

Newsletter

April 2016



Welcome

Welcome to the first edition of a newsletter to be produced monthly by Love Hambrook Marshes Charitable Incorporated Organisation (often shortened to Love Hambrook Marshes CIO or simply LHM). This is the charity that acquired the marshes when Kent Enterprise Trust (KET) sold the land two years ago.

As of the Friends' AGM in April, the Friends of Hambrook Marshes no longer exists, but we recognise the interest many Friends have in Hambrook Marshes and their desire to continue being kept abreast of news about conservation work and wildlife there, so the trustees of LHM felt that the best way forward would be to continue producing the newsletter. You have probably received this newsletter because you were on the mailing list for the Friends of Hambrook Marshes, and were happy for your contact details to be passed over to LHM.

Inevitably, the old Friends logo, created by children at Wincheap School, that headed each of the old newsletters had to go, to be replaced by the new logo of LHM, which most of you won't have seen until now, although it appears on the new information boards that will be going up very shortly around the reserve (more on that in a moment). Over the months, the trustees will be developing the style and content of this newsletter, so it will gradually diverge from the format you were used to, but it will be better than before, containing far more news about recent work and projects that we hope to embark on, so you will be kept more fully informed.

In a world of ever-accelerating change it may or may not come as some consolation to know that I will still be writing each newsletter, so any irritating idiosyncrasies of style will remain.

Recent developments

New information boards

After long delays, two large and six small information panels are now with the printer, and should be up in May. Using pre-existing metals posts and backing boards from the original signs, the new panels are colourful and informative, as you can see from the example below. They all sport the new Trust logo, which should become increasingly familiar, a web address, and even a QR code (the mysterious blue square of hieroglyphics in the bottom right-hand corner that smart phone owners can use to access the website directly. We hope you find the new boards interesting and attractive.

Wildlife at the marshes

This boardwalk allows you to get really close to a very wet part of Hambrook.

Look out for plants and creatures that thrive on these soggy areas. Here are some examples:

- Tussock sedge grows as distinctive tussocks (or little hills) created from former dead leaves - see them at the field border near Whitehall Road where they have survived over many years.
- The little egret which looks like a small white heron.
- The striking damselflies which shine in sunlight as they flit over the pond.
- The palmate newt which you're more likely to see at dusk or night time with a torch.

Little egret
Tussock sedge
Palmate newt
Banded demoiselle (male)



For more information, go to www.lhmcio.org or search 'Love Hambrook'



The shared-use cycle/footpath and all other Hambrook footpaths are permissive paths - none are designated as legal Rights of Way.

More new fencing

Dilapidated fencing in the field immediately south west of the old embankment has recently been replaced by contractors, making it unlikely that any of the cattle will escape in future – a regular occurrence in the past. This is all the more important now that the last of the cattle grids are due to be removed this year (see item under Future Projects). Fencing is an extremely costly business, but at least the new work should last a good few years.



Return of the cattle

Young heifers began returning to the marshes in April, with 25 present near the end of the month, and just five more due to arrive. As the photos below show, initial reactions to the big wide world were rather mixed, and there was a great deal of skittish behaviour, but the animals quickly settled down and already seem perfectly contented. Some had to be coaxed out of the cattle truck.....



.....but others couldn't wait to get out into the field after a winter cooped up in a barn.



Mowing

April saw the first mowing of vegetation on either side of the riverside path. This helps combat the problem of rank vegetation flopping onto the path, making the usable width even tighter (see also under “issues”). The short grass is popular with feeding moorhens (particularly the stretch between the two railway embankments) and, potentially, could be used by bank voles, which like to graze on patches of short grass.

New scrub cutter

Purchase of a petrol scrub cutter with a reciprocating blade that will be used to trim back light scrub from the path (mainly on the steps up to the viewing point on the old railway embankment), any awkward corners of tall grass or rushes that a tractor mower can't reach.

New path onto old railway embankment

In April the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership volunteers re-routed the path at the back end of the old embankment, doing away with a flight of steps that had been wrecked last year by the cattle. The far right photo shows the volunteers at work, while the near right picture is a view onto the embankment, across a repaired stile, with the old pathway blocked off by logs, and the new one to the right.



Issues

Grass encroaching onto path

At a recent meeting with KCC's Cycling Transport Planner we were able to point out problems of grass encroaching onto the main riverside path. This is an insidious process, as it is not until you search out the edge of the tarmac that you realise just how much has been lost in just a few years – up to 10" on each side which, given that the path was only about 7' wide in the first place, amounts to a significant loss of width. This is a concern, as the path is now barely wide enough for walkers and cyclists to pass in comfort. A minority of people further aggravate the problem by cycling too fast, not ringing their bells (if they have one), blocking the path by walking four abreast, or allowing their dogs to run across the path on fully extended leads that then become a serious trip hazard. If the path edges can be pushed back to their original positions, these issues would be reduced. We are therefore hoping, if not actually hopeful, that KCC will have funding available to carry out this work periodically.



Condition of the main riverside footpath surface

You may have noticed bumpy irregularities that have developed in the path surface, mainly in the past couple of years. This is where grass has managed to push its way through the tarmac, creating small holes in the middle of a hump, like the caldera in a smoking volcano. As the grass gets established, and the holes get wider, frost will penetrate and aggravate the situation, to the point where the entire surface may start to break up. It would appear that the path was either constructed to an inadequate specification, or the contractors failed to work to the specification provided. Either way, we now have a developing problem which cannot be cheaply resolved. This issue was also pointed out to the transport officer, who couldn't promise a quick fix.



Future projects



Cattle grids

We hope to obtain funding to pay contractors to remove the final three cattle grids on the marsh this summer. With the cattle now safely contained behind new fencing, the need for any cattle grids on the marsh has simply evaporated. They present a very real hazard to people, especially children, made worse by the unusually wide spacing of the bars on the design we have on the marshes. At times of flooding the cattle grids can disappear altogether, when they represent a potentially lethal danger to the unsuspecting. Cattle grids are totally inappropriate on a footpath that is so heavily used.

Alleviation of flooding

This is another major issue most winters (and even last summer). I suppose the clue is in the name – Hambrook Marsh; the area is naturally wet at all times, with flooding to be expected in winter, but with the high visitor usage of the riverside path we need to do what we can to reduce the problem, and make the walk accessible to people who aren't kitted out with wellies (snorkels and flippers?). Some improvements are proposed to an existing culvert, which pipes water under the path from one field and out into the river. Over the years, deposition of silt every time the river floods, has led to the bank being slightly higher than the surrounding land, blocking the natural egress of surplus water. So we are also investigating the feasibility of installing a new culvert beneath the path, and then funnelling floodwater to the river along a very shallow ditch, which will break through this natural barrier.



Wildlife Report

I may still be buttoned up in a thick coat, hat and gloves on my early morning visits, but spring very definitely is on its way: no tufted ducks or teal have been seen this month and the last three snipe, another winter visitor, were recorded on 13th. As these birds moved away to their breeding areas,



their places were taken by a variety of summer visitors, and the songs of blackcap, whitethroat, reed warbler and cuckoo all managed to filter through the woolly hat that was firmly pulled down over my ears. As I'm sure you are all too aware, cuckoo numbers have declined alarmingly in recent years, and their song is now something to be remarked upon rather than a commonplace occurrence not meriting comment. I was therefore relieved to hear a very distant bird calling from the Chartham direction on 29th and, a few minutes later, to

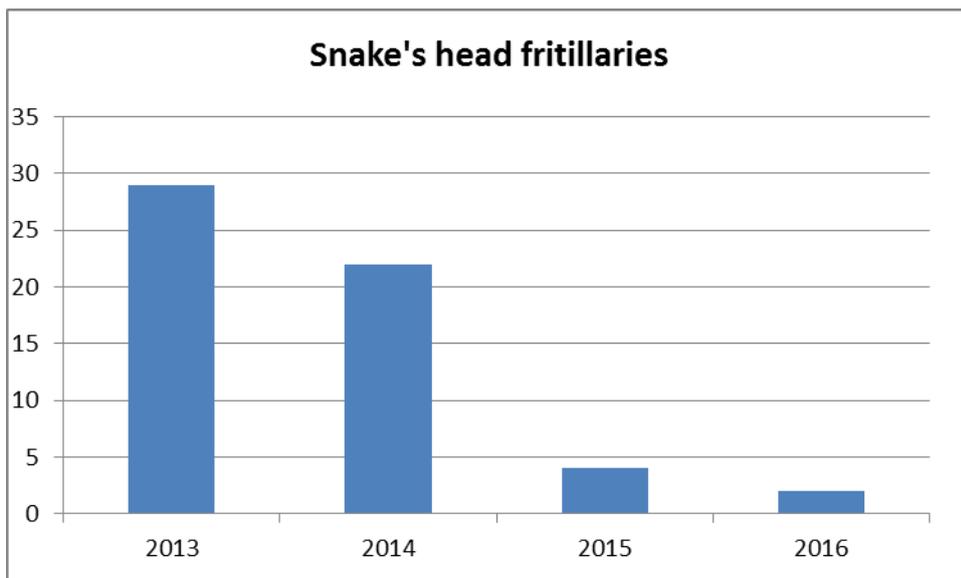
actually see one flying (above) over the marsh. In flight they are remarkably kestrel-like, with their long, pointed wings and long tail, and when they are mobbed it is impossible to know if the small birds are reacting defensively against what they assume to be a bird of prey, or whether they are perhaps acting out a deeply rooted, atavistic attack on a bird that, at some subconscious level, they know to be a very real threat to their eggs and chicks. Other signs of spring were mother mallards shepherding their broods through a hostile world; some were at the heart-stoppingly delightful stage of fluff-balls, while others were half-grown, looking just like their sedate mothers. So, exit winter birds stage left, and enter spring migrants stage right; so far, so good, but what about the single meadow pipit that called on 29th, the first for two months? A few of these small, nondescript, streaky birds overwinter on the central field, but disappear in March, heading off to northern moors perhaps, or simply making the short passage to coastal grassland in Kent. For a bird to turn up here in late April was distinctly odd, but it was presumably just hurrying through the valley, desperate to reach its breeding grounds.

Last month I commented on the presence of a single coot on a ditch in Tonford Field. It is difficult to draw conclusions from isolated records like that, but it was still present a month later, to be joined on 29th by two others. I am now reasonably confident that at least one coot must be nesting there, which would constitute a new breeding record for the reserve.

Perhaps the only other bird record of note was a flock of at least 33 starlings (right) feeding in Tonford Field on 13th, having shunned the area all winter.



Disappointingly, the snake's head fritillary colony in the Boardwalk Field appears to be on the edge of extinction. Large numbers of bulbs were planted into hard ground one summer several years ago (wrong soil conditions, wrong time of year). Miraculously, a few hardy individuals did survive, but numbers have been dropping ever since I became involved in the reserve four springs ago, and this year I only managed to find two - one the traditional chequered pattern of two shades of purple, the other the less common pure white flower - see the bar chart below. This formerly widespread flower was characteristic of wet meadows, that's to say, fields which were mown in early summer for a hay crop rather than grazed, except perhaps after the harvest. Allowing cattle to use that field



on their arrival in early spring each year may well have sounded the death knell for these beautiful little flowers, which could have succumbed directly to being eaten or, more indirectly, to being trampled out of existence.



The last two Hambrook fritillaries?

All bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith

Westgate Parks Project

Immediately downstream from Hambrook Marshes (on the Canterbury side of the Canterbury East railway bridge) is Whitehall Meadow, a field belonging to the City Council that is managed by a combination of grazing and mowing. Its main interest is in winter when part or all of it may be flooded, and it can then attract in hundreds of gulls, together with moorhens, mallard and a few other aquatic birds. Beyond Whitehall Meadow is Toddlers Cove, which marks the start of the Westgate Parks Project. A £770,000 Heritage Lottery Fund grant is enabling work to be carried out that will improve the whole area, starting with all the play equipment in Toddlers Cove, plus fresh landscaping of the Westgate Gardens. Opposite Toddlers Cove, on the other side of the river, is Tannery Field, a slightly wilder area of grass, a newly established meadow, plus groves of trees and shrubs. Upstream from Tannery Field is Bingley Island, the least managed of the four elements of the Project; it has mown and long grass, an area of willow (now being managed on a micro-coppice rotation), a new pond and an older, overgrown pond that usually has breeding reed warbler and reed bunting.

We're delighted to have Westgate Parks, managed by Anna Bell, as near-neighbours, enabling the rural feel of Hambrook Marshes to extend right up to the Westgate Towers. If you would like to know more about the Project and the Friends of Westgate Parks, click [here](#).