



Middle Marches Community Land Trust

Annual General Meeting 2024

- **Activity update to March 2024**
- **Annual Report on Finance and Governance April 2023-March 2024**

Introduction

Our overall Strategy has not changed since last year's Annual Report: we aim to acquire parcels of land, protecting them in perpetuity from damaging development and other sources of harm, and to advise others who wish to acquire land for nature.

While the Lawton Review was right in recommending that nature does need more, bigger, better, and more joined up spaces for nature, people and nature also need local sites which communities can nurture, learn about and in which next door wildlife can thrive. Some of our sites might be small – but they can still make a major contribution to nature recovery.

We also work to inform and network with other people so they can take their ideas back into their communities and start the processes of change and renewal in whatever context makes sense for them. This year, there has been deliberate engagement with Town and Parish Councils, so they can take their ideas back into their communities and start the processes of change and renewal in whatever context makes sense for them.

To make a difference we need a lot of people taking action for nature on the ground.

To recap, we exist to deliver on our three key Objectives, summarised as:

- **The encouragement of community involvement in sustaining and enhancing nature**
- **Promoting the biodiversity of the land through sustainable management and habitat creation**
- **The sharing of information, advice, skills and expertise for those seeking to conserve land.**

Activity Update 2023-2024

Since Christmas 2023 much of our efforts have been directed at developing the Appeal to raise £240,000 for the purchase of Minsterley Meadows SSSI, certainly one of the most important meadows in the Shropshire Hills. This has been undertaken jointly with Marches Meadow Group and

has been supported by a wide range of mainly local organisations as well as by a Working Group in Minsterley. The funds required have to be raised by the start of October. If anyone has any ideas for fundraising, then please let us know!

During the reporting period we continued to hold discussions with members who own, or would like to own, land that they may in time transfer to MMCLT.

We have been involved in ongoing discussions with Natural England as to the possibility of including our Norbury Hill reserve in the proposed Stiperstones Super NNR.

Over the winter period we held four major conferences, two supported financially by Severn Trent Water, and all in partnership with other organisations (a more detailed report follows). Three addressed local nature recovery in Shropshire and were aimed in part at Local Town and Parish Councillors. Baroness Natalie Bennett attended one and Helen Morgan M.P. another. The fourth focused on Species Recovery and was organised jointly with the Stepping Stones Project and Natural England.

The High Leasowes Management Committee decided in June 2023 that they wished to create a new Charitable Incorporated Organisation 'The High Leasowes Trust' and wind up the High Leasowes Management Committee. There are ongoing discussions with MMCLT to finalise the way forward so as to meet the aspirations of both organisations.

Over the summer we will focus all our efforts on fundraising for our current appeal to purchase Minsterley Meadows with four events being held, three at Minsterley Village Hall.

Cudwell Meadow Update

The 'Open Sundays' began in June to enable people to enjoy all the flowers and invertebrates. We also have two 'walking for health' groups from Mayfair that enjoy walking around. We welcomed a group from Middle Marches in July for a tour and update on developments.

The June Bioblitz was blessed with perfect weather – sunny all day but not too hot. Lots of folk came to help identify fauna and flora. Two spider experts came from Shropshire Spiders, Nigel and Jim, complete with their 'Heath Robinson' spider catchers (which also gently scooped up loads of other species too) plus Caroline Uff, County Beetle Recorder. 31 species of spiders were identified including the attractive pink Candy Stripe and the bright Cucumber Green spider.

Lots of shield bugs were scooped up by them too, together with plenty of their juvenile stages known as 'instars' which reveal they are happily multiplying in the meadow. We identified 6 species including the Bishop's Mitre shield bug not seen there before. An update from Cudwell Meadow of beetles reported several new species of ladybird and weevils not found in previous years. Beetles included a splendid large red Hazel Leaf-roller weevil and the Swollen-thighed beetle. Another visitor to the meadow was a quite splendid Bee Chafer in July. These are rare, with around one sighting a year for Shropshire so understandably caused lots of excitement. They breed in old birch trees, of which there are a few nearby so we're hoping it may reappear next year.

Nine members of the Strettons botany group came to look at the vegetation and were pleased to identify two new species for the meadow, Ragged Robin around the pond and Teasel. However, other species may have been lost during the previous very wet winter.

A hay crop was taken in early August but there was considerable damage from the ruts which meant much of one work party was spent repairing the damage. Wet weather began in late autumn 2023 and continued throughout the winter and following spring. The meadow was flooded almost continually for 6 months with the torrential rain from Storm Babet bringing water levels to heights

not previously seen, flooding the nearby road, gardens and some homes both sides of the wetlands. The wet weather meant no sheep could graze the long grass and we fear for the long-term recovery and loss of species. But - this is a wetland water meadow and served to protect other areas of the town from flooding.

A Tawny Owl box was donated and put up in a large tree in adjacent woodlands. As yet we cannot report any desired residents for the Tawny Owl and Kestrel boxes (other than Wood Pigeons) but we live in hope, as all are heard and seen locally.

The trees planted in our three 'wood lots' are growing well, and weeding requirements will ease now there is considerable leaf growth developing. They seem unaffected by the flooding.

More bird species can be reported including Kingfisher, Sparrowhawk, Redstart and Woodcock.

High Leasowes Update

The purchase of High Leasowes was completed in April 2023 and from then on the High Leasowes Management Committee (HLMC) was rather busy!

Our first job was to install gates at Watling Street and Cwms Lane with the generous help of John Ellis and other volunteers to prevent unwanted vehicle access.

We then commissioned local ecologist Dr Caroline Uff to conduct a Baseline Ecological Evaluation (BEE). Caroline was very impressed by our old hedgerows, many of which are dense and well-managed, and also the southern-most of our meadows, Cwm Leasowes, on which she found over 100 species of plants including the lovely little Adder's-tongue, a tiny meadow fern which is indicative of ancient meadowland. She also recorded over 100 species of invertebrates including the Bilberry Bumblebee. Thirty-three bird species, including Greenfinch and Song Thrush were also recorded at the site. HLMC used this information to prepare a management plan to guide us in the management of the meadows, trees and hedgerows, as we strive to work towards our aim of creating an area rich in wildlife and a place that people can appreciate and enjoy.

Meadow management:

During the summer a number of well-attended work parties took place to control bracken, thistles and dock and to remove ragwort from the areas to be cut for haylage. Once the grass had been cut, volunteers sowed the fields with Yellow Rattle and a small amount of other, locally gathered native seeds to improve floral diversity.

Hedgerow management:

Twenty of our volunteers attended a hedge surveying course as part of CPRE's Hedgerow Heroes project, now in its third year. All the hedges on High Leasowes were then surveyed. One section of hedge was restored during the winter months, which involved removing barbed wire and a lot of bramble and elder, removing brash, some coppicing and finally replanting of gaps. Stepping Stones, iDEA and Shropshire Wild Teams gave generously of their time to help with the hard work that this involved.

New hedge:

We decided to subdivide the largest L-shape field to increase both habitat and connectivity, so the National Trust helped our volunteers to install a new protective fence and CPRE funded the hedgerow whips/guards and then led our volunteers to plant a new hedge.

Tree planting:

During the winter months we also planted a strip of woodland, comprising 600 saplings, alongside our eastern boundary to re-establish an earlier woodland that existed until at least 1882. We also

planted about 100 trees in two field corners. All the trees planted were chosen from species typically found in the Shropshire Hills National Landscape and the majority are doing well.

Bird boxes:

Peter Whitlock made 32 bird boxes for small birds, which were installed by a team from iDEA and also two Kestrel boxes which were installed by local tree surgeon, James Cox.

Ongoing monitoring:

Naturalist John Baines visited High Leasowes regularly and continued to make new discoveries of plants, birds, fungi and invertebrates which were added to our dedicated iNaturalist page at <https://uk.inaturalist.org/projects/high-leasowes-church-stretton>

Working with the Community:

In addition to encouraging community involvement through volunteering we were pleased to conduct a number of guided walks, and to give visual presentations about High Leasowes to our supporters, the Mary Webb Society, Rotary and others.

We have made life a little easier for our visitors through the provision of trail benches; these enable people to pause and enjoy the views. We are grateful to the West Midlands Agricultural Showground who funded one of these benches, and to Focus who funded the other three.

We have kept our supporters informed through a regular newsletter; this can be obtained by emailing highleasowes@gmail.com

Finally, during the year, we formalised the management committee by becoming a Charitable Incorporated Organisation 'The High Leasowes Trust', which is registered with the Charities Commission, number 1207101. Our constitution, charitable aims, management plan, BEE, and much more can all be found on our website www.highleasowes.com

I would like to thank Church Stretton Town Council, CPRE Shropshire, Mr. & Mrs. Downes, Stretton Focus, iDEA, MMCLT, The National Trust, the Parish Paths Partnership, Shropshire Wild Teams, Shropshire Wildlife Trust and all our donors, volunteers and supporters, without whom we could not have achieved so much in the first twelve months at High Leasowes.

More volunteers and helpers are always welcome - and I gather the cake is popular!

Norbury Hill Update

Norbury Hill update - spring and summer 2023

The highlight of the year for me on Norbury in 2023 was seeing our first Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary feeding in the area where we had planted out Marsh Violet the previous winter. This may have been pure chance, but it did show that we were right in our choice of violet planting site.

An almost equal delight was that after having seen the beautiful Forester moth very close nearby Caroline Uff spotted it on the MMCLT land. This blue-green iridescent day-flying moth is a quite uncommon and local species.

This year saw the return of Barbara Hadrill and her two horses Molly and Bluebell who worked on bracken rolling for two days with great results. Caradoc Contracting again worked on cutting large areas with the Robocutter and Alpine tractor with topper. Simon Cooter and two apprentice scythers helped cut around the outline of the earthworks of the ancient rabbit warren. In all, we cleared about 6 hectares which was paid for by the Severn Trent Boost for Biodiversity fund.

It was very heartening this spring to start to see the effect of this management with grass and woodland plants starting to strengthen and expand.

As part of a larger project sponsored by Natural England to help the Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary, we carried out more work with rush cutting and removal in the autumn.

Marsh Violet cuttings that were taken back in August are being grown on for us by Rob Lee at RL Wildflowers Ltd. Norbury will be one of the recipients of the twenty thousand plug plants that are being grown.

Caroline Uff prepared a report, *Norbury Hill Birds 2023*, which focused on the birds that use the MMCLT's 19 ha of Norbury Hill. It complements the 2021 ecological assessment. Altogether 32 species of birds were recorded on the site between 2021 and 2023, with a further 16 species recorded either flying overhead or on the adjacent land. Twenty-six species were potentially breeding on or near the site, and four species were either overwintering or on passage.

Events Update

Events are one of the main areas of activity that we have developed this year. They are an enjoyable and effective way of exchanging information and engaging with people. We have met many interesting people and developed new partnerships as a consequence of our hosting activities.

All our events have been fully booked and the feedback we have received has been consistently positive.

In May 2023, we ran a conference jointly with the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Partnership on *Creating Stepping Stones for Nature Recovery across the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership and Wider*. The theme was to help and provide guidance for small landowners wanting to enhance their landholdings for nature, and for Town and Parish Councils who were interested in developing nature recovery plans. In all 120 delegates were welcomed including representatives from 10 parish councils.

This first event was followed up with 5 site visits and picnics - see MMCLT website events page for full report.

In July 2023, we held two hedgerow survey workshops in collaboration with CPRE on 19th and 20th July at High Leasowes and at Stoney Field, in New Invention.

In October 2023, we organised a conference on *Verges, Hedges and Waterways: The importance of these features in our Shropshire Landscape*. The conference was a collaboration with Restoring Shropshire's Verges Project and was sponsored by Severn Trent at Montford Village Hall. It specifically aimed to engage Town and Parish councillors and interested members of the public.

We were delighted that the conference attracted 100 delegates and was oversubscribed, all indicating the high level of interest from local councillors and residents working to improve the quality of life and the environment across the county. Support and encouragement were received from the leader at Shropshire Council Lezley Picton who encouraged engagement with Nature Recovery activities across the County.

In November 2023, we followed up the October conference with a second event at Fitz Village Hall when MMCLT, sponsored by Severn Trent, again brought together representatives from Town and Parish Councils and interested members of the public from across Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin. The conference was on *The Importance of Town & Parish Councils to help deliver Nature Recovery across Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin*.

The conference attracted 89 delegates, and we were especially pleased to receive support from Baroness Natalie Bennett, in her role as Vice chair of the National Association of Local Councils. Baroness Bennett promised to champion Nature Recovery initiatives across Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin in the House of Lords and has agreed to come back to Shropshire on December 6th 2024 for a further conference hosted by Shropshire Association of Local Councils (SALC) in support of Nature Recovery ambitions.

Cllr Ian Nellins, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Climate Change, environment and transport also supported the conference as one of the speakers.

In February 2024, we held a conference on *The Stepping Stones Species Action Plans* at Norbury Village Hall.

The Species Action Plans were commissioned by Natural England and the Stepping Stones Project in South Shropshire. The initial conference was aimed at landowners, organisations (including Town and Parish Councils) and individuals who will be key and help to drive forward the actions to help these threatened 12 local species survive and thrive across Shropshire. The Species Action Plans and further information is available on MMCLT Hub section of the website <https://middlemarchescommunitylandtrust.org.uk/info-sheets/>

In March 2024, the final conference for this reporting year on *Meadows & Verges* was held in collaboration with Marches Meadow Group and Restoring Shropshire's Verges Project at Oswestry Memorial Hall. We were very pleased to welcome North Shropshire Liberal Democrat MP Helen Morgan, who tweeted @HelenMorganMP <https://twitter.com/HelenMorganMP/status/1766119179592347891>

The forthcoming summer events this year will all focus on fundraising for our current appeal to purchase Minsterley Meadows on behalf of Shropshire's Community. The appeal page can be found at <https://middlemarchescommunitylandtrust.org.uk/minsterley-meadows-appeal/>

We will continue gathering ideas and planning further events for 2024-2025 and beyond, so if you have a site visit to offer or have in mind a topic which justifies a conference or a seminar, please let us know.

Annual Report 2023-2024

Financial Summary

A copy of the full accounts is available on our website.

A modest level of income (£2389) from land use and other income was supplemented by £7294 of Government Land Support and £29,869 from Gift Aid and Interest earned.

We are grateful for grants totalling £6150 awarded by Severn Trent, AONB Trust, CPRE, Shropshire County Council, Caring for God's Acre and Marches Meadow Group towards the costs of running our conferences. Other donations and legacies amounted to £12,583 and consisted of both regular and occasional sums from individuals as well as amounts collected at meetings and conferences.

A big change happened in April 2023, at the beginning of the financial year, when the purchase of the High Leasowes land, made possible by a very successful quick-fire appeal, was completed. At this point the bank balance fell from its high point to a more accurate reflection of the funds available for

ongoing activity, to be replaced by the £400,000 asset of the land. Excluding the sums raised to purchase High Leasowes and expenses and provision relating to High Leasowes, the overall income for this accounting year was higher than in the previous year, and general expenditure was similar to that in the previous accounting year. The overall balance sheet remained strong.

Governance Summary

Trustees continue to meet formally on a monthly basis and operate in accordance with standards and policies laid out in our first two years. We are up to date with our submissions to the Financial Conduct Authority and our rules are published on our website as well as the proceedings of the AGM.

We are still interested in recruiting more people to our Board who have experience of business and financial skills but also including law, marketing, fundraising, and business administration.

During the last year Rosie Wood resigned from the Board although she remains a member, and we are very grateful for her contribution over the years to the Trust's development.

We have been without a Treasurer since the end of March 2023 and continue to seek a new one. Until the end of March 2024, we had contracted a bookkeeper to stay on top of our finances day to day, however that person has also now resigned.

Fortunately, we now have a voluntary bookkeeper who is keeping track of our finances until such time as we can recruit a new Treasurer to the Board. The new Hon Treasurer would be a Board member, and would work with our bookkeeper, using the systems we have in place and improving upon them so that we become ever more efficient.

If anyone is interested in getting further involved, then please get in touch with Richard Keymer.

We also have a range of other volunteer opportunities available. If you think you can help, please get in touch.

Thanks

We would like to take this opportunity to thank our shareholders, supporters and volunteers, as well as the farmers who graze our land, who all enable us to take forward our mission to help improve the natural environment of the Marches.

We plan to keep on making a difference and keep on making it possible for others to do the same – and with your help, we will.

MMCLT Board of Trustees, September 2024