

ANNUAL REPORT FOR THE AGM

The previous year and half proved to be a testing time for the Trust, with two of our colleagues having to step down due to ill health. Despite this, the volunteer members of the Board have continued working hard to make Middle Marches a success.

We have been buoyed up in our efforts by the support of our volunteers, the constructive engagement of other conservation bodies, in particular the Stepping Stones project, the desire of landowners and estates to engage and work with us, and by the very positive feedback we have received from the many participants at our events.

To be effective, we know we have to demonstrate to our donors, supporters, volunteers, fellow workers and activists in the conservation of nature wildlife, that we are delivering on our three key Objectives, which can be summarised as:

- The encouragement of community involvement in sustaining and enhancing landscapes
- Promoting the bio-diversity of the land through its sustainable management and habitat re-creation
- The sharing of information, advice skills and expertise for those seeking to conserve land.

The accounts below detail what has been done for nature on the two sites we hold in trust. In addition, the presentations being made today will demonstrate that a lot has been achieved with the resources of time, money and energy that we have available.

Cudwell Meadow

In January the management group agreed the management plan. This year, after three years of managing Cudwell Meadow as a wetland wildflower meadow, we finally got on top of rampant nettle, dock and bramble and as a result saw the meadow begin to flourish. Trees in the wooded copses have established well, and a few more trees were planted in March.

Twelve enthusiastic Stepping Stones volunteers came along in March to dig a scrape. The soil has a high clay content and holds water well for most of the year.

With funding from Green Recovery Challenge Fund, an attractive sign was designed and produced. This provides information on the management plan and its benefits to wildlife. The sign was erected by volunteers in June – a week before a celebratory opening event was held during the Jubilee Bank Holiday weekend. Around 80 folk turned up to enjoy cake and explore the meadow, through which paths had been mown. Following the open event, the meadow was left open every Sunday throughout the summer for local residents to enjoy. Walking groups also asked permission to visit.

A bumblebee walk was established and registered with Bumblebee Conservation Trust. The first walk in July recorded 6 different species including the rare Bilberry Bumblebee.

Following hay making a small flock of rams were grazed – not really enough animals to do justice to the amount of grass but hopefully further sheep will soon appear to enjoy the grazing.

A particular encouragement was a visit from a group from the Shropshire Mammal Group surveying for harvest mice nests. They found two old nests – a wonderful surprise. We will ensure that we carefully manage the area where they were found to encourage this species. That brings to 11 the mammal species found in the meadow.

Norbury Hill

This last year, funding from the Stepping Stones Green Recovery Challenge Fund project enabled us to carry out fencing and bracken control on Norbury Hill, and as part of a separate Stepping Stone project to do some management for the benefit of the Small Pearl-bordered fritillary butterfly. The initial bracken rolling with a horse and roller took place in July and August.

In September and October more areas were cut with tractor and topper and with the Robocut (a radio controlled machine), on the steeper banks. These areas were mapped by Caroline Uff and we intend to monitor the difference between rolling and cutting in years to come.

To the east of the site the relatively flat hilltop is where most of the Skylark and Meadow Pipits breed and to the west there is a fairly steep bracken dominated slope which has not been grazed for around 20 years. With the aid of electric fencing we were able to allow the cattle on to some of this land this autumn.

At the same time some of the often wet and rushy areas in the valley were cut and at the end of October a gang of volunteers came out to rake up the rushes. The intention is to open up more of the areas that are dominated by the rushes to enable the more interesting wetland plants to thrive, especially the Marsh Violet which is the food plant of the Small Pearl-bordered fritillary.

At present the fritillary breeds in the land just to the north of us and flies close by and we are trying to entice it further south. This butterfly is now locally scarce and is known from a few sites from Norbury Hill northwards to the east side of the Stiperstones ridge.

This year volunteers grew marsh violets from cuttings and some of these were planted out in the Norbury wet flushes. We hope to build on this in future years. About 20 people visited when the bracken was rolled by horse, and 10 people came and volunteered for the day raking up the rushes.

Conferences

The first conference on regenerative farming brought together the farming and landholding communities with environmentalists from across the county to discuss the environmental challenges we face and the economic pressures confronting farmers at a very difficult time.

We were delighted that the conference attracted a broad range of delegates and indeed was oversubscribed, indicating the current interest there is in this topic, with 100 delegates attending.

The second conference, on verges, hedges and ditches attracted 120 delegates, including managers and owners of large estates, woodland managers, smallholders and farmers, environmentalists, wildlife experts, conservationists, and ecologists, all sharing their experience, skills and good practice, generating a lot of networking in the process! This event was also oversubscribed. This demonstrates the levels of interest and expertise available across Shropshire and beyond that we are able to bring together, to practical effect.

Feedback from the delegates at both events was very good. Just a handful of the many positive comments:

- *Heartfelt thanks for organising such an interesting conference*
- *Very well organised conference. Speakers very informative and knowledgeable*
- *It was an inspiring conference with excellent speakers and it was very good to chat matters conservation*
- *What a great conference today. So many insights and remarkable experts to gain valuable information from. I loved it.*
- *I just wanted to say a big thank you for the conference on Friday – X and I really enjoyed it. The speakers were all really engaging and I drove home scrutinising hedges...*

Our finances

Since the last annual review we have received a number of grants, including a substantial grant from the National Trust Stepping Stones Green Recovery Challenge Fund Project for work on Norbury Hill and Cudwell, to fund two conferences and develop a Farm & Environment services hub.

In addition, the extreme hard work and networking of two of our members, Peter and Sandra Whitlock, resulted in them raising over £410,000 for the purchase of 16 acres of land at High Leasowes, on the outskirts of Church Stretton.

This means the current balances look healthy, and even when the purchase of High Leasowes is complete we will still be in the black. As at the end of December 2022 our reserves are currently at £451,253 which is assigned to the following pots.

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| * General Reserves (including shareholding) | £12,749 |
| * Cudwell Meadow | £3,306 |
| * Norbury Hill | £23,013 |
| * High Leasowes | £412,184 |
| * Marches Grow Local - has now moved away from us and therefore we no longer | |

have anything on the books for them.

In terms of income and expenditure from the last annual report, we have received £449,877 (mainly donations and grants), and expenditure of £18,655 which is split approximately £6.6K for Norbury Hill, £1.7K for Cudwell Meadow, £7K for conferences and the Hub, and £3K for general expenses (administration, subscriptions, insurance and licence fees). We have also recently heard that our application for Norbury to Defra's Countryside Stewardship Scheme has been successful which will provide additional money to assist with the management of the site, providing we meet certain standards of management.

Looking forward

Events - the Board is planning up to two more conferences, visits, walks and talks, as well as a summer picnic. The first event to be confirmed is a visit to the Isle Estate, North of Shrewsbury, on the 24th June. This promises to be an eye opening experience, where our host will show, amongst other things, what is being done to promote soil health, actions on water management, and farm diversification leading to zero input of artificial fertilisers. The invitation to visit the Isle came as a direct consequence of the landowner coming to one of our conferences.

It is intended that the conference topics will include: providing help and advice for small landowners wanting to enhance their holdings for nature and bio-diversity, and at the other end of the scale, looking at how some of the largest estates in the county are aiming to lead the way in more sustainable land management.

Holding more land in Trust - We are expecting the purchase of the meadow land at Church Stretton to be completed within a few weeks. Work is already in hand to produce a management plan for the site, and the newly formed Management Committee are keen to get started on preparatory tasks, including putting in new gates and fencing.

Governance - We are keen to recruit more people to our Management Board, especially with experience of business and financial skills but also including law, marketing, fundraising, and business administration. In particular, we are seeking a new Treasurer and a new Secretary. If anyone is interested in getting involved then please get in touch. We also have a range of other volunteer opportunities available.

Thanks

We would like to warmly thank our shareholders, supporters and volunteers, who all enable us to take forward our mission to help improve the natural environment of the Marches. We hope to continue to make a difference where other organisations are not able to act.