

MIDDLE MARCHES COMMUNITY LAND TRUST
MINUTES OF AGM HELD ON 27TH NOVEMBER 2021

Present: Richard Keymer (Chair), Rosie Wood (Vice-Chair), Tim Selman (Secretary), Louise Robbins (Treasurer), Sara Braun, Rob Rowe, Richard Small, Janet Cobb, John Higson, Mike Carter, Nick Morgan, Andrew Wood, Rosa James, Mike Watkins

Apologies: Jonathan Brown, William Tacon, Simon Cooter, Steve Griggs, Ros Payne, Alyson Small, Leo Smith, Michael Innes, Alison Weeks, Patrick Cosgrove, Pippa Middlemiss, Mary Napper-White, Isobel Carter.

1. **Welcome**

Richard Keymer welcomed everyone and thanked them for turning out on such a cold day, unfortunately to an unheated meeting room. He began the meeting by introducing the MMCLT's Secretary Tim Selman.

2. **Annual Review** – Tim Selman

Tim told the meeting that the MMCLT's activities had been affected by the 'lockdown' resulting in a quiet year, especially regarding all of our direct contact, events and outreach. However, the space created had allowed us to work on important things we needed in terms of our governance and organisation, such as the *Acquisition Policy* and the *Business Plan*, both intended to help us focus better on our strategy. The Business Plan is our first attempt at identifying our strategy for the next 2-3 years. The hiatus has also allowed the new Board members to get to know each other better. Sadly, Lizzie Hulton-Harrop, after doing so much to help with the enormous effort of getting the organisation up and running, has stood down, and we need to focus on getting the website, which has become a little stagnant, back into gear. A big plus has been the recruitment of Louise Robbins as our Treasurer, who has been responsible for pulling our accounts together and submitting them to the FSA, and will be a key player in the one of the most important of our strategic activities: fund raising. Whilst our funds are small our ideas are big, Tim said, and we need to work hard to raise the money needed to fulfil them. He finished by pointing out that copies of the Annual Review were available.

3. **Treasurer's Report** – Louise Robbins

Louise told the meeting that she saw her main challenge as managing MMCLT's finances, separated as they are, in various 'pots'. She was concerned by the level of funds for 'General' expenditure which remains in the black purely because we have the backup of the shareholding, but are otherwise not being fully met by revenue streams. To this end, she is working with Jonathan Brown to explore how we improve our revenue streams, for example by encouraging monthly donations and through holding events.

Louise mentioned that the funds overall look very healthy but this is because we still have a considerable amount remaining of the loan given for Norbury Hill. She was clear that this should not be used just to plug gaps and the use of these moneys must be very carefully monitored, as it is a loan that will eventually need to be paid back.

She explained that when the Business Plan budget details were originally done she had included land grants and grazing rights in with general reserves. Later discussion at a Board meeting clarified that these should be assigned to the pots of money for the sites from which they came. Louise will be adjusting the Business Plan to make this change.

4.

Cudwell Meadow – Mike Carter

Mike began by recounting the history of Cudwell Meadow, from its probable origins as a glacial lake which later sedimented and became wetlands. In places there was 4-5 metres of peat. Fishponds were introduced as part of the development of the 12th century Castle on Brockhurst Hill. The site, which is an 11 hectare site to the south of the Strettons, consisted of a series of fields belonging to 8 landowners. The development of the railways in the 19th century required drainage works which resulted in converting some of the land to pasture, but this is slowly reverting to wetlands. There was a footpath which, due to inundation, could only be used for 6 months of the year, so the Strettons Wetlands Interest Group [SWIG] decided to install a boardwalk. They raised £12.5k for this work, and with good support from Shropshire Council and with the help of volunteers, this was completed and became a great success with the local community.

An offer to buy 0.9 hectares led them to approach the MMCLT for assistance. With a lot of help from Lizzie and Jonathan they raised the £24k needed in 5 months, and a Cudwell Meadow Management team was

established. They have since carried out vegetation and botanical surveys. There are water voles and otters present as well as a wide-range of plants that vary depending on the seasonal inundations. Nest boxes have been established in adjacent woodlands. At the moment the land is gated, and they are trying to address the public access issue. Ideally, they would like to increase the involvement of younger people. On possible focus for the future is to encourage landowners to allow the flow of water to slow, letting it meander through the meadows rather than drain quickly into the river, and hope the forthcoming ELMS will help provide a stimulus for this.

Janet Cobb asked who in Shropshire Council gave help to the project.

Mike said this was David Hardwick, the 'Rights of Way' officer for the Strettons area.

Rosie Wood asked if, given wetlands are the single most important carbon sink, have they thought of calculating the meadows' carbon value using Zero Carbon Shropshire's tool, which John Bacon can help with.

Mike said they were considering this but had not yet got round to doing it.

Tim Selman asked if there was any prospect of buying further land.

Mike said there that a further 3 hectares of wet grassland may become available.

5. **Norbury Hill – Rob Rowe**

Rob gave a lively presentation, with lots of slides of the site's flora and fauna and a description of the various bracken-cutting activities that had taken place since the MMCLT had taken possession of the site in May 2021. Our portion of Norbury Hill consists largely of 25 acres of bracken with 22 acres semi-improved grassland on the remainder. The bracken camouflages some post-medieval rabbit warrens and, where the bracken litter isn't too deep, Wood Sorrel and Bluebells flower. Activities have included manual cutting by volunteers and the use of a specialist machine. In future the use of horse-drawn cutting and rolling may be added.

A grant from the Stepping Stones project and AONB Conservation fund enabled an ecological survey to be carried out by Caroline Uff, which extended to the bordering fields to help understand the context for our site. Amongst other creatures to be found is the rare Green Hairstreak as well as the Wall Brown butterflies.

The Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary breeds on Marsh Violets on adjacent land, something we hope to encourage. There are around 200 species of plants, in the richer areas these include Tormentil and Heath Bedstraw. Of the 45 bird species identified, Linnet, Skylark and Meadow pipit are important breeding species. Snipe are quite common in winter although they do not breed there, likewise Curlews, which feed here in the summer although there is potential for them starting to breed on the site. 200 invertebrates have been identified. A copy of Caroline's report will be posted on our website shortly.

In answer to a question on the frequency of bracken cutting by Louise, Rob explained that the traditional saying was that it should be cut 3 times a year for 3 years, but rolling also bruises the fronds and reduces its strength, and harrowing helps to break-up the 'litter'. Richard Keymer added that grazing with cattle also helps trample and break-up the litter.

Rosie Wood asked Rob how he envisaged Norbury Hill looking in 5 year's time, to which Rob responded by guessing there would be little visible change, but hopefully more wildlife such as butterflies, and curlews nesting.

Richard Keymer mentioned the problem of water supply for cattle, which would be put to graze on the land in July, after the nesting birds had finished. He also flagged the issues of Rights of Way and Public Access which need addressing.

Mike Carter asked how the loan to purchase Norbury Hill would be dealt with. Rob said the agreement was for the £80k to be repaid within 20 years. Richard said the revenue from various sources, e.g Stewardship Grants, Rural Grants and Grazing Rights, would ensure we could either repay well within the timescale or instead use the surplus to carry-out extra site work.

6. **Voting**

Richard asked for a vote to be taken to confirm Louise Robbins as MMCLT's Treasurer. The vote was unanimously in favour.

7. **Q & A Session**

Andrew Wood asked Louise about the problems caused by the separate 'pots' of money and the lack of 'general' funds and; in addition to what was being doing to diversify fund raising, would she consider 'skimming-off' a small percentage from particular sites' funds for use in general expenditure?

Louise said that some of the 'pots' of money, particularly the Cudwell Meadow one, simply can't be made use of beyond its specified purpose. Norbury Hill's 'pot' does have the flexibility to allow some to be spent on general costs, but it was essential to keep a close eye on such spending. The 'skimming-off' suggestion was one possible option; we do reserve the right to use any of the 'pots' excess in general expenditure.

Andrew then asked whether the 'Acquisition Strategy' encourages the MMCLT in an opportunistic or more specific direction?

Richard Keymer said that the direction of travel contained within the Strategy is to look for sites that fit within the context of creating 'stepping stones' rather than simply acquiring scattered parcels of lands.

Mike Carter asked what impact the loss of Lizzie might have on the links that have been created with philanthropic donors?

Rosie Wood said that there are various platforms we can utilise, such as 'Just Giving' or 'Just Fund Me'. In parallel there are 'Match Funding' opportunities the eligibility criteria for which need exploring. She added that, as well as purchasing land, we might also achieve some of our goals by working with other like-minded groups.

Nick Morgan asked whether the long-term vision was for developing foot paths and car parks to encourage visitors to Norbury Hill for bird watching, etc, or simply keeping it natural?

Richard Keymer said that we aspired to make access available to people without damaging the flora and fauna which we want to see prosper and not do anything to jeopardise. Any developments would need to be done on a site-specific basis, with approaches such as providing screened routes to hides. He added that MMCLT are negotiating for a piece of land adjacent to Norbury Hill that could be used as a car park for events.

Nick suggested that raising money might be easier if it was tied to the development of specific improvements such as bird hides, etc.

Earlier questions submitted by e-mail included:-

William Tacon: 'For Norbury Hill, there was a view I recall that income would be generated from grazing rights and entitlements under (the changing) agricultural support payments. Also, significant expenditure was envisaged, eg for bracken clearing. I may be missing something but I could not see any reference to such matters in the 3 year proposals, just to some very limited income and expenditure. Could you clarify just what costs and revenues are expected from Norbury Hill and how long term obligations are going to be met?'

Sara and Richard Small sent the following response:-

For the next three years MMCLT can expect income from the lease of the grazing and from the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS). An application has been made to the mid-tier of the Countryside Stewardship Scheme; a decision on the application is expected in early December, but the Board is taking a conservative view of the likelihood of success. BPS payments will decrease in line with Defra's 2020 statement to reach 50% of the 2020 BPS by 2024. Thereafter we anticipate the loss of the BPS entitlement claim as MMCLT is a 'new farmer', but we intend to investigate whether we may retain some income by leasing out the BPS entitlements owned by MMCLT.

On management costs MMCLT has already secured grants towards fencing and bracken cutting. For example, an award from the Stepping Stones project funded a day's bracken cutting of several acres with a robotic machine. Such awards will supplement the income outlined above.

Simon Cooter: 'I was going to ask whether you have had sight of the Stepping Stones habitat opportunity maps and whether they would be used for planning restoration or future acquisitions?'

Richard Keymer had responded saying: No we have not had sight of the Stepping Stones habitat opportunity maps and we would certainly like to see them please. They would indeed be useful for planning restoration work or future acquisitions.

Alastair Warrington's e-mail asked: 'Is trail hunting by recognised hunts going to be allowed on the MMCLT land?' And, in a follow-up e-mail: 'I would be interested to know if this decision was arrived at by consultation with the shareholders or was an executive one taken by the board of directors?'

Rosie Wood replied for the MMCLT:-

FINAL

Not allowing any form of hunting is a specified requirement by shareholders and people who have donated money for the purchase of the land we manage. The grounds for the decision made was two-fold:-

- One, it was a specific condition of a number of our donors for the purchase of land that it should not be made available for any form of hunting;
- Two, that condition was agreed to by the whole Board because it is also in keeping with our management plans for the sites concerned.

On the matter of meat production, the health of some habitats depends on restricted numbers of large herbivores browsing and grazing the land - the modern proxy for which are some breeds of livestock. So we intend to bring some livestock onto some land for conservation management. The Trust supports Marches Grow Local and similar local good food initiatives, for both meat and plant-based foods, which aim to support local producers and increase the market for their produce

Alastair replied: 'Where meat production is concerned, I do think it is necessary for allow some grazing on your land as has been demonstrated on other similar projects. Re wilding needs to be managed, or you will be left with a landscape of scrub and invasive plants such as bracken and gorse. Also to encourage wildlife such as curlew, grouse, hedgehogs etc, as well as young trees and shrubs, a degree of predation control is necessary, both avian and four legged.'

Mike Watkins

MMCLT Minutes Secretary

28th November 2021