



Annual Report

2016-17



Introduction

Hambrook Marshes is 50 acres of marshland and meadow beside the river Stour, immediately upstream from Canterbury. It was acquired by the Love Hambrook Marshes Charitable Incorporated Organisation in 2014 and is managed for wildlife, with free access on foot across most of the site.

Habitat management

- Last year's new grazier returned in April with a fresh herd of young heifers, but early on one animal was seriously injured by a dog. Fortunately, our grazier was prepared to keep his herd on site that summer, though there was a second instance of a dog chasing the cattle, fortunately without injuring any.
- Thistles and rushes tend to be avoided by cattle, and so were kept in check by mowing.



- The central meadow, which is not grazed, was cut for hay by last year’s contractor (right). Not all the round bales could be taken away, and these were left to rot at the edge of the field, the warmth generated possibly making them attractive to slow worms and grass snakes.
- The willow contractor who cut the osier bed near the level crossing entrance in 2015-16 returned to clear a little more during the winter, but will not come back next winter as he had found that the round trip from Essex made it uneconomic. The trustees will therefore be considering how best to manage this area in future.



Estate management

- More dilapidated fencing was replaced, making all the grazed fields stockproof. A completely new fenceline was installed to ease the transfer of cattle from the Boardwalk Field to Tonford Field. Improvements were made to the kissing gates to further reduce the likelihood of cattle escaping
- Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership (KSCP) volunteers spent four days carrying out improvements to the footpath onto the old railway embankment, and extending the handrails running beside the steps onto the embankment viewpoint (right). They also trimmed the willow maze.
- The final three cattle grids along the riverside walk were removed. They were no longer needed and represented a hazard to the public, especially small children. We are grateful to KSCP for arranging funding for this work.
- A new culvert (right) was installed in February, close to the riverside path. This should greatly reduce the risk of the path flooding in future. The height of the spillway pipe can be finely adjusted so that just enough water is drained off to prevent flooding, but not enough to dry out the marsh behind. Once again thanks are due to KSCP for organising the work and obtaining funding for us.



Visitors

- Three large and six small information boards were installed in June. The photo on the right shows trustee David Lewis with Poppy Beerling, whose foundation helped finance the work. Other grants came from Canterbury City Council and Kent County Council.



- The three larger panels give general information about the site, together with a map, while the smaller panels highlight different aspects of the Marshes – grazing, flowers, wetland wildlife, the old Elham Valley railway, and willow management (right).



The Wild about flowers panel (below) clearly shows the high standard of the design, providing interesting information in a colourful format. Unfortunately, some of the panels have been deliberately scratched, but they all remain serviceable.



- Several student groups from local universities carried out short research projects. The trustees are keen to encourage more links with the local community in this way.
- Hambrook was entered into the “It’s Your Neighbourhood” competition, an offshoot of Britain in Bloom, and we were graded as thriving (equivalent to a silver medal)

Undesirable activity

- Horseriders, motorcyclists and lads with air rifles were all reported by other users of Hambrook.
- The trustees have been seeking advice on how best to deal with illegal campers, who continue to set up tents, often in areas where largely screened from public gaze, but sometimes in full view on the old railway embankment.

- There was some minor vandalism (right) of our new information boards, and a metal field gate was demolished by a car. We aim to remove graffiti as soon as it appears, in a bid to discourage the “taggers” from repeating the exercise.



Wildlife report

It was exceptionally dry from July onwards, so there was no winter flooding, which in turn meant that there were no congregations of feeding or roosting gulls or mallard. However, the fields were wet enough to regularly support up to 50 snipe through the winter.

- Snake’s head fritillary (right) has declined from 29 in 2013 to 2 in 2016
- The marsh frog, an introduced amphibian, appears to have become established in the wetter areas.
- A pair of coots bred successfully for the first time, but there was no sign of nesting kingfishers.
- Two Cetti’s warblers were singing in October
- A flock of 50 goldfinches was feeding in alders in November.
- A steady decline in the number of overflying cormorants continued.
- Two pairs of stonechats returned for the winter despite loss of habitat through hay mowing
- 162 species of plants have now been recorded
- The total number of recorded bird species now stands at 97, which includes three new species – common sandpiper (right), skylark and coal tit (the first two had been recorded near or flying over the Marshes previously, but not actually on the site).



Marestalk



Meadow barley



Purple loosestrife



Water mint



Frosted teasel

Management plan

A start has been made on compiling a management plan, which will focus on what we hope to achieve on the Marshes over the next five years. As well as giving clear direction to the management to be carried out, the document will collate information about the site.

Thank you

Our thanks go to the various contractors, and the KSCP volunteers, without whom most of this work could not have been achieved.

The Trustees
Love Hambrook Marshes CIO