

WASSAIL REPORT Sunday 19th January

Well, it certainly seems a long time since the Wassail ceremony. It turned out to be one of the best yet, especially as we enjoyed the company of the lively, outgoing Mayor, (in both senses of the word!), Councillor Annie Brewster. Annie was a delight and joined in all the events of the afternoon with great enthusiasm. She said afterwards; "I loved being part of the Apple Wassail. It will be one of my more memorable experiences, dancing with big sticks and hanging pieces of toast in apple trees. I am absolutely delighted to support our wonderful Watercress Wildlife Association which has worked so hard to preserve the ancient cress beds as a beautiful nature reserve for us all. The Association's strong and unique vision certainly enriches the life of our community".

Very nicely put, Annie.



We were very lucky to have been able to put on the event at all, as the ground was saturated and everyone needed their wellies just to get around the Reserve. Just a short time after, the wet weather continued and soon the Ver was flowing over the banks and flooding large sections of the site (more on the flooding later).

The event raised £557 on the day, so a big 'Thank You' goes to all who were so generous, either by donations, help on the day or even both!

Special thanks go to Aylett Nursery who loaned a solid silver cup to Howard (Reserve Manager), to use as a Wassail Bowl. Howard received the cup at a prize-giving ceremony the previous day as winner of the Cottonmill and Nunnery Allotment Summer Show that Aylett Nursery help to sponsor.

And the delightful Wicket Brood gained an extra dancer for the afternoon!

How can we possibly match this, next year?

A MESSAGE FROM THE MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

So far 174 members have renewed this year. If you still wish to support the Association and have not yet renewed, we would love to hear from you.

Our donation box was broken into recently (or rather dealt a blow with a large brick which opened the door) but the WWA Chairman managed to take it home and repair and strengthen it. Now it is back in place. Whoever was responsible didn't even take the money so it seems it was just an act of pointless vandalism. Very annoying!

The donation box is proving to be quite an asset and brings in a small, but regular income that all helps towards maintain the nature reserve.

Howard (Reserve Manager)



ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting took place on Sunday 16th March at the Sub-Aqua Club in Cottonmill Lane. Reports were given and the new committee was duly elected. After a break for refreshments, Liz, from the Herts Butterfly Conservation group, gave a really interesting and informative illustrated talk on the butterflies likely to be found locally.

FLOODING SPECIAL

Here, in St. Albans, we were very lucky not to experience the flooding that caused so many difficulties for the residents of large swathes of the British countryside during the spring of this year. But there were incidents enough to cause concern along the length of the River Ver, especially to the people living at Old Sopwell Gardens where the flood waters came seriously close to their properties.



The land alongside the river is a designated flood plain and for the first time in many years it did its job. The most affected areas were Verulamium Park, the allotments in Cottonmill Lane (above), Sopwell Nunnery Open Space, and our very own WWA Reserve. In all the 38 years that I have lived in the Sopwell area, I have never seen the river rise so high that the water was flowing over the banks and onto the surrounding areas. This resulted in the water level at the WWA reaching record levels and staying high for many weeks. The WWA Reserve was truly a wetland habitat.

The site is still slowly drying out and we have only recently been able to open up all of the pathways that became waterlogged. Surprisingly, months later, it is hard to believe that the only way to access the Ver side of the site was in chest waders! Pictured right is the place where we held the Wassail a few weeks earlier before the deluge. We had put down a thick layer of barley straw on the day of the Wassail to soak up the excess sogginess, which just about held out for the afternoon, before the water rose. When the flood waters receded, the straw turned into a rotting mess, so we raked it up and used it to fill in a deep depression on an area which will be opened up to the public in due course....so at least it was recycled into something useful.

FLOODING SPECIAL

The main inconvenience to having all this water on site was the virtual abandonment of the winter work programme. We were hoping to do another section of hedgelaying but it was not possible, so this has been re-scheduled for the autumn. And much of the pollarding/coppicing maintenance programme had to be abandoned. It is going to be a busy autumn catching up!



The vegetation is growing particularly vigorously after all the watering it received over the wet spring period. It is only very recently that it has become possible to take the ride-on mower around the site without it sinking! The grass was so high it had to be strimmed down first, followed by a cut with a hand-pushed mower. What a slow, laborious task. But I'm sure our members and visitors realise the difficulties we are experiencing and will be patient as to why the site is looking in need of some serious TLC!

Sheila (Editor)



A new variety of aquatic daffodils....no watering required.

WORK PARTY NEWS

January: The weather was appalling and we nearly cancelled the work party, but as a few hardy souls made the effort to turn up we managed to do some tasks. Previously, Howard and Steve had managed some of the annual coppicing and there were large piles of cut material left lying around the site. This was gathered up and taken to the bonfire site ready for burning. Everyone was so wet and cold they decamped to the Reserve Manager's residence for hot drinks and cake.

February: As mentioned earlier, the barley straw laid down for the Wassail was turning into a soggy, rotting mess and would stop the grass re-growing so the volunteers gathered it up and put it on the paved area to dry out for use later. Steve and Howard made attempts to raise the level of the river bank to try and stem the flow of water coming onto the site. Unfortunately, to no avail!

March: Volunteers worked on the riverbank, preparing the area for a properly constructed dead hedge. This is to screen the rather unsightly works that have been undertaken on the opposite bank by the Council and Countryside Management Service.

April: The entrance area was cleared of unwanted vegetation.

May: Plans for the work party changed when we found a fallen willow blocking the second bridge. This was cleared away to the bonfire site. Then the brambles in front of the bird hide were trimmed back so visitors can see the feeders from the comfort of the bird hide.



BIRD HIDE CODE

The code to enter the bird hide is **XXXX**. Please make sure the door and windows are closed when you leave, for security reasons. There are plenty of books, wall charts and posters to help with identification purposes, and it is a great place to shelter if it starts to rain! If you do see anything unusual, feel free to write it up on the sightings board inside the hide, or on the blackboard outside. We are always interested in recording what is found around the Reserve.

WORK PROJECTS PLANNED FOR 2014

As it has been impossible to crack on with many of the planned tasks because of the flooding Steve and Howard thought this would be a good opportunity to have a go at fixing the second small bridge. They have been working very hard and have now completed this task. The old chicken wire has been removed, any decaying boards replaced and the remaining boards cleaned of years of accumulated muck and moss. New chicken wire was then stapled to the boards. So, that is two down and one to go. Well done, lads.

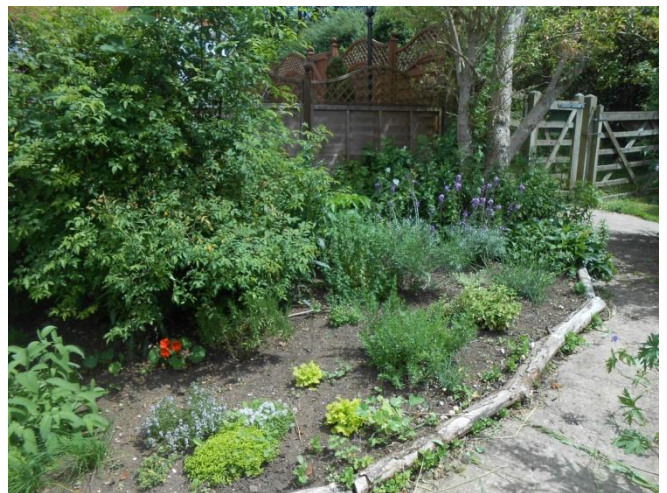
We'll try and get you some help for the next one! In fact, the July work party is a possible good date to gather volunteers to help remove the chicken wire. We do want to get this final bridge renovated as soon as possible.

Steve has ordered and received the materials required to do the job to renovate this last bridge so this is the priority task for the site.

HERB GARDEN and BUTTERFLY MEADOW

Local volunteer, Margarita, is doing a splendid job of renovating and maintaining the Herb Garden. It has never looked so neat and tidy before! Our thanks go to her. So Margarita: **"Labai ačiū"**

And if any members can help to weed the Butterfly Meadow it would be much appreciated. Just contact the Reserve Manager for more information.



If anyone is keen to try their hand at some willow weaving, volunteers are needed to have a go at making a new low, woven fence around the edge of the Butterfly. The original one has finally disintegrated and needs renewing. There is plenty of material around the site that can be used. Just come along to the next work party or contact the Reserve Manager. It doesn't need to be anything fancy...just some short hazel or willow uprights interwoven with lengths of willow. Simple, but effective....and it looks pretty, too!

WORK PARTY DATES 2014

Sunday 29th June: The Allotment meadow needs scything. Start removal of chicken wire and staples from main bridge. General cutting back of overgrown paths.

Sunday 27th July: Removal of chicken wire and staples if not already finished.

Continue scything of the Allotment meadow.

Sunday 31st August: Scything and general maintenance

Sunday 28th September: Hedgelaying

Sunday 26th October: Hedgelaying/coppicing

Sunday 30th November: Hedgelaying/pollarding

Sunday 28th December: A post Christmas social, perhaps?

All ages are welcome. Work parties start at **10am** and finish around **1pm**. Light refreshments are served around midday. Tools and gloves are provided.

WATERWHEELERS

Graham and Yvonne completed the St. Albans Rotary Club 25th Charity Bike Ride back in May. They cycled the 40 mile route but you could also choose to do 10, 20 or 30 miles. Graham's wife, Jill, along with friend Alison, did a shorter route than the Graham and Yvonne....but they were not on a tandem!

WATLING VIEW SCHOOL

Staff and pupils from Watling View School continue to come along and help on Wednesday mornings, weather permitting. They have finished most of the cutting back in the Orchard and are now helping with general tidying where needed. But the best part of the morning has to be having our refreshments in the peace and quiet of the old allotment, watching the butterflies and listening to the bird song.

GROUP VISITS

We have had group visits from a Cub Scout Group, the Woodcraft Folk and various U3A rambling groups. The Cub Scouts were great as they managed to find a complete set of site keys that the Editor lost one afternoon whilst cutting the grass. Having spent hours looking for them, she gave up hope of ever finding them. But they were found by a very observant lad, hidden away by the main gate, where he was searching for bugs as part of his Nature badge. Thanks go to him from an extremely grateful Editor!

WWA COMMITTEE 2014

Officers

Steve/Chairman

Janet/Secretary

Howard/Reserve Manager & Membership Secretary

Mandy/Treasurer

Members

Sheila/Newsletter Editor

Pat/Member

Derryn/Member

Penny/Social Secretary

Sam/Webmaster

Margaret/Management Plan Advisor

BIRDS

Richard and Rebecca, regular visitors to the Reserve, managed to take this photo of the only ducklings we had this year. There were about a dozen to start with but the family has since disappeared, so whether they survived and are somewhere along the River Ver, is not known.

It has been a very poor year for waterfowl, generally, with only two Moorhen chicks seen, and no



baby Coots at all. The Gadwalls and Tufted ducks that have been fairly regular visitors have, unfortunately, not stayed and nested. Such a shame, but we live in hope that one day they'll settle here.

Red Kites are becoming a regular sight in the area, and it is lovely to see the Swifts are back in good numbers. They nest in Ramsbury Road and are a sign that summer has truly arrived!