

Hurst Water Meadow News June 2009

Old Bridge Meadow

The site between the sewage works and the river Thame has been bought by Richard Douglas from the Cook Family Trust. A one-acre strip next to the sewage works has been leased to Dorchester Parish Council for use as a temporary car park in a completely separate transaction. The remaining 3.628 acres between the car park and the river was offered to the Hurst Water Meadow Trust for purchase at less than cost. This gave the trustees the essential time to raise the money. Once the sale was completed, an item was put in the November 2008 *Dorchester News*, and the public appeal for funds started. Full funds were pledged by the middle of March 2009.

The total cost of the project was estimated at £51,722, of which £47,297 was for land purchase, fees and site works and £4,425 for enhancing the wildlife. This was eventually raised by mid-March from the following sources:

- Landfill Communities Fund, via Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment £20,000 (less third party contribution of £2,160), and £4,425 from WREN Gift-aid Fund
- Two Charitable Trusts who request anonymity £10,000
- The Hurst Trust's Land Purchase Fund (from a local donor) £7,500
- South Oxfordshire District Council Capital Grant £3,850
- Dorchester Parish Council £1,000.

The balance was contributed by local donors to whom we are very grateful for their generosity in these hard times. The sale can now go ahead and the plan is to sign the contract as soon as the documentation is complete – about mid-May 2009.

The contractor who improved the drainage in the village has kindly built up the footpath below the kissing gate to make it less steep at no cost to the Trust. It now has a slope of about one in fifteen, which is recommended for wheelchairs. The path surface is limestone scalping, which could probably be left to green over. This should be less muddy in wet weather than covering with topsoil, sowing grass and laying down turf-reinforcement mesh. We can see how it works out, and comments from users would be welcome. The bare soil will be sown with a grass and wild flower seed-mix.

We have had a few objections to the kissing gate, which is essential to keep out motorcycles. Some would like it set further back from the road or painted or replaced with a timber gate. The trustees are open to suggestions, but these changes (except painting) would be costly. Another possibility is to plant a hedge of mixed native species down the site by the fence. This would screen the meadow from the proposed car park and be very good for wildlife.

The next stage will be for the trustees to commission expert reports on managing the land and its wildlife and improving public access. A questionnaire to assess public support received over 100 signatures. Three people have objected, and these have been taken seriously. When the expert advice has been received, the trustees will make action plans, which will be presented to the public at an open meeting, probably in July 2009. The future financing of the Trust's activities will also be discussed.

The site will be very valuable for visiting school parties, since it is more accessible than the Hurst and has shelter from the rain. The work done on fencing and gates was essential for defining and securing the site. It will be a most attractive venue for the public to enjoy in perpetuity.

Overseeding project on the Hurst meadow

The second year's work on soil preparation and sowing was completed by White Horse Contractors and Charles Flower in October 2008 despite adverse weather conditions. All that remains to do is an autumn cut in 2009 and then wait for wild flowers to flourish in abundance over the next few years.

Wild flower project on lower field

This project is now in its sixth year and proving very successful in establishing yellow rattle and other wild flower species with minimal disturbance of the soil and no grazing. Dr John Metcalfe deserves great credit. It is noteworthy that he was awarded an MBE for his public services, mostly to the Abbey.

Entrust audit report

Entrust, the HM Revenue and Customs regulatory body, carried out a thorough audit of our management of four projects that had received grants from the Landfill Communities Fund. We received full marks and Andrew Clements's computerized financial records were highly commended.

Educational visits to the Hurst

Six schools visited in the year, plus two visits from a youth group from Reading, who built coracles and launched them on the river. This was great fun for all and the stretch of river from Buck Pool to Bridge End proved very safe and suitable for coracles, though several of the coracles got wet. As part of the Department of Schools, Families and Children initiative, 'Learning outside the classroom', the Trust has been awarded a 'Quality Badge'. This will help with school visits, since all the County schools are being advised to give preference to venues with a quality badge. We are one of the first in the county.

Tree management

Seven willow trees have been pollarded in the past year as part of long-term management and for public safety.

Grazing on Hurst

This has been minimal, since the seeding projects left little to graze, but two polo ponies grazed the uncut areas on two occasions

Retirement of Hon. Secretary

I have been privileged to hold this post for 13 years, and it has been a great source of enjoyment and inspiration. I think that the time has come to hand over to a highly competent team of trustees and plan to retire – perhaps after the public meeting scheduled for July. I have been ably supported throughout by two Chairmen, the Hon. Treasurer and all the trustees, as well as the local community. Lisbet Clements, who has done much of the Trust's secretarial work over the years, is now the Trust's administrator.

The handover is being planned in detail, and Mike Southon has agreed to be Hon. Secretary. His appointment was unanimously supported by the trustees, as was the appointment of Graham Beland as a trustee. He will organize future working parties (successfully done by Mike Southon on 13 occasions in the past year). The office workload will be shared between Mike Southon and Lisbet Clements. I have every confidence that the Trust will be in excellent and younger hands. I also feel sure that the residents of Dorchester will fully support the work of the Trust as they have done in the past.



Graham Beland and Mike Southon

Peter Pritchard
Hon. Secretary
on behalf of the trustees
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