



# Annual Report

2020-21



## Love Hambrook Marshes

### 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. The threat of a park and ride extension on the opposite side of the river has receded, but another arson attack destroyed the remainder of the boardwalk. But over-riding all this was the dead weight of the pandemic and a succession of lockdowns.

### Weather

The vagaries of the English climate were well to the fore this year, starting with a drought that began in April and lasted for most of the summer. During the period April, May, July and September only 47% of the expected rainfall was recorded, a situation exacerbated by the heat, with the mean maximum temperature in every month from April to September being higher than the 40-year average.

But Nature was playing games with us, for after wilting seriously through the summer, we were then thrown into the second wettest winter in forty years, leading to severe flooding of all the paths.

Then in February we had a week of snow, now an unusual phenomenon in our generally milder winters. The maximum depth was around 10cm, but the first major overnight fall was melting as fast as it hit the ground and, had it all settled, the ensuing traffic chaos would have been far worse.

We rounded off the twelve months with a welcome, but totally unseasonal three-day mini-heatwave when the temperature rose to 24.8° at the end of March. At least we can never accuse our weather of being boring!

### Habitat management

- As usual a small herd of cattle was on the marshes from April to October. Despite the drought, they managed to get by without supplementary feeding.
- The 18 trees that had been planted in the hay field in February 2020 were watered regularly throughout the summer. Some watering would have been advantageous in getting these large specimens established even in a normal year, but in the hot, dry summer they struggled, despite each tree being lavished with around 30 litres of water every week. Thankfully, all have pulled through, and we are now hoping for a less extreme summer in 2021 with a reduced need for watering.
- We were unable to find a contractor willing to cut and remove a hay crop from our hay field.
- The annual osier harvest was carried out in January, but social distancing requirements meant that the usual weekend blitz by around a dozen local basket weavers was not possible.
- The contractor who cleared away the debris left by the arson attacks in February and March 2020 was also able to dig out a small pond (right) that visitors would be able to view from the short surviving remnant of the boardwalk (but see under “Undesirable activity”).



### Estate management

- Seven stretches of riverbank nettles were cut in order to maintain views of the river.
- A summer storm blew down a hybrid poplar on the old railway embankment. This had already been earmarked for tree surgery in the autumn to reduce its lean over the path, but the weather beat us to it. Contractors cleared away the windblown tree, and at the same time drastically reduced the height of a nearby dying poplar to make it safer (right). Most of the cut timber was left in situ, but some was made into two stacks that can rot down and become bug hotels. Wire straps were stapled to these logpiles to prevent them being thrown around.
- The willow maze was trimmed twice during the summer.
- In July a contractor brought in a mini-digger to dig out the stumps of over a hundred plastic posts destroyed by the February 2020 arson attack on the boardwalk.
- In the interests of safety, vegetation growing on both flights of steps leading onto the embankment viewpoint has to be cleared away annually.
- Unfortunately, the posts used for the 2014 refencing of Tonford Field were sub-standard, and many have rotted at the base, leading to the risk of the cattle escaping. Two sides of the field



were therefore re-posted in November, making use of the original wire netting, which was still in good condition.

- The much-admired picnic table by the riverside path needed major repair in September due to one of the back supports having been broken off (the result of rot rather than vandalism). Steve Portchmouth (right), who had created the original structure, was able to skilfully strengthen and rebuild what amounts to a wooden sculpture rather than a utilitarian table and benches. Our thanks go to the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership (KSCP) for part-funding the work.



- In November volunteers from KSCP replaced two rotting strainer posts in the Boardwalk Field.
- Environment Agency installed ugly, shiny, metal fencing around the large water pipe that spans the river. We hope to screen it with vegetation.

### Wildlife surveys

- The usual weekly bird survey continued through the year.
- Only one new plant was identified – cuckoopint on the old embankment.
- A PhD student from East Anglia, finding himself stuck in Canterbury during lockdown, offered to do some amphibian survey work for us. We hope to report on his results later.

### Visitors and promotion

- Hambrook Marshes saw a huge increase in visitors throughout this period, thanks to the arrival of the covid pandemic and the imposition of a series of lockdowns when daily exercise was the only permitted outdoor activity. Many people enjoyed the Marshes for the first time, and the number of runners, walkers and cyclists mushroomed. It seems likely that visitor numbers will remain elevated even once all covid restrictions are lifted.
- A concert to raise funds for dealing with the aftermath of two arson attacks was planned for a hall in Canterbury, but the arrival of the first lockdown in March meant this was no longer possible. Instead, Richard Navarro managed to put on an incredibly professional 1¾ hour online production, with 22 local musicians, singers, photographers and poets. Still available to view on [Youtube](#), the concert brought in over £4000, and we are most grateful to all those who helped make it such a resounding success.
- A well-received, socially-distanced walk (right) was held for Extinction Rebellion members in October.
- Our new media officer initiated a quarterly photographic competition in October, inviting visitors to send in photos that in some way illustrated the current season. The winner's reward is to have their best shot aired on Facebook, our website, and in our monthly newsletter.



### Undesirable activity

- On one occasion young lads chased the cattle in Tonford Field, causing injury to two of the beasts, and panicking another two into leaping into the next field.
- A bizarre occurrence in March was the electrocution on the same day of two herring gulls around an electricity pole in Boardwalk Field. UK Power Networks said they would inspect the pole, but no report has been received from them.

- But the worst event of the year was a third arson attack, in which the section of boardwalk that had survived the original attack in February 2020 was destroyed (right).
- An undesirable side effect of the pandemic-induced increase in visitors was a massive proliferation of litter.



Thanks go to the volunteers who kept on top of all this mess. A QR code has been fixed to the side of the Wincheap litter bin, making it easy for anyone to report that it is overflowing. Emptying of that bin has become more unreliable, thanks to the handover of litter collection from Serco to Canenco, and we still seem to be in a bedding-in period.

### Park and ride planning threat

- Canterbury Council’s progress with its own application to expand the Wincheap park and ride onto the meadow opposite Hambrook Marshes was slowed enormously by the pandemic, and the council was forced to apply to CPRE for a further delay to the judicial review (for which the local campaign had raised £10,600), as they were still awaiting Highways England’s consent to the change in road layout that would be needed. The highways agency’s eventual refusal to sign off the plans meant that the council had to revoke its application in October and so, for the time being, the threat of the meadow being tarmacked has receded. The group then allowed itself a small celebration (right).



- The council announced that, as mitigation, they would put £50,000 into turning an area immediately downstream from the car park extension into a nature reserve if the project went ahead.

- During the summer the proposed extension site was mown very severely three times, scalped in fact - seemingly done deliberately to prevent it from acquiring any wildlife interest that might compromise the development plan. The photo on the right shows an extensive patch of bird’s-foot trefoil just before the area was savagely mown again.



- The only good thing to come out of this debacle was that the St Mildred’s Area Community Society bestowed a “Good Coronavirus Award” on the Save Wincheap Water Meadows group who led the battle against the council.

## Administration

- Jack Goodhew stepped down as our land management trustee after three eventful years. We are extremely grateful to Jack for all his hard work, and now welcome his replacement, Paul Roberts, who was thrown in at the deep end, having to deal with fencing renewal, sorting out the aftermath of the third arson attack, tree surgery, picnic table repair and recruiting a new grazer – the list seems endless!
- We also welcomed Lesley Malone to the new post of media officer. She has already completely rebuilt our website and set up an ongoing photographic competition. This is not currently a trustee position.

## Wildlife report

- A survey of the areas where 400 snake's head fritillary bulbs were planted in the hay field in October 2019 (right) revealed the presence of 26 flowering plants and at least a further 36 non-flowering ones, which were much harder to spot, and so may have been under-recorded.
- Unfortunately, it would appear that no reed warblers or reed buntings attempted to breed this year.
- Records of cuckoo were extremely scarce and there was a dearth of swallows, house martins and swifts.
- A single grey squirrel appeared periodically, but was evidently not resident.
- There was a record peak count of 27 marbled white butterflies in July.
- In July there was a single record of a green sandpiper, and the same month came the site's first record of an overflying crossbill.
- A pair of mute swans (right) was often on the river with their family of eight cygnets.
- One, occasionally two, collared doves were frequently seen on the old embankment near the viewpoint, but it is not known if they nested.
- A new mammal record was of a dead pygmy shrew.
- About a hundred fieldfares briefly made landfall on the old embankment in October.
- A singularly unlikely report from a reliable third party was of a gannet (right) flying downriver at Chartham on 1<sup>st</sup> November. It is therefore most probable that it continued down through Hambrook, but was not reported there and so has not been added to the bird list.
- A pair of stonechats was present in Tonford Field one day in November, but was not seen subsequently.
- A guinea fowl was seen periodically from November, usually in gardens on the far side of the river.



- Overwintering snipe numbers were disappointing, with a peak of only 27, and double figures on just eight occasions, whereas in the 2019-20 winter there was a peak of 58 and double figures on 17 dates.
- Highlight of the year was a possible sighting of an otter crossing Whitehall Road in the dark, close to Hambrook, on 31<sup>st</sup> December. The following day there was a second possible sighting, this time actually on Hambrook, and this was followed by the discovery of otter footprints (right) in nearby mud. Identification of the prints was subsequently confirmed by two mammal experts.



*Photo credits:*

<i>Arson attack</i>	<i>Simon Pettman</i>
<i>Mute swans</i>	<i>Glynn Crocker</i>
<i>Gannet</i>	<i>Dave Smith</i>
<i>Otter tracks</i>	<i>Dave Hanna</i>

### **Thank you**

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

The Trustees  
Love Hambrook Marshes CIO

30<sup>th</sup> April 2021

Registered charity no. 1156473