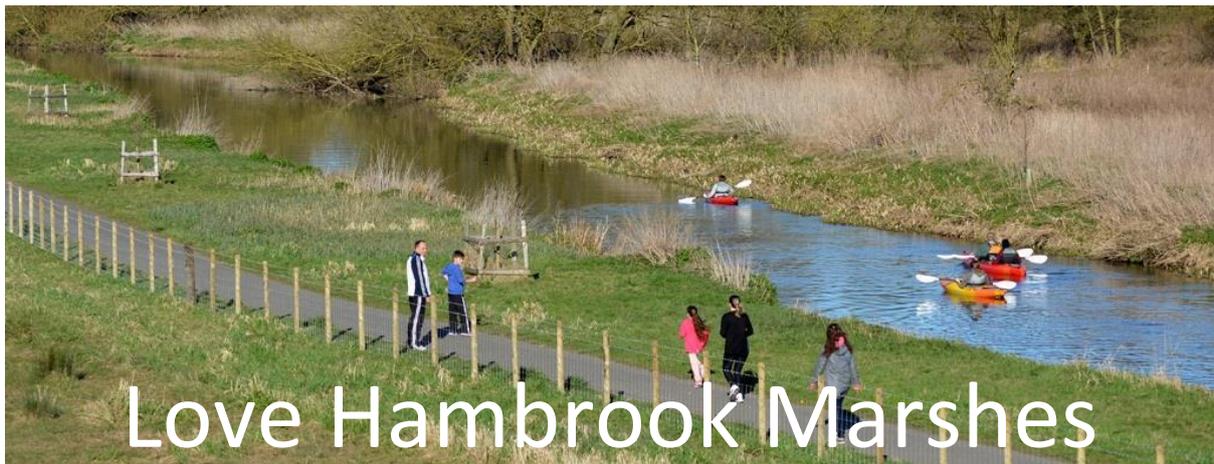


# Newsletter

July 2016



## Welcome

Summer did come for a while this month, accompanied by complaints from some quarters that it was now too hot, but during the fine weather numbers of visitors to the Marshes increased, along with punters and canoeists on the river. It was a fairly quiet month for birds, but if you read the section below on recent developments you'll see that we have been busy on a number of projects.

## Recent developments

### Extra fencing



Back in May our grazier wanted to move his cattle from the Boardwalk Field at the NE end of the marshes across to the Tonford Field at the SW end, which involved herding them across the Middle Field, which is kept for a hay crop. Despite there being seven people to cajole them into heading in the right direction, the best we could manage was to get them nearly up to the gate into Tonford Field, at which point they simply rebelled, turned about and galloped past us. Five or six attempts were made to get

them moved, but all ended in abject failure. Grass was getting in short supply in the Boardwalk Field, so it was imperative that the beasts were moved soon, and the grazier returned a week later with even more helping hands, and finally persuaded the heifers to go through into Tonford Field, where they are presumably much happier, knee-deep in lush grass. The exercise had cost him a great deal of time and effort, and, as we were anxious not to lose him, we agreed to put in additional fencing that would make the transfer easier another time. So, you will see that this month a line of fencing has been set up across the hay field, which in future will make it easier to funnel the cattle from one field to the other. The photos (above and below) show the view from either end of the new fence. As mentioned in the May newsletter, grazing is essential for the creation and maintenance of suitable conditions for wildlife, and it attracts a grant from Natural England, without which we wouldn't be able to finance all the work needing to be done on the marshes, so it is vitally important that we retain our present, sympathetic grazier.

This central field has been managed for some years as an open access area without any fencing, but the new stretch of fence won't materially affect walkers' freedom to roam, as the small area that is now behind the wire is very wet and uneven, with tall vegetation that would discourage all but the most intrepid from entering.



### **New gate design**



At the same time as the new fencing was being installed, we engaged the contractor to modify three of the kissing gates. Now, instead of having to squeeze around the gate, which made life difficult for cyclists and pushers of buggies, visitors can pass through in a straight line from one spring-loaded gate to another – a bit like going through an air lock! This will introduce an extra level of security, making it less likely that cattle will escape, with or without human assistance, while simultaneously facilitating access for our many visitors, so we are hoping that this innovation will prove a win-win modification.

### **Willow maze**

Work was carried out this month on the willow maze near the park-and-ride bridge, as rampant willow growth had rather got out of hand. Long stems were either cut or woven back into the screen to thicken it up and make it harder for cheats to short-circuit the



winding route to the centre. The photo (above) shows the hedging being lopped into shape, while the one on the right is a view inside the maze, and I'm pleased to say that, having taken the photo, I managed to find my way back out! Interestingly, a few weeks ago a reed warbler decided to include the maze in its territory, and could be heard singing lustily from within.



### Controlling hard rush

The typical, abundant rush of the marshes is hard rush, which seems to be getting more entrenched at present. A start has therefore been made on cutting it, which won't kill the rush but will certainly weaken the plant and encourage more palatable grasses to move in. In the picture (left) a large rush tussock in the foreground has been cut, but other uncut clumps can be seen in the background. All the cut material was picked up and stacked in large piles at the edge of the field, where it may become home to slow worms. This work was achieved with a brushcutter and many pairs of willing hands to rake up and stack the cuttings. While effective, this method is extremely inefficient, so we are now looking into the possibility of hiring a suitable machine that could do all the processes mechanically.

## Wildlife Report

The hot weather in mid-July was insufficient to kick-start the butterfly season, and everyone up and down the country is bemoaning the lack of butterflies this year. The main meadow butterflies at Hambrook are the rather dull meadow browns and brighter orange gatekeepers (right), both of whose caterpillars are grass feeders. One of the gatekeeper's favourite



nectaring plants is common fleabane (left), which appears to be exceptionally abundant this year, so it is a real shame that there aren't more butterflies around to take advantage of this glut of feeding stations.

Grasses are classified as flowering plants, but are considerably less showy than fleabane, so tend to be overlooked. However, meadow barley, which is particularly abundant in Tonford Field, was at its sparkling best on early dewy mornings this month



(above), although most of it has now been eaten or trampled by the cattle!



Another rather lovely flower whose delicate mauve blooms roll in heavily-scented drifts across some of the damper areas at the moment is water mint (left). I don't recall seeing such carpets of it in previous years, so perhaps the chilly spring and wet June have favoured it – bramble and other robust vegetation certainly appears to be thriving this summer, so more path-trimming than usual has had to be carried out.

I hate to say this, but signs of autumn are already upon us: 12 swifts (right) over the marshes on 14<sup>th</sup> were the largest group I had seen this year, and most have already departed for Africa, their breeding cycle compressed into an incredibly brief three months. There have also



been good numbers of young whitethroats (left) skulking in scrubby areas, a sure sign of a successful nesting season, and an equally good indication that they, along with many other summer visitors, will soon be getting fidgety and thinking about the arduous flight across Europe and the Sahara into southern Africa.

A kingfisher on 3<sup>rd</sup> was my first record since late April, so presumably they didn't breed on or close to the marshes this year. On 29<sup>th</sup> three greylag (right) and 28 Canada geese flew over, my first Canadas for over a year, and easily the biggest ever flock that I had seen there.



*All bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith  
Gatekeeper photo courtesy of Glynn Crocker*