



# Newsletter

January 2018



## Welcome

### New trustees

The interview process for new trustees was completed early in the month, and we are pleased to announce that all five interviewed proved eminently qualified and have now agreed to join the team. The full complement, together with their key roles, is given below:

Hilary Adams	Treasurer
Natalie Coles	Community involvement and social media
Jack Goodhew	Land manager
David Lewis	Chair and website manager
Margaret Love	Founder
Rick Norman	Secretary and legal matters
Sian Pettman	Litter, local authorities and other organisations
Michael Walter	Environment and newsletter
Jon Winder	Grants

The whole recruitment process was prompted by one of the original trustees, Steve Rogers, announcing his wish to stand down this spring. As a founding trustee he did much to formulate and establish work in several areas including finance, business strategy, grants, finding and managing contractors, working with Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership volunteers and managing repairs and maintenance on site. This has been a major personal contribution to the launch of the new CIO, and will stand it in good stead for the years ahead. We are most grateful to Steve for all the hard work, time and energy he put into the project.

### Information on Hambrook flowers

We hope shortly to be adding a new section to the website. This is being set out in the form of spreadsheets and a map, which will give you a good indication of where and when to look out for all the species to be found on the Marshes. All species for which we have photos are highlighted, and at the foot of each month's list there is a link to take you to our photo library. The fieldwork has been carried out by a volunteer, Chris Millar, to whom we are very grateful, while David Lewis has laboured long and hard on converting this mass of detail into user-friendly displays. We'll let you know when it is up and running, but meanwhile, why not check out the website to view loads of photos, read about the history of the site, or look up old newsletters.

### Weather

We've had a lucky escape, with a generally mild winter so far, though on the downside this hasn't make for an exceptional bird period – it's during cold, snowy weather that we may see movements of lapwings, skylarks, fieldfares and redwings. December and January have, however, been very wet months, so the surprise is that there hasn't been any sustained flooding, and the surface water that appeared on 4<sup>th</sup> soon vanished. This is presumably a testament to the exceptionally dry October and November, with the result that even at this stage in the winter the ground still isn't totally saturated, and water has been able to drain away faster than it falls as rain. The culvert that was installed a year ago has finally been in operation, with water trickling over the lip of a vertical pipe and then led into the river through a pipe beneath the path, instead of being allowed to flood the path, as happened in the past.

## What's happening on the marshes?



On an open site like Hambrook the wind generally blows straight across without being able to do much damage, but New Year gales did bring down one arm of an ancient hawthorn atop the old railway embankment, leading to this slightly unnerving view from the riverside path (left). In fact that limb was firmly attached to a larger bough that had been torn off, and which was, in turn, jammed up against the trunk and railings, so there was actually no chance of it falling onto the path. Volunteers from the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership (KSCP) cleared it away a few days later, and have also spent two sessions cutting part of the osier bed. Osiers are varieties of willow that grow as shrubs and produce a mass of long, whippy stems if cut every year or two. In the past there was a huge rural craft industry associated with converting these thin, woody stems into woven baskets of all shapes and sizes, lobster pots, and fencing, all now superseded by equivalents in plastic or softwood. Even the word osier has passed out of common usage, though

the verse below nicely captures the sense of country people making use of what they could harvest from the countryside.

*The gipsy wife came to my door with pegs and brooms to sell  
They make by many a roadside fire and many a greenwood dell,  
With bee-skeps and with baskets wove of osier, rush and sedge,  
And withies from the river-bed and brambles from the hedge.*

From *The Gipsy Soldier* by Cicely Fox Smith (1882 – 1954)



Traditionally the stems would be cut down close to ground level, but the commercial cutter from Essex who managed the plot two years ago established a slightly odd system of high cutting, which led to stems sprouting from “legs”, so saving his back a little, but leading to the strange appearance (left) after the volunteers (below) had finished harvesting. Naturally, this gaunt-looking habitat isn't going to be of interest to much wildlife at

the start of the spring and, as far as birds are concerned, there will be no possibility of nesting until spring 2019, when there will be a year's growth shooting skywards from the stocks. It is therefore important not to manage the whole osier bed on a one-year cycle (which is what would happen in the most productive, commercial sites with extremely high growth rates) as that would mean there would never be any possibility of birds breeding. So our aim here is to establish a cutting rotation of two or three years for most of the site, so that there are always sections of the bed that support one- or two-year-old regrowth. In the past this area has attracted reed buntings and reed warblers to nest here each spring, and last year a Cetti's warbler sang there one day. As reported in last May's newsletter, a potential new contractor has viewed the bed, and may return to harvest some of the wands next winter.



## Wildlife Report

25 black-headed gulls were resting on Tonford Lake's choppy water on 7<sup>th</sup>, one of them amazing me with its almost completely brown hood - summer plumage already!

The brief flooding episode early in the month led to 48 mallard being present on Tonford Field on 4<sup>th</sup>, the first time this winter that any ducks have moved in from the river, and were even joined by a handsome drake mandarin. Unfortunately, the floodwater soon drained away, and with it went the birds.



On Tonford Lake, just upriver from Hambrook, the flock of tufted duck increased to 29, and they were joined on 19<sup>th</sup> by a female pochard (left). It has to be said that they aren't very dramatic to look at, their plumage far less nuanced than that of a female mallard which, though essentially brown, can boast some tortoiseshell patterning. So it wasn't the gorgeous plumage that got me excited but the fact that this was the first time I had recorded a pochard at Hambrook, making it the 98<sup>th</sup> species to be seen on, from or over the Marshes. British ducks are divided into two main categories - divers and

dabblers. The dabblers we are most familiar with, to be found in Westgate Gardens or on any park lake, are mallard. When not gorging on white bread, mallard have a distinctive feeding technique, using their bills to sift or "dabble" at the surface of shallow-flooded areas as they Hoover up floating seeds. Another characteristic of dabbling ducks is that they can take off more or less vertically from land or water, much like VTOL jets, now largely retired from our armed forces. The pochard I saw on Tonford Lake, by contrast, was a diving duck. They, along with several other species, such as tufted ducks, feed on invertebrates by diving from the surface of a lake. To assist with diving, their legs are set further back on their bodies than they are on dabbling ducks, but this means they are less well equipped for taking off, and become airborne more like a lumbering jumbo jet, using the lake as a runway and paddling furiously across the surface.

Surprisingly for what should be the heart of the winter, there have been quite a few signs of spring, with great spotted woodpecker drumming on 7<sup>th</sup>, song thrush and dunnock in full song a day later.



But there is still plenty of evidence that winter's grip has yet to slacken: up to 50 snipe and two teal have been present in the shallow flood at the north east end of Tonford Field; redwings have been flitting through the scrub on the old embankment and there were large movements of fieldfares (left) throughout this part of Kent towards the end of the month; meadow pipits are purely a winter visitor to Hambrook, and

had been present in ones or twos, so it was satisfying to see a flock of 17 at the end of the month. Another winter visitor is the stonechat, but this lovely bird has been proving rather elusive; like bullfinches, stonechats almost invariably stay in pairs so, having found one bird, it is usually just a matter of patience to locate its mate, but this year it seems we have a solitary female (right), which is rather drabber than the male. As you can see from the photo, the female has a hint of orange on its breast, but lacks the almost luminescent quality of the male. Her white neckband is also far less striking, not least because on the male it is sandwiched between a solid black hood and orange breast. Four pied wagtails seem to have become a fixture, regularly frequenting the wet area close to the Wincheap bridge.



*All bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith.  
Banner photo on page 1 courtesy of Sian Pettman*

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