

WATERCRESS

Spring 2007 Issue 72



AGM Report

The AGM was well attended by thirty people in February, but for the first time in the history of the WWA without the presence of the Mayor. The committee has decided to invite the Mayor to a less formal function - either the Wassail or the summer event in future years. This means that at least he/she actually gets to visit the Reserve and hopefully has some fun at the same time. There were some changes to the committee this year and the current members are listed on the back page. Andy XXXX has resigned after more than ten years of service and we would all like to thank him for his hard work over the years, especially in setting up and tending the Orchard. Andy is Chairman of the Ver Valley Society (who campaign tirelessly to improve the state of the River Ver) so he will still be very busy with his conservation work. We hope he will find the time to pop in and see us all and keep us up to date with the state of the river. Aaron XXXX is stepping down from the committee as his work commitments will be taking up a large part of his time this year, but he hopes to be able to help out at any events that we hold. Thanks, Aaron. Joining the committee is Jack XXXX, who is on the Reserve most days; keeping the bird feeders full, repairing the various buildings and generally helping out with many of the day-to-day practical tasks. Also joining us is Mandy XXXX, who has offered to have a go at being our fundraiser – good luck with this, Mandy.

Jean XXXX has had to give up helping out with the website as she has developed RSI, and the Chairman thanked her for all her assistance over the last year. Sam XXXX (who designed the WaterWheelers logo) has kindly offered to take her place, which is great news.

The official business was followed with an illustrated talk on butterflies by Alan XXXX, the Gardening Advisor from Butterfly Conservation. As mentioned in the previous newsletter, Alan has drawn up a new planting scheme for the Butterfly Garden which will be implemented over the next couple of years. At the moment the ground is being dug over and cleared, and once again, vast amounts of rubble and rubbish are being unearthed. Alan is going to supply us with many of the 'plug plants' (which he grows on behalf of Butterfly Conservation) so we will be supporting their work as well as getting the correct plants that supply nectar for the butterflies.

Bud XXXX, Steve XXXX and Sam XXXX provided photos and display boards showing various WWA activities throughout the years.



THE WASSAIL



The Wassail, held in January, was a great success and resulted in takings of over £600 on the day. The WWA have sent £100 of the proceeds to Monica XXXX for recognising her achievement in completing the 'Cycle the Nile' challenge (more on this overleaf). 200 people turned up at the event which is a Wassail record. The weather helped as it was a lovely day – a blessing after all the weeks of heavy rain and gales! Sandy XXXX, once again, led the proceedings and The Wicket Brood performed their own brand of Morris dancing. The format was slightly different this year and the volume of people caused a few problems (mainly lack of space for the dancers because of the crowds) but these difficulties will easily be resolved in time for the next Wassail. It was all good experience in running what is becoming a large event, and everyone said how much they enjoyed the afternoon. Once again, many, many thanks go to all those who helped to make the Wassail such a success – the cake and jam makers, the raffle ticket sellers, the hot drinks dispensers, the photographers, the awning erectors and those two guys with the funny straw hats!

"Just a note to say how we enjoyed the Sunday afternoon Wassail very much and really felt the community there were uplifted from the experience...." Christine and Dave XXXX

Comments like that make it all worthwhile. Lovely!

MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS

In the unlikely event that you may have overlooked your membership renewal for this year, it is definitely not too late to do so and I would be delighted to hear from you! Our membership base is now around the 200 mark which is at an all-time high. I would like to thank all of you who renewed so promptly, and also to thank those who have contributed a little extra. As I mentioned in the last newsletter, the committee are looking to purchase some new garden machinery this year and the extra funds will enable us to do just that. As Membership Secretary, I have received many encouraging comments, sent in with renewal forms, about how lovely the Reserve is looking and wish to pass on some of these comments to all those who have been, or are involved with the running of the Association. It really makes a difference to feel appreciated! Here a just a few of the comments that I have received.

"Myself and a friend, we are senior citizens, enjoy a stroll to this oasis several times a year. A tonic, so keep up the good work!"
A.M. XXXX

"...we often pop into the Reserve for a few minutes and greatly appreciate the community value of what you all do..."
John

"...you and your Association have done wonderful work in the way of restoration and conservation of wildlife and you are to be congratulated...."
Lady XXXX

"I visited this Reserve for the first time last week and was hugely impressed...."
Kim

"It has been marvellous to see the transformation from tip to haven for wildlife. Congratulations and best wishes to all who have made this lovely spot"
H. XXXX

WATERWHEELERS UPDATE

CYCLE THE NILE CHALLENGE 2007

Many congratulations go to Monica XXXX and Corinne XXXX for successfully completing their challenge at the end of February. Between them they raised a fantastic amount of money for the RNIB and the Alzheimer's Association. The WWA had lent one of the WaterWheeler tandems to them for their training runs and then, ultimately, for the Nile trip. They promptly nicknamed the bike 'Precious' which is what it meant to them, as it was now, temporarily, in their care! Monica has written a short account of how she found the experience. They certainly had an eventful time and both have sent their sincerest thanks to the WWA for trusting them to borrow the tandem. Both riders and tandem returned home safe and sound! Corinne sent in her diary of the trip and the photos below. Her account runs to eleven pages so is too large for inclusion here, but if anyone wants a copy, just contact the Editor. Monica said they were the fastest cyclists in the group – even going ahead of the young and fit 20-30 year old lads! They obviously had the trip of a lifetime and it makes running the WaterWheeler feel a very worthwhile project. All we need now is a couple more tandems!



Monica (pictured right) with Corinne and a very strange looking companion!

Monica's challenge

In February-March 2007, Monica XXXX took on the challenge of cycling along the banks of the river Nile. She succeeded, travelling 250 miles in five days! From flat to undulating terrain, from fertile vegetation to desert, this proved to be a wonderful experience exploring the lifeblood river of Egypt. Monica is blind and so rode a tandem named "Precious" (borrowed from the WaterWheeler of St. Albans) along with her sighted friend Corinne. Monica kept a diary of her challenge, recording her thoughts and experiences of the challenge.

"I did it! I thoroughly enjoyed the cycling and have found a sport that I really enjoy. We were very lucky to have the support and good company of an amazing group of people. Egypt is a fascinating country; it was the trip of a lifetime!"

Some of Monica's experiences

Starting off

"It was incredibly scary to begin as the children are so wonderfully enthusiastic. They were all shouting and jumping in front of the bikes, which meant that Corinne needed full concentration."

The cycling experience

"The children were amazing, all shouting 'hello' and waving. It is a bit like being a celebrity. Corinne described the sights along the way: beautiful minarets, yoked cows drawing water up a water wheel, donkey-led trucks, old men playing dominoes or smoking hookah pipes, and dromedaries travelling in pick-up trucks. We took breaks in the shady courtyards of mosques, hospitals or schools. There was a wonderful array of snacks at every rest: little finger bananas, luscious juicy oranges, a kind of squashed date loaf, crisps, mixed nuts and dried fruit".

Team spirit

"Some cyclists were really unlucky – they fell off or struggled with the heat, injury or tiredness through no fault of their own. There was a fantastic team spirit to get us through. It was great to chat to the other cyclists during snack stops and find out how everyone was doing. There was a really lovely sense of camaraderie among the team."

Completing the challenge

"The final stretch down to the finish line was very sedate, crowded and definitely not a race. It was a really special moment and I had goose bumps all over. There were hugs and kisses all round. A wonderful banner was above the road and a bottle of champagne to baptise us as we completed the ride of our lives."



Well done, to the both of you - and we now hope that you find a way of getting a tandem for the use of visually impaired people in the Sawbridgeworth area so that others may have the opportunity to follow in your footsteps (or pedals!). If any local business people reading this can sponsor Monica or can help her to obtain a bike, then please contact the Editor.

PEOPLE - PAST AND PRESENT

John XXXX (a former WWA Chairman) sent in this account of “Sushi”, a well-known and well-loved local character who once worked an allotment at the Reserve.



“Not an article about Japanese food in a Conservation Newsletter?” you may well ask. No, rather an article about Italian food, drink and hospitality. Sushi was a charming Italian lady whose correct name was Assunto XXXX, who, for many years was a tenant on one of the best-kept allotments on the site, long before and subsequent to the formation of the Watercress Wildlife Association. Prior to the formation of the WWA there were five or six allotments around the Reserve, but in the untilled areas there had been considerable unauthorised dumping of rubbish. Because of this, St. Albans District Council decided to evict the allotment holders and ‘develop’ the area in an unspecified manner. However, allotment holders and local residents had other ideas. By a combined effort they managed to get the Council to change its mind and let it be developed as a conservation area with the allotments remaining in situ. Before permission was granted, the allotment holders had to agree to binding tenancy agreements (that had not previously been the case).



As I was an allotment holder and also involved in the initial action to secure the site for the WWA I was designated “Allotment Representative” and tasked with getting fellow holders to agree to a draft contract for approval by the Council. So it came to pass that I went to visit Sushi who lived with her extended family in Cornwall Road. After I explained the reason for my call, she invited me in and offered me wine and snacks. We then discussed the proposed contract, in the presence of a member of her family. The existing allotment holders, excluding myself of course, were very reluctant to sign any agreement – having had their plots (at nominal rents and without any written agreements) for many years – and Sushi was no exception. After a few minutes of discussion, she said to me in her lovely Italian accent – “Excusa, we gonna talk in Italian. You helpa yourself to some more wine”. I was quite happy for them to continue with their discussion but eventually we reached agreement and I went merrily on my way. The draft agreement was accepted by the Council and so we were able to get possession of the site and the Association was officially set up. Our first task was to commence clearing rubbish from the site (not realising

that this would take months – even years – and numerous skips. Although several of the founder members would be down on site at every spare moment, there were designated Working Days sometimes attracting 15 to 20 supporters. Those workers who had the stamina to continue into the afternoon almost invariably would see Sushi trundling down the entrance drive with her old wheelbarrow which we knew would be laden with delicious home-made pizza, cake and wine. So we would down tools and unwind in the nicest possible way. As a mediocre grower of vegetables I had my own reason for appreciating Sushi because she kept me with a steady supply of young plants to fill in the gaps on my allotment and Cynthia, my wife knew that she could rely on Sushi for fresh herbs and vegetables, if she was ever short. Unfortunately, Sushi was not to be in this world for much longer and when she passed away the turnout at her funeral reflected the high regard in which she was held.

RIP Sushi

John XXXX 2007



Sushi is the lady in the red headscarf serving her delicious wine, pizza and cake.

FLORA AND FAUNA

Your editor had almost forgotten that this is a newsletter about a Nature Reserve and its natural inhabitants!! It can become rather dull each season to just make a list of all the plants and wildlife seen on the Reserve but this is what the place is all about. I took a stroll around at the beginning of April, with my camera and was quite amazed by the variety of plants coming into bloom. The most notable plants showing were:

Greater Stitchwort, Green Alkanet, Marsh Marigold, Bluebell, Red Campion, Lesser Celandine, Primrose, Snake’s Head Fritillary, Ramsons, Ground Ivy, White Deadnettle and Comfrey. The apple trees are just beginning to blossom and the Goat Willow has a fine show of catkins. The catkins are an important source of nectar for early-flying insects and can also attract numbers of night-flying moths on warm evenings.

There have been regular sightings of two Muntjac deer, a Heron was seen catching and eating an unlucky frog and there are masses of small song birds flitting around the Reserve. Jays, Magpies and Crows are seen regularly and two Canada Geese tried to make a home here in March. Although they are beautiful looking birds and it would be good to have more diversity, geese are not welcome visitors. When the Association was set up, the Wildlife Advisory Group and the Groundwork Trust advised us to always discourage geese as they would cause numerous management problems in the future if they stayed and bred on the site. So if you saw Howard (Reserve Manager) in the Mere in his waders flapping his arms around, he was just gently persuading them to settle elsewhere! And it has worked...so far!



WWA COMMITTEE 2007

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Secretary:

Anne XXXX

Treasurer:

Laura XXXX

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Howard XXXX

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