



Annual Report

2023-4



Hawthorn flowers

David Lewis, former trustee

It was with great sadness that we announced the death in September of David Lewis, a founder member of Love Hambrook Marshes CIO and chairman of the trustees for several years. The end of the reporting year marks the tenth anniversary of the acquisition of Hambrook Marshes to protect it forever from development, retaining open access to the public, and carrying out management to improve the site for wildlife.

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. During covid lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 the Marshes were extremely heavily used by local residents, but the number of visitors is thought to have now eased off to roughly pre-pandemic levels.

Weather

April was wet, but May, June, August and September were dry (a hosepipe ban was introduced in June), but October, November and February were particularly wet, leading to some flooding of the fields in November and February. A pattern of dry or extremely dry summers seems to be emerging, and the trustees have begun considering options for storing more water on the site over the winter period. May was chilly, and July rather disappointing, but it was warm in June and September, and the winter was generally mild, but with some icing in January. Strong winds in February brought down a large hybrid poplar on the embankment, completely blocking the path.

Habitat management

- As usual, our local willow weavers came over in January to cut down the one-year-old growth in the osier bed, removing all the wands for their basketry work in the following weeks.
- Ten cattle came onto the marsh on the late date of 14th May, but were removed almost immediately due to their being too frisky and two escaping over the fence. They didn't return until July, so it was a short season, and no grazing took place in Tonford Field, which may be why so few snipe were present the following winter (see under Wildlife on page 6 for more detail). They were taken off in October, on the day that one of them gave birth to a calf (right).
- Canterbury College came over in April and again in November to plant more willow cuttings in the space between the original osier bed and the new fence. Unfortunately, as in 2022, survival rates were not very high, probably due to the dry weather in the critical months of May and June, when they should have been putting down roots.
- A large part of the hay field was cut using a hay mower in August; the bulk of the material was roughly raked up by tractor and dumped in the adjacent Scrub Field. Rougher areas were swiped in September, doing a much poorer job, with a high proportion of the vegetation flattened rather than cut. Areas that had been swiped in the vicinity of the snake's head fritillary patches were cut by scythe and raked up in October in a bid to give the fritillaries a better chance in 2024. In February, remaining heaps were moved by hand to the Scrub Field by Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership (KSCP) volunteers.
- In September, in a bid to diversify the flora of this field, seeds of a variety of typical hay meadow plants, such as oxeye daisy, yellow rattle, wild carrot, fleabane, vetches and scabious were scattered in one area that had been cleanly cut by hay mower.
- KSCP spent two sessions on the embankment clearing some of the scrub to retain a matrix of scrub and more open vegetation.



Estate management

- Limited sections of rank vegetation in front of riverside benches were scythed to give visitors a view of the river. For several years long stretches had been scythed to open up the river view, but this was not possible in 2023, owing to a broken collar bone!
- Following its makeover in the 2022-3 winter, vigorous willow regrowth in the maze (right) had to be cut four times – twice in May, once in July and once in September.



- KCC is responsible for mowing the verges of the riverside walk. They made a start in early summer, but did not complete the first cut until September.
- Routine repairs were carried out to stiles, fences and gates.
- A February storm brought down a large hybrid poplar on the South Embankment, completely blocking the path (right). Options are to clear the tree away, which will be a big job, create a short stretch of path around the root plate (difficult, as a fairly huge crater has been left by the root plate), open up a steep former path nearby (a flight of steps would have to be put in), or simply open up the metal gate at the north edge (this is the simplest short-term solution, one that has been adopted, but it would remove any control over when the cattle are allowed onto the embankment).
- Bramble growth along the riverside path was rampant this summer, and time had to be spent cutting it back severely.
- The dilapidated fence between the osier bed and the hay meadow was replaced (right), repositioning it closer to the path so that the space between the bed and the fence could be planted up with willow to create new breeding habitat for birds.
- The stone/soil mix laid on the two flights of steps up to the embankment viewing point had gradually eroded or been compressed, resulting in the risers standing proud of the level surface, and so creating a trip hazard. In August the hard crust was loosened with iron bars, fresh stone incorporated, and then the mixture beaten down with a tamper (right).
- In December the Environment Agency cleared away a large willow (see next page) that had fallen across the river. The tree had been standing on the far bank, and so did not belong to Hambrook, but EA piled all the wood on our side, creating a considerable mess in the process.
- In September art students from Canterbury College created a mural (see next page) on the brickwork of the north-east wing of the old railway bridge abutment. This featured an egret catching a fish, sheep, cattle, dragonflies, and a duck. The end result was attractive, but unfortunately in February two lots of large graffiti were sprayed over it. The worst of the graffiti (see next page) could be scrubbed off, but the mural will benefit from touching up with fresh paint, which the students may return to do this summer.





Willow dragged out of river



Mural starting to take shape



Completed mural



Vandalised five months later

- Our educational package is now more or less ready for release, and we have advertised for a volunteer educational coordinator to liaise with the schools.
- A group of about 25 students from UKC were shown round the Marshes for two hours in February.
- The city council launched a Great Stour Riverfest in September to raise the profile of our chalk stream. It was deemed a success and plans are already being laid for a second one in September 2024. A Riverside Strategy was produced to coincide with the Riverfest.
- Production of a detailed leaflet on the wildlife of the Stour was funded by BID (Business Improvement District), with some input from trustees.

Undesirable activity

- Campers were an occasional problem. Our contact now for reporting rough sleepers is Streetlink, reached at <https://www.streetlink.org.uk> or using the smart phone app 'StreetLink' from Apple iTunes/Google Play store or by phoning 0300 500 0914.
- A group of young lads took to partying on the North Embankment (right),



bringing with them two large sofas. These were eventually removed by the boys, but simply relocated to council land on the other side of the river, where, along with other furniture and assorted rubbish, they were very conspicuous to visitors on the riverside path during the winter months.

- A pollution incident in the river in mid-February was due to a break-in at the defunct paper mill at Chartham. Thieves wishing to make off with copper wire in two transformers, drained the coolant oil, allowing it to find its way into the river. As it was light oil, it appeared not to do a great deal of ecological damage, and much of it will have evaporated.
- Graffiti damage to the new mural has already been mentioned on page 3.

Administration

- We were again given a Green Flag Award, the international quality mark for parks and open spaces.
- The five-year management plan is now due for review and, to help us decide the best way forward, we engaged the help of a botanist and an ornithologist, whom we showed round the site in September.
- The city council has submitted an outline planning application for an off-slip on the Dover-bound carriageway of the A2, to feed into the Wincheap retail estate, but this time not linked to an extension to the park and ride car park.

Wildlife

- In 2023 the snake's head fritillary population (right) in the hay field increased from 84 to 147, a 75% rise, but in 2024 the numbers fell back to 109. The relict population in the Boardwalk Field increased from five to eleven.
- Several of the marsh marigolds that were established from seed some years ago produced exceptionally vigorous plants this spring.
- The southern marsh orchid population remained at six in their usual site, but a further three were discovered nearby and two more in a different field.
- Pale toadflax (right) flowered fairly abundantly in one corner of the Boardwalk Field. I had seen this plant there before, but the late arrival of a reduced number of cattle gave the plants a chance to grow before they were chewed down.
- Flooding episodes in November and February attracted up to 160 black-headed gulls and 15 mallard.
- The parakeet abandoned the site in April, reappearing briefly in August, but now seems to have gone for good.
- A pair of great crested grebes appeared on Tonford Lake in January but didn't



stay long; a single coot on the river was joined by a second one in January, but both soon disappeared; peak count of tufted duck on Tonford Lake was 24 in February.

- A pair of stonechats were present from January to February.
- The last snipe of the spring was on 27th April, and the first of the autumn on 29th November. This year the peak was only five cf 20 in 2022-3 and 32 the year before that. This very marked decline is thought to have been due to the total lack of grazing of Tonford Field in summer 2023, leading to the development of a very deep thatch of flattened vegetation, which would have been unsuitable for snipe to feed among.
- Of concern was the continuing decline of several species:
 - Only four bird-days for little grebe, cf 9 the previous winter, and 49 in 2016-7.
 - This year I didn't have a single record of swift, swallow or house martin, and it is now the norm not to record cuckoo.
- Breeding birds included:
 - A pair of mute swans that hadn't nested on Hambrook produced seven well-grown cygnets,
 - For the first time, a pair of linnets were hanging around in a scrubby area, and may well have bred.
 - Reed warbler and garden warbler were both present in the osier bed, and may have nested in the narrow strip that is not harvested by the willow weavers.
- A high point of the year was finding a pair of firecrests (above right) on the Embankment in February, the 110th species recorded on Hambrook.
- Other miscellaneous bird records include a tight flock of 30 Mediterranean gulls flying over in April; a common sandpiper on the river in May; a great white egret on Tonford Lake in November (the 109th Hambrook species); a flock of seven little egrets in a flooded field in November; a dead sparrowhawk on the embankment in January and a dead mute swan found beneath the low tension cables in December.
- A swarm of bees made one of the fence posts their temporary home in May, doubtless to the consternation of visitors on the adjoining path.
- A single squirrel is occasionally seen on the embankment, but in December a group of four was unexpectedly seen feeding on hawthorn berries on the embankment. Discarding the pulpy covering, the squirrels made straight for the single seed.



Thank you

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

Photo credits: Dave Smith for the firecrest

The Trustees
Love Hambrook Marshes CIO

5th April 2024

Registered charity no. 1156473