

Middle Marches Community Land Trust's Autumn Newsletter

View from The (Vice) Chair

Rosie Wood

Our Chairman Richard Keymer is taking a short break so this time it's a view from the Vice Chair instead, and I find there's a lot to feel positive about as we enter autumn this year.

Within MMCLT our project work is going from strength to strength, with confirmation of a grant from the *Stepping Stones* project to progress work on sites and associated development. We're right in the middle of signing-off which project gets what and when so I can't say too much but as each element gets going, we will update you. There will be plenty of opportunities for involvement too – if you can't wait for specifics but just want to find a way to get involved please drop us a line at info@middlemarchescommunitylandtrust.org.uk.

We also have a new colleague, Louise Robbins, who is our Treasurer (do read Louise's piece later in the Newsletter). Louise couldn't have timed her arrival better – aside from the *Stepping Stones* grant, we're also applying for other grants available to landowners to improve biodiversity, so we hope to keep Louise pretty busy!

This year's AGM is coming up – please save the date, Saturday 27th November, 9-30 for coffee, we start at 10-00am and finish at 1-00pm. It will be in person for the first time too and we have a lot of good progress to share with you all. Further details to follow.

Outside of MMCLT, an increasing number of landowners and estates are taking a serious interest in regenerative agriculture and rebuilding nature while continuing to produce good food. These two objectives go hand-in-hand as the bigger projects elsewhere in the UK have demonstrated. Such landowners include those in our patch, and elsewhere in Shropshire, Herefordshire, and Powys – a couple of huge estates among their number. These landowners aren't getting involved because it's fashionable: they're getting involved because it makes very good business sense. They aren't daft people.

Whenever Defra release final details of their Environmental Land Management scheme (ELMs) it won't be a mechanism for propping up business as usual: it will herald change. Successful businesses aren't the biggest or the richest – we've all seen big names go bust in recent years. Successful businesses are those which adapt most quickly and effectively to new conditions – those are the 'fittest' according to Darwin. Regenerative, restorative agriculture, feeding people well, while rebuilding biodiversity to address climate change is where the clever money is and where the clever money is going.

AONB Team Visit Norbury Hill

Richard Small

On 23rd July four members of MMCLT's Board welcomed six officers of the Shropshire Hills AONB team for a visit to Norbury Hill. They were joined by two neighbouring landowners, including Will Jones, whose cattle graze Norbury Hill, Charlie Bell (NT's *Stepping Stones* officer), Caroline Uff (ecologist who has surveyed Norbury Hill over the summer) and Lizzie Hulton-Harrop, who having done so much to help MMCLT acquire the land, was making her first visit since the purchase.

The visit by the AONB team was an opportunity to outline MMCLT's vision for the land, albeit it in general terms until the results of the ecological surveys have been assimilated. The surveys have included the adjoining parts of Norbury Hill belonging to the neighbouring landowners and, although

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there may be minor differences, it is hoped that management of these different areas will be complementary.



1. AONB & MMCLT teams on Norbury Hill

MMCLT representatives also explained how the site would be managed in the short-term and the sources of funding that had been pursued, including farming support payments and an application for *Countryside Stewardship*. MMCLT may also be able to apply for funding from the *Farming in Protected Landscapes* (FiPL) award to the AONB, and the opportunity was taken to explore what might be possible with the newly appointed FiPL project officer, Alison Jones. However, any submission to FiPL may have to await a decision on the *Countryside Stewardship* application.

Although many of the members of the AONB team had visited Norbury Hill on previous occasions, the visit re-emphasised the stunning landscape visible from the top and the opportunities for quiet recreation. MMCLT's acquisition, through the generosity of its members and supporters, has so much to offer in delivering the aims of the AONB.

MMCLT's Business Plan

Rosie Wood

Our first Business Plan is now published and is on the website at <https://bit.ly/3zXHjBU>. It sets out our plans and priorities for the next few years, and gives us a framework within which we set out what we want to achieve and how we will direct our resources. It covers this financial year (2021 – 2022) and three years to 2023-2024. It isn't set in stone – when new opportunities arise, we will take a look even if they are not in the plan.

Our objectives will not change and nor will our vision, the Business Plan just gives us the chance to share with you what we're doing to achieve those objectives on your behalf. We'd love to hear your views, especially on our current plans for Years Two and Three.

info@middlemarchescommunitylandtrust.org.uk

Norbury Hill activities

Rob Rowe

A warm day at the beginning of July saw a group of *National Trust Stepping Stones* volunteers come out onto Norbury Hill to help clear bracken by hand. We used a variety of hand tools varying from sticks to slashers.

The area we worked on was chosen because, although the bracken was fairly dense there was still some heathy grassland underneath, in places with plants such as *Wavy hair grass*, *Heath bedstraw* and *Tormentil* and also some active anthills. In many other parts the bracken is so dense there is

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nothing growing underneath. We hope to tackle some of these areas by machine in the future. Hard work and many thanks to those who helped. At present we are still working on the hill's Management Plan, so during August I took 3 walks over Norbury hill to show interested members the site and to explain some of the natural history past management and possible hopes and plans. We were fortunate to have fine weather on each walk. As so often happens with these meetings the networking is really important, a variety of good connections were made between the group.

I also lead a local walking group over the hill and they were persuaded to do a bit of bracken bashing along the way! One of the items to come up was about the formation of a volunteer working group for the hill. In the future this could include bracken clearance, rush cutting and tree planting etc. I am also working on a tree/hedge planting project in conjunction with CPRE [Campaign for Protection of Rural England]

Volunteering on Norbury Hill Looking forward to next year I am hoping to build up a group to do management work on Norbury Hill mentioned above (mainly bracken and rush cutting to benefit butterflies, etc). If you are interested please contact me direct and I will put you on a list of contacts. Rob's contact e-mail for any of the above is: rob@robrowe.co.uk



3. Bracken bashing

2. Oliver hitting a six!



5. Robocut at work on Norbury Hill



4Sshh! Wildlife entomologists at work on Norbury

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MMCLT Annual General Meeting

Rosie Wood

Save the date!

This year's Annual General Meeting will be held in person on **Saturday 27th November** – coffee from 9-30am, and the business starts at 10-00am and runs through until 1pm.

As it's the AGM, it is a Shareholder (member) only event – if you're not yet a Shareholder but would like to hear more about our work, our plans, and have a vote in how MMCLT is run, then you still have time to sign up. Just click on <https://middlemarchescommunitylandtrust.org.uk/get-involved/buy-a-share/> and follow the instructions to become a Shareholder. You will then have a vote for as long as you are a Shareholder and will have a say in how the organisation does business.

We're currently costing venues, ones which are easy to access even if the weather or road conditions aren't great, where there is ample parking and good facilities. Full details to follow.

If you've got any questions, please get in touch at info@middlemarchescommunitylandtrust.org.uk



MMCLT on the road

Rob Rowe

MMCLT were represented with display stands at Ludlow Green Fair on Sunday 11th July and at The Hay Meadow Festival at Craven Arms later in the month. It was a good opportunity to meet people and explain our purpose and also to connect with other stall holders.

The 'Newbie'

Louise Robbins

It all started when I had Tim back to do some more fencing for me and out of the blue he asked if I wanted to be a Treasurer. Since I am now retired, I thought it would be a good way to keep the brain cells firing and said yes. There then followed a very gentle interview over coffee at the Castle Hotel with Richard K, Jonathan (incumbent) and Rosie and it seemed that I had the gig (so to speak).

As Treasurer my aims are firstly to keep accurate financial records, keep an eye on spending, create budgets and report back to the board/relevant stakeholders. Secondly (since I'm a lover of spreadsheets, organisation, and attention to detail) to run with anything else that needs detailed attention. Finally, since I have no background in agriculture, fundraising or ecology to add a slightly different view to the mix.

So far so good, the brain cells have woken up and it's been very interesting getting to know the various people and groups involved in the MMCLT. I look forward to learning more.

Hedgerow Quiz

Janet Cobb

Have you done your hedgerow homework? Fancy yourself as a bit of a shrubby sensation? Take our quiz to put your knowledge to the test!

<https://cpre.typeform.com/hedge-quiz-ps>

We bought a field!

Sarah Jameson

Some of you will already know Sarah and many more of you will know her through her wonderful artwork. What you might not know is that Sarah is a member of MMCLT and is a volunteer with us too. MMCLT is a community of individuals as well as a Trust in its own right and several members are restoring nature in their own plots of land – Sarah is one such person. Here's a bit of her story so far.

“On 30th September 2018 we bid for and bought a field at auction. Not just any field, but the 11.4 acre field right next to our house, three miles from Clun, described by the auctioneers as a ‘blank canvas’. The field had been grazed by sheep for decades for most of the year. With no sheep of our own, we wanted to try and manage it differently.

Since 2018 we have planted nearly 1000 trees, created wetland, ponds and scrapes, begun to manage the main part of the field as a wildflower meadow (including the two ‘tumps’ with their anthills and associated flora) and we have plans to repair the ruined old field barn.

Much of this work has been done with grant help via the *Shropshire Hills AONB* and the *Shropshire Wildlife Trust* and with the help and advice of many local and knowledgeable people. A neighbouring farmer's sheep still definitely play their part in the field and come on in early autumn and again in the spring to help us keep the grassland managed.

As beginners to land management we have had a steep learning curve in 3 years with a lifetime of learning yet to come!”

To read more, and sign up for updates, visit Sarah's blog – the latest is here [Three Men Went to Mow](https://www.threemenwenttomow.co.uk) ([wixsite.com](https://www.threemenwenttomow.co.uk)) Sarah's website also has an ever growing plant list and plenty more to inspire you, including a gallery of wonderful pictures. <https://sarahnewinvention.wixsite.com/we-bought-a-field/new-gallery>.

Learn traditional hedgelaying – free!

Sarah Jameson



CPRE Shropshire is delighted to be offering free workshops this autumn as part of its *Hedgerow Heroes* project. The 2-day workshops are for adults and will be held on (1) Thursday 4 to Friday 5 November and (2) Saturday 13 to Sunday 14 November. All workshops are offered free of charge; booking is essential and numbers are limited. Participants must have a reasonable level of fitness and be willing to work outside in winter weather.

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Deadline for bookings for (1) and (2) is 22 October

The trainer is Richard Clarke from *Really Rural* (Bromyard, Herefordshire), an experienced hedgelayer and tutor. The venues for the workshops are TBC but will be in South Shropshire.

(More information about our plans to plant new hedges, our hedge talk and walks and other activities here: <https://www.cpreshropshire.org.uk/hedgerow-project>)

CPRE Shropshire is also co-running a one day hedge-laying workshop in conjunction with the AONB Shropshire Hills Young Rangers – for the under 18s to be held on 28 October (all bookings for this to Joe Penfold, Joe.Penfold@shropshire.gov.uk).

CPRE Shropshire, admin@cpreshropshire.org.uk / 01547 528546
www.cpreshropshire.org.uk/hedgerow-project

Talk in Bishop's Castle by 'Framing Nature' author Laurence Rose

In our last newsletter, we carried a review of the book 'Framing Nature' by Laurence Rose. We're delighted to say that Laurence is coming to Bishop's Castle to give a talk on his book on **Sunday 14th November** at the Poetry Pharmacy – it promises to be a lovely event, and booking is essential. Please see website for details on how to book <https://poetrypharmacy.co.uk/the-distillery/>

From Lawn to Wildflower Garden

Janet Cobb

"Anyone over fifty years old can remember a time when any long-distance drive in summer resulted in a windscreen so splattered with dead insects that it was necessary to stop occasionally to scrub them off. Driving country lanes at night in high summer would reveal a blizzard of moths in the headlights. Today, drivers in Western Europe and North America are freed from the chore of washing their windscreen". (Prof Dave Goulson).

We all love to see butterflies and bees in our gardens. Unfortunately a number of factors in recent decades have reduced the number and diversity of these insects. These include habitat loss, urbanisation, land use intensification and intensive use of fertilisers and pesticides. Of the 2430 British insect species assessed by Natural England, 55 have gone extinct and 286 (11%) are threatened (UK Parliament PostNoteNumber 619 March 2020).

Lawns may look like attractive green spaces to our eyes but from the viewpoint of a butterfly or bee they are a relative desert, even more so if they contain few flowering plants. But any gardener can convert all or just a modest part of a lawn to make it more insect friendly. With an estimated 24 million gardens in the UK this could have a significant impact for our beneficial insects. Beneficial insects include not only pollinators but insect predators like hoverflies and ladybirds which eat garden pests such as aphids.

The key change to make is to ensure soil fertility is reduced and the soil surface disturbed to allow wildflower seeds to get a foothold in direct contact with the soil.

Bare soil is the easiest surface to seed as wildflowers have the best chance of germinating there provided the soil has not recently been enriched with fertilisers. Such enriched soil should be left fallow for the year before seeding. All vegetation appearing will need to be cut regularly and all cuttings removed promptly to reduce fertility.

A lawn, not recently improved and given fertilisers, can be scarified or rotavated or even have the

surface turf removed altogether to give the necessary open areas for wildflowers to colonise. Take care that the seed mix you choose is suited to the soil conditions and local environment. Wildflowers suited for thin soil over chalk will differ from those that grow well in a damp low lying area. If there are existing vigorous grasses in place then include Yellow Rattle seeds in the mix you use to re-seed. This is an annual plant which is able to parasitize vigorous grasses. The following season it will weaken them and again help to give the less vigorous wild-flower species a foothold.

To plant a perennial wild-flower area it is best to seed your prepared area in September/October when rain is expected. Tread or roll the seeds in after scattering them to ensure good contact with the soil. If grasses and pernicious weeds continue to grow in the same area cut them short or better still uproot them and remove all cuttings so that a blanketing of grass thatch does not cover the wild-flower seeds. A nurse crop of annual wildflowers can be sown alongside the perennial seed mix to give a fast burst of colour the following season. This could include Cornflowers, Corn Poppy, Corn Marigold and Corn Cockle. The seeded area should be kept short until the following early spring. In traditional meadows this would have been done by grazing cattle over the winter. In the absence of a herd of cattle a gardener must do their own regular cutting and removal of vegetation.

From early spring the wildflower area is allowed to grow, flower and set seed. To make a more striking display of the newly wilded area you can choose to keep the areas adjacent to flower borders cut short, as well as a path through the longer vegetation so that you can get up close and personal with the new range of wildlife. The remainder should be cut around mid-July and all cuttings removed. In a farming system this would be used as hay for the animals. As the vegetation will be quite long an ordinary mower may not cope. A hedge trimmer or shears could be used over a small area. A larger area may need a scythe. The Scythe Association of Britain and Ireland (<http://scytheassociation.org>), often working with Wild-Life Trusts, run courses on scythe use or can put gardeners in touch with experienced local scythers. If motorised cutting machinery is used all cuttings must be removed. Keep the wild flower area short until the next spring.

Even a small area of lawn can be turned over to wildflowers to make a new area of interest and a home for useful insects. If more gardens had such areas then they could form the stepping stones in pathways for pollinators linking nearby plots. You would be supporting a greater diversity of beneficial insects. And you would be helping mitigate, at a local level, some of the key drivers of the loss of beneficial insects.

Summary of the first year of development of a wildflower area.

- Remove, pernicious weeds like docks or nettles. Remove all cuttings in season before sowing.
- Prepare the soil surface by late summer.
- Choose a suitable type and quantity of seeds. Emorsgate Seeds is a reputable supplier with many years of experience but other sources of seed do exist.
- In autumn sow your chosen seed mixture. Hand sowing can be done even over large areas pretty quickly.
- Cut down and remove any rank growth of competing weeds in autumn and up to the early part of following spring.
- Do not cut the main area again from March until after around mid-July and enjoy the resulting display. Once flowers have gone to seed, cut and remove all top growth after letting seed fall.

You will see a significant increase in plant and insect diversity in the first season after planting. This will also include birds. For example if Teazle heads are left to stand in the winter Goldfinches may well visit them to find seeds.

<http://www.marshwoodvale.com/gardening/2021/08/from-lawn-to-wildflower-garden/>

Grasslands

This organisation is a newly formed coalition of three charities who have come together to protect and restore the planet's grasslands, savannahs, plains, heaths, steppes and meadows. The coalition is made up of the Bumblebee Conservation Trust, Butterfly Conservation and Plantlife.

Grasslands has come together ahead of COP26 in Glasgow to issue a joint call for protection and restoration of the planet's grasslands, savannahs, plains, heaths, steppes and meadows.

Grasslands are among our planet's most fertile and diverse landscapes. But today they are under threat; in the last 100 years, the UK alone has lost 97% of its meadows and other species-rich grasslands. Crucially for the fight against climate change, grasslands currently store 30% of the earth's carbon - and expanded protection could of course see this role enhanced even further.

Together we are seeking international protections for grasslands in the COP communiques, in order to give the global community a fighting chance to mitigate the effects of climate change, increase biodiversity and ensure that these areas of natural beauty are preserved for future generations to enjoy.

We have just one simple request - that you sign up to support our growing coalition's call as a supporting organisation. Your endorsement of the following statement would be a huge boost, helping to show the international strength of feeling at this crucial moment.

"We're standing together to call for international protections for our planet's grasslands, savannas, plains, heaths, steppes and meadows to mitigate the impact of climate change and increase biodiversity. By committing to restoring, enhancing and protecting these habitats, at COP26 in Glasgow world leaders can make a vital intervention in the fight against climate change."

We really hope you are able to back our call by signing up to show your support.

<https://grasslandsplus.org.uk/>

Struggling to think of a present?

Louise Robbins

These days it's increasingly difficult to think of an interesting gift for a friend or relative so consider buying them membership of the Middle Marches Community Land Trust. The minimum membership is £10 of £1 shares, and this grants the recipient a stake in any land that the Trust acquires. Plus they will get a quarterly Newsletter and invitations to various events, together with the knowledge that they are investing in the future of the land and our wildlife.

If you are interested please email the Treasurer at louise.robbsins@btinternet.com