.
- **We have learnt that our communications miss important groups of potential stakeholders.** We need to devise an inclusive communications strategy involving all forms of print and virtual communication, especially to reach our most important audiences.
- **Our decision making has appeared inconsistent to some members.** We need to improve our messaging on key decisions to our members.

Our finances

Thus far, the work of the Trust and the success of its appeals, has relied upon our supporters buying shares or making donations. Up until the end of November 2020, our gross income was £59,470.45. It has been run almost entirely on a voluntary basis, with total expenditure over a 17 month period of £3,873.79. The largest amount has been spent on the efficient administration of the appeals, running the website, producing a monthly newsletter, and the Gift Aid claim. What these figures do not take account of, of course, is the considerable benefit the Trust has received from the huge amount of freely given volunteer time, and valuable pro-bono help and advice.

Looking forward - what we want to do in 2021

Now we have established the organisation and created some initial energy and momentum, MMCLT wants to underpin this during 2021. Since the establishment of MMCLT it has been run by an interim steering group. As the responsibilities increase we need to create solid foundations for the future.

General Meeting and Establishing a new Board

The Trust's General Meeting, at which the first formal Board is to be elected, will be held via Zoom on Thursday the 21st of January, at 7pm.

We encourage all members to consider applying. To do so, submit a short statement (and if possible a photo of yourself), outlining the relevant skills and experience that you will bring to the role. Please submit your application to: info@middlemarchescommunitylandtrust.org.uk. The code of conduct, and what being a Board member involves, can be found on the website.

The rules of the Trust requires its members to 'use their reasonable endeavours to ensure that the successful candidates have the requisite skills and experience as may be requested by the Board'. To this end, we are particularly keen to recruit people with experience of amongst other things;

- Dealing with the Rural Payments Agency
- Preparation of land conservation management plans
- Bookkeeping and accountancy

- Fundraising and communications
- Data management and data protection
- Working with and managing volunteers

It would also be very encouraging to get more women involved, as well as people below retirement age.

The closing date for applications will be Friday the 8th of January, and the list of successful candidates will be on the website by Friday the 15th of January.

How the recruitment process works;

Stage one; anyone can apply. After the closing date, the interim board goes through all applications and decides who to put forward.

Stage two; details of all the 'approved' candidates go out to our members along with the other papers.

Stage three: election on the night. If there are 7 or less names, then no voting is needed. If more we elect by a show of hands.

Please note, only shareholder members have a vote at the AGM.

Building Our Membership

In 2021 the Trust will be carrying out a recruitment drive to attract new members, and to ask our many donors to also become member Shareholders, and will be promoting tax-efficient ways of giving money to the Trust.

Outreach - Events, Conference, Training Courses

We really want to reestablish our outreach programmes as soon as we can, and it's hoped that farm walks and other visits can be restarted. It may be that we have to continue to use our virtual hub as a means to do this, but we hope to have real face to face again experiences soon.

At a time of great change in our landscape and its economy we want to run a programme next year to mirror this. Part of this is to host a conference in 2021, we have planned to do this as a face to face event, but this is obviously dependent on what happens with Covid. We also want to start to run some of our own training projects and restart events and networking.

Site management

Now we have been successful in obtaining our first sites, we need to carefully steward and manage them. Over the next year we will take time to ensure we understand the land properly, survey it and then produce management plans. We will also begin to shape bids for funding. We would really like to start to get community involvement in our sites, as our eyes and ears and also to do practical and monitoring projects.

Food Hub

In 2021, following on from the feasibility work completed by Marches Grow Local, there is an outline plan to create a pilot food hub around Bishops Castle. This will be especially by working with local growers, existing businesses and landowners on exploring ways to produce short supply chains for a range of produce perhaps using the REKO model and the Open Food Network. REKO stands

for 'Fair Consumption' and is a trade model originally created in Finland.

Please contact us and get involved

If you would like more information about any of our activities, becoming a shareholder or supporter, or to ask about standing for election to the Board, please email us at info@middlemarchescommunitylandtrust.org.uk or check out our website.

Thank you

It has been a solid start to our Land Trust in 2020, but it has been alongside a strange and stressful year, leaving much uncertainty around what will follow next year for our landscape, communities, growers and farmers.

In the midst of all this we thank you hugely for all of your support, and hope we can continue to make positive progress in 2021. In the meantime we wish you all a peaceful Christmas and happy new year.

The MMCLT Founders: Oliver Goode, Rob Rowe, Richard Keymer, Jonathan Brown, Tim Selman, Lizzie Hulton-Harrop

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