

Plantlife Case Studies – Restoring Shropshire’s Verges Project 2021

Managing grassland road verges: a best practice guide

Case Study: Establishment of main road verge meadows in and around Bishop’s Castle, Shropshire

A case study from: Restoring Shropshire’s Verges Project (RSVP)

Partners: Restoring Shropshire’s Verges Project (RSVP).

Costs: £10K Heritage Fund grant to Caring for Gods Acre (CfGA)

<https://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/> and hundreds of hours of volunteer time.



Twitter and Facebook @ShropsVerge

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RESTORING SHROPSHIRE’S VERGES (RSVP) PROJECT: main road verge restorations.

Restoring Shropshire's Verges Project (RSVP) is a partnership organisation built on an alliance of organisations across Shropshire and was established from the bottom up by local people to restore and create wildflower-rich meadows on Shropshire's verges.

The alliance was formed in 2018 and is run entirely by volunteers.

Caring for Gods Acre, the National Trust, the Stepping Stones Project, Plantlife, Shropshire Wildlife Trust and Shropshire Hills AONB have all collaborated to ensure success of the project.

Shropshire Council and Highways England have overall responsibility for verge management across Shropshire and RSVP is working with all partners and highways to plan how future verge management could increase biodiversity by creating habitats and connectivity, reduce carbon emissions, and enhance the beauty of our roadsides.

RSVP took proactive measures to be inclusive, remove barriers to access and reach new and diverse audiences through the delivery of this project and have used a combination of actual and virtual communications to reach as many people as possible.

One of our members and a volunteer champion of the project, has given face to face talks (Pre Covid-19), online support (during lockdowns) and practical hands-on support (once restrictions were removed) to a total of 28 groups.

This includes presentations to parish councils, WI groups, gardening groups, Shropshire Smallholders and various other groups, reaching an estimated total of 350+ people.

RSVP held a virtual launch meeting, produced a short film

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJpejshEqG4>

and are active on social media @ShropsVerge and are part of the larger Stepping Stones project which has established a large mailing list.

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/carding-mill-valley-and-the-long-mynd/features/stepping-stones-project>

We had a lively stall at Ludlow Green Festival <http://greenfestival.co.uk/> which attracted hundreds of visitors from all over the UK and we were a key organiser and stall holder at the Hay Meadow Festival summer 2021

<https://guide2.co.uk/shropshire/events/hay-meadow-festival/> which also attracted a wide audience of over 500 people including both locals and those from further afield including urban areas, and most recently RSVP have been part of Shropshire Love Nature Festival.

<https://www.shropshirewildlifetrust.org.uk/shropshire-love-nature>

At all these events we handed out literature on RSVP and invited interested people to join our fledgling national mailing list and encouraged the establishment of new RSVP projects.

We were included in a national webinar given by Plantlife in 2020, have had one case study published by Plantlife already and are about to submit several more case studies from the RSVP projects now established across Shropshire.

Existing case study:

https://plantlife.love-wildflowers.org.uk/uploads/documents/RVcasestudy_EdgtonShropshire.pdf

We have now been invited to participate in a national Plantlife online road verge event on Thurs 7th October 2021 at 6.30pm on Zoom.

Restoring Shropshire's Verges Project is currently running two distinct initiatives:

1. Trial sites of between 10 and 20 kilometres on wide verges running alongside roads predominantly around Bishop's Castle in South Shropshire.

These verges have been intentionally planted with Yellow Rattle and are now naturally regenerating with wild flowers plus some intentional planting back of wild flower species.

A late cut and removal of arisings by project volunteers is currently underway.

These are 'test' sites working with Shropshire Highways department to establish that a different management regime can achieve better outcomes in relation to biodiversity and climate change mitigation and at the same time make financial savings.

We have this summer also been able to engage with Highways England (HE) to explore the possibility of working in partnership to restore some of the major road systems through the County assisting HE meet their Key Performance Indicator (KPI) on biodiversity.

Importantly we have also been able to engage politically and positively with Shropshire Council portfolio holders for highways.

A secondary phase is intended to look at the possibility of transporting arisings to bio-digesters creating another positive outcome.

We believe this is a win/win situation for all parties in Shropshire.

RSVP Preparation on trial verges



Intentional seeding with green Hay and Yellow Rattle Seed



Results from test verge at Nind (Shropshire)



Results from test verge at Bishop's Castle



2. RSVP has established a series of 36 mini-RSVP projects across Shropshire managed by local volunteer groups.

Interest in establishing new projects is high so growth is predicted over the coming months.

Two local schools have also indicated interest in initiating a restorative project on school grounds (Clun and Winstanstow) and engaging children, young people and parents is one of the key performance indicators RSVP may adopt in the future.

All these initiatives are supported by RSVP board members with practical help, advice and encouragements such as:

- Writing of local verge plans sometimes with the intention of applying for grants / funds from local parish councils.
- Botanical assistance with verge surveys, data collection and photographic records
- Practical assistance with removal of invasive species (Himalayan Balsam) or the more aggressive species dominating many verges such as hog weed, nettles & brambles where necessary.
- Supply of verge signs and information leaflets
- Litter picking.
- Seeding of verges with yellow rattle to suppress grass growth and open sward to allow natural regeneration.
- Growing and intentional planting of wild flowers back into verges.
- Removal of arisings following cutting of verges by RSVP volunteer group.
- Agreement with Shropshire Highways department on late cuts
- Leafletting and engagement of local communities.
- Health and safety / risk assessment advice and support.
- Writing of local articles, radio interviews and use of social media
- Twitter and Facebook @ShropsVerge
- Stalls at local events
- Writing of case studies and photographic recording of projects.
- Evaluation survey

Many people have seen our demonstration verges; the evaluation survey received 105 responses of which 70 respondents had noticed a change in verge management in the area with 71 respondents reporting an increase in wildflowers. A further 88 respondents had seen articles, photos and social media posts about verges and 44 of those who responded to the survey have given contact details as they wish to be involved with RSVP going forward.

It has not been easy to engage volunteers during the lifetime of this project due to Covid-19. However, despite the situation, we have been able to organise some work parties and had RSVP board members plus many local volunteers attending to mow, rake and sow seed or plant plugs.

We received a great many cowslip seedlings from two volunteers, yellow rattle from others and have local volunteer groups growing and planting hundreds of plug plants for us in all the mini-RSVP sites.

Twelve of the Caring for God's Acre volunteers were involved in scything churchyard meadow grass and then spreading this as green hay onto local verges nearby.

Ours social media campaign continues to gather pace with 361 followers on Facebook and 342 followers on Twitter.

RSVP has set up as a constituted group which has 11 committee members, all of whom also act as Champions in their own neighbourhoods (constitution attached).

Examples of the work of these Champions includes;

Janet Cobb who gives talks, manages local verges with the help of the village verge volunteer group, supports new verge groups with information and assistance writing plans with other volunteers and lobbies the county council.

Rob Rowe who leads guided walks identifying wildflowers, native grasses and fungi and mows or rakes verges across the project area. Rob also approached many landowners to discuss verge management as well as doing extra surveying.

Peter Carty who mows verges (using a mower bought by the Stepping Stones project for RSVP) and who also mows a small meadow on a housing estate and donates the fee to RSVP as match funding.

Lorna Taylor who acts as secretary, posts for us on social media and represents RSVP at meetings such as the Stretton's Climate Care events.

Carole Booker who manages her local verges and posts for us on social media.

Meg Stratford who manages her local verge and lobbies the town council.

Charlie Bell who works for the Stepping Stones project (so is not a volunteer) has put a great deal of time towards RSVP, drafting our constitution, seeking a bank suitable for our bank account, setting up and promoting volunteer opportunities and generally raising our profile.

She is our joint chair and treasurer with Peter Carty.

Following Caring for Gods Acre evaluation survey an additional 44 people have now joined RSVP mailing list.

Three people attended Shropshire Councils protocols for roadside working and were able to disseminate the training and protocols to all of our volunteers and advise on what personal protective equipment to purchase and which verges are suitable, from a safety and risk management point of view, for working on with volunteers.

The RSVP project has been able to improve between 10 to 20 Kilometres of verges in the area (see attached map) using a variety of techniques.

Working in partnership with the National Trust Stepping Stones project meant that RSVP could capitalize on the purchase of machinery by the National Trust including a specialist mower (See photographs) which can cut, collect and also scarify.

This mower is not suitable for all verges so hand raking, scything and using additional mowers has taken place too.

Volunteers have collected yellow rattle seed, green hay from churchyards and the Marches Meadow Group <https://www.marchesmeadowgroup.com/> has been strewn and the included photographs show the effects of our work.

RSVP Leaflets and road verge sign samples:



Verges sign version 3.pdf



RSVP one-pager.pdf