

Middle Marches Community Land Trust

Annual General Meeting 2025

- **Activity update to March 2025**
- **Annual Report on Finance and Governance April 2024-March 2025**

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 maintain nature on land that they already own or on land that they hope to acquire.

In our view there is still a place for smaller local sites which communities can nurture, learn about and in which nature can thrive. Such sites can form part of the network of connected sites that we should be fostering.

We also work to inform and network with other people and groups 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 for this purpose. To make a difference, we need many people taking action for nature on the ground.

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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 2024-2025

Our main activity this year focused on fund raising for the purchase of Minsterley Meadows Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), which was launched jointly with the Marches Meadow Group in Minsterley Parish Hall on the 9th June 2024. The purchase was completed on 11th November 2024.

Over £159,000 was raised by donations from local people and organisations, and a £10,000 grant from Defra was facilitated by Shropshire Hills National Landscapes staff. Thanks to National Lottery players, The National Lottery Heritage Fund awarded the Project a grant of

£224,000 in October which covers a contribution to the purchase of the meadows, the ongoing work to manage them, funds to support local people to care for them, and engagement with young people to learn about them. This includes a local art project, activities and events as well as working closely with local primary and secondary schools.

The National Lottery Heritage Fund grant included funding for a Project Coordinator and Project Evaluators. In March Sarah Wallace-Johnston began working as the Project Coordinator and 'Resources for Change' were appointed to be the evaluators. The Project is now well set up and will run until 3 January 2028.

In late summer an Agreement was finalised between Middle Marches CLT and The High Leasowes Trust (THLT) as to how the two organisations will work together going forwards. MMCLT will continue to own the land and will enter into a Farm Business Tenancy with THLT to enable them to implement the agreed Management Plan for the site.

Discussions started with Natural England and partners regarding the extension of the existing Stiperstones National Nature Reserve to become the Stiperstones Landscape National Nature Reserve in the King's Series of National Nature Reserves. Minsterley Meadows and Norbury Hill were included in this extended reserve. In March, Natural England confirmed that Middle Marches CLT had been granted Approved Body Status under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981). This status recognises that Middle Marches CLT has the skills and expertise expected of organisations approved to manage a National Nature Reserve.

Cudwell Meadow Update

As with last year, much of the meadow was a lake during the winter months. For a few days it froze over completely. This inundation must be impacting on the wildlife. It also meant it was not possible to bring in sheep in the Spring. A detailed botanical survey will be done in the summer months of 2025, and it will be interesting to compare the flora with a baseline survey 5 years back.

Prolonged inundation during the past two winters raises questions about the future management of the meadow and whether hay crops can be taken. Dock and rush continue to encroach. One new plant species was identified this year: Water Plantain, bringing the total to 167.

Damage from Storm Darragh

Storm Darragh in December brought considerable damage to this valley. Nearby Hopes Wood was devastated with over 50 large trees brought down, and a lot of damage was caused in the adjacent Brockhurst Wood along Ludlow Road. We lost a mature Hawthorn next to our tool store. This is a sad loss given its size and maturity and there is no root stock left for it to rejuvenate. However, there are plenty of other Hawthorn around, including new ones that we have planted, so it could have been worse. A conifer also came down at the West end of the meadow, narrowly missing the power lines. This came from an adjoining

garden so was not our responsibility to clear.

Meadow management

Work parties have continued every month except for December and January. We meet on the first Thursday of each month from 1.30 to 3.30pm (usually ending with a sociable cuppa). The work varies but much of the time is spent scything docks, bracken and soft rush, clearing the scrape and weeding small areas planted to shrubs. We installed two seats purchased from money donated from the closure of Church Stretton Civic Society.

Our amazing volunteers tried out a new technique of underwater scything! Apparently if Soft Rush is cut and remains underwater for a couple of weeks, it is not likely to recover. Since Soft Rush has thrived in the wet conditions and threatened to dominate, this seemed an idea worth trying. The technique, we soon discovered, is to scythe very gently to avoid getting soaked. Interestingly by Spring 2025 it was clear there was a marked reduction of rush in the main part of the meadow.

Late in 2024 the meadow dried up somewhat and a work party in November tackled the scrape which was very overgrown. Given its benefit for wildlife, we were pleased to get this work done before winter.

Wildlife sightings

Mallard ducks and Moorhen have been happy with all the flooding. Otter have been regularly seen on a trail camera along the brook. Egret, Heron, Buzzard and Sparrowhawk make occasional visits. It has been pleasing to note some of the benefits to wildlife in the meadow after a pretty tough year in 2024 for invertebrates. Six species of dragonflies and damselflies were seen last year around the scrape and stream - including two new species for the meadow - Broad Bodied Chaser and Golden Ringed dragonfly.

The monthly Bee Walk has continued, and numbers were OK given the huge drop in Bumblebees in the UK. A Bilberry Bumblebee was recorded actually inside the meadow for the first time. White-tailed Bumblebees, usually one of the most common in the meadow, were non-existent, coinciding with a UK wide drop of 70% in records for this species.

During the summer of 2024 the meadow was opened every weekend with a gentle flow of visitors. We held two open evenings in July: this time encouraging fauna ID as well as flora walks. This proved popular with around 15-20 visitors each time, finding a good range of grasshoppers, beetles and birds. This will be repeated in 2025.

High Leasowes Update

The High Leasowes Trust are pleased to report that the community contributed over 500 hours of voluntary work in caring for High Leasowes during the period April 2024 to March 2025. Individual volunteers were supported by Shropshire Wild Teams as well as employees from Agilent and iDEA.

The work at High Leasowes included meadow management to remove weeds such as ragwort, dock and thistle from the hay crop. Yellow rattle and a small amount of other

locally gathered native seeds were sown by hand - a very enjoyable task - after the hay had been taken, in order to add to floral diversity. This was the second year we had scattered seed in this way, and it was good to see yellow rattle growing well in some parts of the meadows. It was also a nice surprise when a couple of orchids and a helleborine appeared!

Other work included the planting of a further 250 trees to extend the woodland strip on the eastern boundary, and renovation of 50 metres of hedgerow by removing brash and bracken and planting the gaps with suitable whips. We also laid about 25 metres of hedgerow, giving a few hedge-layers the chance to practice their skills while restoring another section of hedge. All of this created a lot of brash, which was tidied away into environmentally useful dead-hedges.

Ongoing surveying by John Baines, with records added to our [iNaturalist page](#) and a visit by Joy of Wildlife, added to our knowledge of the range of species that make High Leasowes their home. By April 2025 we had records for over 500 species, a list that has continued to grow.

Shropshire Wildlife Trust created a new pond in a wet area of one of High Leasowes fields where there had previously been a seasonal pond. Unfortunately, this is not holding water, and we are waiting for a return visit from the contractor to try to remedy this. We very much hope that a wide range of aquatic life will arrive once the problems have been rectified, but even with a shallow pool we were pleased to see frog spawn arrive.

The High Leasowes Trust commissioned and installed two interpretation boards, one for the site as a whole and one for the pond, to add to people's understanding and enjoyment of High Leasowes. For the same reason we also conducted guided walks, giving people the opportunity to walk around the fields with a botanist and enjoy the flowers and the lovely views.

Some of our work was funded by a Farming in Protected Landscape grant and we are grateful to Shropshire Hills National Landscape for this. We produce a regular newsletter and have a [web site](#) which contains information about our activities, our management plans for High Leasowes, species lists and much more.

Norbury Hill Update

A major focus for our Norbury Hill site is the Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary butterfly and its commonly used foodplant, the Marsh Violet. Natural England is sponsoring an on-going project to help the Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary. Norbury Hill was one of the recipients of some of the twenty thousand plug plants grown from seed as part of this project. The seeds came from plants which had originally been taken back in August 2023 as cuttings and then grown on for us by Rob Lee Wildflowers Ltd. At the end of April 2024, with the help of volunteers, we planted about 1700 of the plug plants. A repeat autumn planting at the end of October doubled that number. The areas were strimmed and raked before planting. The plants, which were very small plugs, have had varied success and their progress is being monitored. They certainly do not like it to dry while they establish but do not like to be drowned either! The project details had been sent to the press by the National Trust office

and the project ended up being filmed and on ITV News at 10 and reported in the Guardian.

Spring /summer 2024 was a disastrous year for many insects due to the cold early summer weather and there was no sight of the Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary butterfly on our site this year. Even in its best sites numbers were really low.

In June, National Trust volunteers spent a day on the hill hanging two gates, fencing off a deep wet hole and scything bracken around the old warren site.

Most of the bracken control happened in July and August. At the end of July, Barbara Hadrill and her two horses, Molly and Bluebell, worked on bracken rolling for two days with great results. Many thanks to those who came up to Norbury to be around while Barbara was working. Caradoc Contracting again followed up in August and worked on cutting large areas with the Robocutter and Alpine tractor with topper. In all we cleared about 8 hectares of bracken which was paid for by a Farming in Protected Landscapes grant through the Shropshire Hills National Landscapes [formerly AONB]. It was heartening in this following spring to see the effect of the bracken management with slow expansion of acid grassland and woodland plants.

This year as well as the usual cattle grazing in the autumn, we had sheep on afterwards for a couple of months.

In the middle of February 2025, with a group of volunteers we planted and guarded 100 trees on the steep bracken slopes. These were a mixture of Birch, Rowan and Holly.

Many thanks to all the people who have helped and volunteered over the past year.

Minsterley Meadows

The major focus for Minsterley Meadows SSSI between April 2024 and March 2025 was on securing enough funding to purchase the meadows and raising the profile of the importance of the meadows with the local community and further afield. A local working group was established with regular meetings throughout the year.

Many fundraising events were organized over summer 2024 starting with a well-attended public meeting in May followed by the formal launch of Minsterley Meadows appeal in June at which a very entertaining talk was given by international photographer Ben Osborne, a wildlife and landscape photographer best known for his images of Antarctica in the BBC series "Life in the Freezer" presented by David Attenborough.

Other fundraising events followed including a Hedges & Meadow Walk & Talk with Megan Gimber from The People's Trust for Endangered Species; a talk from Nancy Lowe RHS qualified organic gardener and ecological garden designer, and a talk by Simon Cooter, Natural England on the importance of SSSI meadows. Summer events finished in September with an entertaining talk on Barn Owls by John Lightfoot from Shropshire Barn Owl group.

Donations came from local people and supporters as far afield as London, Scotland and Cumbria! We also received some unexpected contributions from the Hardy Orchid Society and Minsterley Show Committee. We were also in the BBC news:

Bid to raise £240k to buy orchid meadows

Middle Marches Community Land Trust and Marches Meadow Group

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c1wwe2e4jeqo.amp>

A fantastic £159,436 was raised from public donations and with the help of Harriet and Peter Carty amazing support arrived in the form of a National Lottery Heritage Fund grant in October enabling the purchase of the meadows and funding to implement community engagement and capacity building for the next three years in and around Minsterley Meadows. The funding enabled us to appoint our wonderful project co-ordinator, Sarah Wallace-Johnson.

Two baseline surveys were carried out during the summer/autumn. A visit from Shropshire Botanical Society in July made a comprehensive list of the flora of the site listing a total of 107 species, nine of which are classified as axiophytes (indicators of good habitat). In October and November, a survey of grassland fungi found a total 12 waxcap species plus several other grassland fungus types.

Events Update

Events continue to be one of our central areas of activity, raising the profile of MMCLT and connecting with new audiences.

This year we started to connect with national audiences and to work collaboratively with colleagues from organisations with similar aims:

- Marches Meadow Group (MMG) <https://www.marchesmeadowgroup.com/>
- Caring for Gods Acre (CfGA) <https://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/>
- Restoring Shropshire's Verges Project (RSVP) <https://middlemarchescommunitylandtrust.org.uk/restoring-shropshire-road-verges/>
- Shropshire Hills National Landscape Trust <https://www.shropshirehills-nl.org.uk/help-to-look-after/shropshire-hills-landscape-trust>
- Marches Artists for Nature <https://middlemarchescommunitylandtrust.org.uk/marches-artists-nature/>

We have also continued to build on our relationship with Town and Parish Councils via Shropshire Association of Local Councils (SALC) which now has a Nature Recovery tab on its website. <https://www.alcshropshire.co.uk/local-nature-recovery>

Importantly we have also been supporting the work on the development of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy – now out for consultation here:

<https://next.shropshire.gov.uk/environment/shropshire-and-telford-wrekin-local-nature-recovery-strategy/>

So far, the MMCLT has organised ten conferences in four years including the first National Meadows Conference in conjunction with MMG and many other smaller events in between.

The current events list is on our website.

April 2024

We kicked off the events programme running between April 2024 to March 2025 with a mini conference held in partnership with Shropshire Wildlife Trust Clun branch at Clun Memorial Hall. The theme was **Hedges, Verges & Waterways** and the event was in partnership with RSVP.

May 2024

Next up was a walk, talk and picnic in May on Norbury Hill with local bird expert Dave Pearce and our own Rob Rowe. The weather was perfect for bird spotting and a picnic.

This was followed by a public meeting event in Minsterley public hall in support of the Minsterley Meadows appeal with Peter Carty and Dr Richard Keymer explaining the importance of the SSSI Minsterley Meadows site.

June 2024

Saw the formal launch event for the Minsterley Meadows appeal and we were fortunate to have the support of international photographer Ben Osborne to give a fascinating talk about Costa Rica.

July 2024

We were again fortunate to have a Hedges and Meadows walk and talk looking at Minsterley Meadows' fantastic hedges with Megan Gimber the Key Habitats Officer at People's Trust for Endangered Species. Megan has spent 10 years with the Trust focusing on 'woodland edge' type habitats and specialising in hedgerows. Rob Rowe supported the event with his botanical expertise, and the weather was kind allowing us to picnic on the meadows.

We also organised a lovely talk by Nancy Lowe, the Natural Gardener, at Minsterley Parish Hall. Nancy is an RHS qualified organic gardener, ecological garden designer and permaculturalist and speaks publicly about wildlife and productive gardening.

A third event in July was given by Simon Cooter, reserve manager on Stiperstones, Natural England, on SSSI meadows and their importance. Simon's talk confirmed the importance of Minsterley Meadows' as a precious habitat for Green Winged Orchids and other wildflowers.

September 2024

John Lightfoot from Shropshire Barn Owl group gave a very entertaining talk in Minsterley Parish Hall which surprised us with its popularity. Standing room only with over 100 attendees!

November 2024

The National Meadows Conference held in partnership with Marches Meadow Group and supported by a grant from the Shropshire Hills National Landscape Trust was our first national conference and attracted delegates from across the UK.

The conference was fully booked and has acted as a springboard into more national conferences raising the profile of all three organisations, making wider national connections and creating important networking opportunities.

December 2024

Working collaboratively with Shropshire Association of Local Councils (SALC) and the Local Nature Recovery Strategy lead, Lynn Parker, MMCLT helped to organise a conference specifically aimed at Town and Parish Councils, 98 delegates came with representation for 58 town and parish councils.

VIP guest speakers were Baroness Natalie Bennett, Vice Chair the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), Chris Borg, policy officer (NALC), Dr Jack Reed, Exeter University, researching Nature Recovery and Regional Development (Shropshire is one of eleven local authorities in the project). The afternoon presentations featured fantastic initiatives taking place across Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin. The event has acted as a catalyst for initiating the development of nature recovery plans in many town and Parish Councils with ongoing support being given via MMCLT.

March 2025

Saw our final woodland conference in the financial year, once again supported by the Shropshire Hills National Landscape Trust. This event was also supported by the newly established Marches Artists for Nature giving the whole event a completely different feel.

Information on all these events is on Middle Marches Community Land Trust website.

Annual Report 2024-2025

Financial Summary

A copy of the full accounts is available on our website. These have been examined and signed off an external auditor. After the examination, the accounts were submitted to the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) as part of the Annual Review required by the FCA.

MMCLT's total funds as at 31st March 2025 were £829,371. This included fixed assets of £711,500 and cash totalling £197,871.

A modest level of income (£1263) from land use and other income was supplemented by £5782 of Government Land Support and £32,341 from Gift Aid and Interest earned.

We are grateful for donations totalling £7388, and grants (excluding Minsterley Meadows) of £3328. An appeal to purchase Minsterley Meadows raised £159,436 and a National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) grant to support the Saving Minsterley Meadows Project provided

£127,593 towards the purchase and the three-year programme of work on the meadows. Further payments will be received from the NLHF over the lifetime of the project until MMCLT has received the full £244,900 grant from the NLHF.

During this financial year, MMCLT's cash funds rose during the very successful appeal to purchase Minsterley Meadows and were further boosted by the grant from the NLHF. The fall in the bank balance on purchasing the meadows was replaced by the new £190,000 asset of the land. Total expenditure, £18,421, was lower and net income, £318,712, was substantially higher than in the previous year. The overall balance sheet remained very 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 and the proceedings of the AGM are published on our website.

During the last year Sara Braune resigned from the Board, and we are very grateful for her invaluable contributions as Board Member and Land Agent to the MMCLT. Although no longer a Member of the Board, in a less formal capacity Sara continues to advise the Board on issues related to land on an *ad hoc* basis.

We are interested in recruiting people to our Board who have experience of business, finance, law, marketing, fundraising, or business administration.

We have been without a Treasurer since the end of March 2023 and continue to seek a new one. We have a voluntary bookkeeper who is keeping track of our finances. The new 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 or make hay on 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 2025