

# Vale Landscape Heritage Trust

Winter 2019-2020



## Looking forward to 2020

A new year, a new decade and lots to look forward to. Our land holding increased in 2019 with the purchase of two more floodplain meadows. The two new sites; Mill Bank near Fladbury and Wheeler's Meadow at North Littleton, offer exciting opportunities to bring back more flower-rich meadows to the Avon Valley.

Mill Bank Meadows featured in our previous newsletter (autumn 2019). Our most recent acquisition is Wheeler's Meadow, an 8.5-acre floodplain meadow, one of a series of long narrow meadows adjacent to the river Avon under Cleeve Hill at North Littleton. We already own Brodie's Meadow (another of the long meadow series) and on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2019 as a fantastic end to our 20<sup>th</sup> year, we exchanged contracts for Wheeler's Meadow. This meadow lies one field further along from Brodie's so is in a perfect location to allow us to transfer seed from the more flower-rich Brodie's Meadow. Wheeler's has been cut early for silage in recent years and so has lost some of the characteristic wildflowers associated with floodplains, but is in ideal condition for work to reinstate these missing plants. We will be surveying the meadow during 2020 and referring back to surveys carried out in the 1980s to see which species are still found here and which should be here. With patience and appropriate management, we aim to turn back the clock and restore this meadow to its former glory. The purchase of this meadow was funded by Severn Waste Services through the Landfill Communities Fund.

We will also continue to manage our orchards, planting new trees and pruning existing trees to ensure these sites remain as important landscape features where wildlife can thrive, while providing us with an income to help fund the management of the sites. Funding will be a challenge this decade, with changes to farming payments and stewardship schemes as we leave the European Union. We have been incredibly fortunate to receive Landfill Communities Fund monies from Severn Waste Services over the past few years which has allowed us to purchase and manage around 320 acres of land in the Vale but this funding is likely to decrease as the amount of waste going to landfill decreases. So, we are looking at other funding opportunities, from partnership working on projects like the market gardening history (and hovels) project to floodplain meadow enhancement schemes. We are also looking at ways to increasing the number of Friends who make regular contributions. Friends' contributions will become much more important to us so please consider putting a standing order in place with your bank to make regular (monthly or annual) donations of an amount appropriate to yourself to help us continue our work. Thank you.



*Many of our projects are funded by Severn Waste Services through the Landfill Communities Fund. Without their support, VLHT could not own, or protect, anywhere near as much land.*



## Looking back at 20 20: 20 highlights from our first 20 years (1999 – 2019)

1. 1999 – On 14<sup>th</sup> May 1999 our first trustees signed a declaration of trust, to create Vale Landscape Heritage Trust (VLHT).
2. 2000 – on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2000 VLHT became Registered Charity number 1080109.
3. 2002 – Thanks to a grant from Worcestershire County Council we took over the tenancy for Hampton Orchard under the Evesham Custom. As well as the old plum trees this little orchard has many wildflowers and is home to the rare Noble Chafer beetle.
4. 2004 – Evesham-born Actor/Entertainer Alistair McGowan visited Hampton Orchard to see our volunteers at work which resulted in some excellent publicity for VLHT.
5. 2004 – An article in the Evesham Journal covering Alistair McGowan’s visit to Hampton Orchard brought VLHT to the attention of Severn Waste Services (SWS) who offered Landfill Communities Fund money to purchase land. This has allowed VLHT to grow far bigger and faster than anyone could have imagined in the early days.
6. 2004 – SWS funding allowed the purchase of our first two floodplain meadows, Gore Meadows near Fladbury and Littleton Meadows in North Littleton. This has allowed the reinstatement of more traditional management regime of hay-cutting and aftermath grazing which is helping to restore the wildflower grassland at these sites.
7. 2006 – Further SWS funding allowed the purchase and management of the first section of our important wetland site at Lower Moor. This site attracts many birds (see latest report in this newsletter) as well as supporting many insects including some quite rare species.
8. 2007 – VLHT’s first manager was employed to run the trust and manage the increasing amount of land. He summed up the fortunes of VLHT quite nicely when he said *“In the case of Vale Landscape Heritage Trust it would be true to use the phrase great oaks from little acorns grow or more accurately beautiful orchards from little plum stones grow.”*
9. 2007 – Funding from both the Tubney Charitable Trust and SWS allowed us to purchase 70 acres of traditional plum orchard at Hipton Hill. This site is not only a wonderful landscape feature it also has a spectacular display of orchids in summer.
10. 2008 – Our orchards at Hipton Hill were officially opened by the eminent writer, broadcaster and commentator on environmental protection and sustainable development Jonathon Porritt CBE.
11. 2010 – We extended our landholding at Lower Moor to 50 acres of riverside pasture, hay meadow and wetland. Protecting even more habitat vital to the wildlife in this area.
12. 2012 – We started our present Higher-Level Stewardship agreement with Natural England which helps fund the management of many of our sites until 2021.
13. 2012 – We purchased a tractor and topper enabling appropriate management of the grassland at Hipton and other sites.



9. Orchids thrive at Hipton Hill orchards

14. 2014 – VLHT was part of a three-year Lottery funded project, Three Counties Traditional Orchard Project working to restore and celebrate orchards in Herefordshire Gloucestershire & Worcestershire. Over 80% of our traditional orchards have vanished locally as farming practices have changed and land has been cleared or developed. One third of the UK’s surviving traditional orchards are in the Three Counties – just 31 precious square miles.

15. 2015 – SWS funded the purchase of the beautiful Naunton Court Orchard, a traditional old apple and pear orchard. The site is now home to our Worcestershire apple collection inspired by Wade Muggleton’s book *The Apples and Orchards of Worcestershire*.

16. 2016 - Volunteers carrying out practical work on our sites put in over 1,000 hours and this continues each year.

17. 2018 – VLHT are part of the Lottery funded Market Gardening Heritage Project being run by Worcestershire Achieve and Archaeology Services, recording, restoring and celebrating the hovels and associated market gardening heritage of the Vale.

18. 2019 – VLHT appointed a part-time assistant to help manage our increasing amount of land.

19. 2019 – To celebrate BBC Hereford and Worcester’s 30<sup>th</sup> year and VLHT’s 20<sup>th</sup> year we planted a birthday orchard at our North Littleton Community Orchard site.

20. 2019 – Again, thanks to SWS we purchased two more floodplain sites in our 20<sup>th</sup> year, Mill Bank Meadows near Fladbury and Wheeler’s Meadow at North Littleton.

Here’s to the next 20 years!

### Volunteers

2019 was another busy year for our volunteers, undertaking 47 tasks totalling 1,152 hours, so when I say “we couldn’t do what we do without them” it really is true.

They have removed old hazardous barbed wire from Ian’s Wood, coppiced scrub at South Littleton Nature Reserve, pruned fruit trees and dug a small pond at Stocken, helped lay a hedge and planted fruit trees at North Littleton, repaired fences and managed scrub at Littleton Meadows, cut back vegetation to keep the permissive route open at Lower Moor, planted fruit trees at Naunton Court Orchard, repaired the gate and cut back vegetation at Gore Meadows, Planted trees and hedging at Mill Bank, and at Hipton they cleared scrub and pruned fruit trees as well as picking plums for the Plum Festival sales.

*If you would like to get involved and help us make a real difference, please get in touch.*

### Tree planting at Mill Bank Meadows

As part of OVO Energy’s I Dig Trees campaign, with the aim of planting 1 million trees, we were awarded 750 small trees and shrubs to plant as part of a wildlife corridor across the top of the bank at Mill Bank Meadows. A further 250 hedging shrubs have been funded by Severn Waste Services and so the corridor will stretch the full 480metres (over ¼ mile) of the site.

We also had five larger Beech trees donated by Fladbury resident Mike Izod, author of *A Fladbury Lad*. These trees have been planted at a high point at Mill Bank Meadows where they will be visible from Fladbury for years to come.



Mike Izod at Mill Bank with one of the beech trees

### BBC Hereford & Worcester 30th birthday orchard

As part of VLHT's 20th year celebrations we joined up with BBC Hereford & Worcester (H&W) to plant a birthday orchard celebrating the radio station's 30th year. The site chosen is at our North Littleton Community Orchard site between Cleeve Prior and the Littletons where it forms part of the replanted orchard. The morning of the planting was bright and fresh (one of the few nice days this autumn/winter so far) and we were joined by Mark Hellings and Justyn Surrall from BBC Hereford & Worcester. An enjoyable morning was had by all and VLHT and the orchard were mentioned through the day on the radio station as well as a short feature on Midlands Today news.



Planting the BBC Hereford & Worcester Orchard

The trees supplied by H&W are a mixture of apples and pears of traditional varieties and include three Worcester Black pears. The Worcester Black is synonymous with Worcestershire and can be traced back to the Worcestershire Bowmen who carried banners bearing a pear tree laden with fruit at the battle of Agincourt. More information about the Worcester Black can be found in *The Worcester Black Pear* written by Wade Muggleton, published in 2018 with proceeds being donated towards the work of VLHT.

### 20 species from 20 years of conservation work

Our sites offer refuge for an increasing number of species of plants and animals from the small and obscure to the large and the attractive, here are just twenty from our first 20 years:

**Great Burnet** - with careful management this plant is increasing at Gore, Brodie's and Mike's Meadows.

**Noble Chafer Beetle** – nationally rare but found in all of VLHT's old orchards.

**Grizzled Skipper** – this tiny butterfly is rare in Worcestershire but is increasing at Hipton Hill.

**Otter** – recovering nationally from years of persecution, seen at Lower Moor in recent times.

**Barn Owl**- thanks to the work of a couple of our volunteers Barn Owls are doing well in the Vale.

**Greater Butterfly Orchid** – uncommon in Worcestershire but thriving at Hipton Hill and found at Stocken.

**Short-winged Conehead** – an uncommon bush-cricket which is abundant at Lower Moor.

**Red Kite** – sightings are increasing over our sites in the Littletons and the Lenches.

**Lesnes Earwig** – a nationally scarce insect found on many of our sites.

**Narrow-leaved Bird's-foot-trefoil** – this plant is abundant at Hipton Hill and has been found at Lower Moor.

**Water Shrew** – not common and very secretive. Found once at Naunton Court Orchard.

**Mistletoe Weevil** – this tiny but beautiful beetle has been found at Naunton Court Orchard.

**Scarce Chaser** – this once scarce dragonfly is often seen at Lower Moor and Haines Meadows.

**Brown Hare** – occasionally seen at Haines Meadows, Naunton Court Orchard and Hipton.

**Curlew** – declining across the country, seen annually at Lower Moor.

**Marbled White** – once scarce, this butterfly is now found at all of VLHT's sites.

**Tubular Water Dropwort** – an uncommon wetland plant but abundant at Lower Moor.

**Basket Longhorn Beetle** – a tiny rare beetle living in dead twigs on fruit trees at Naunton Court Orchard.

**Emperor Moth** – caterpillars of this beautiful moth have been found at Hipton Hill.

**Bee Orchid** – this wonderful flower appears at many of our sites, including Stocken and North Littleton.

*Vale Landscape Heritage Trust (VLHT) is a registered charity, number 1080109.*

*We work to protect and preserve the environment in and around the Vale of Evesham and Pershore. We work with volunteers, funders, farmers and the government to secure the future of over 320 acres.*

## Birds at Lower Moor and Haines Meadows, October – December 2019.

Rob Prudden

The beginning of October remained warm and summer-like, on the 5th a small group of 10 **Swallows** and 5 **House Martins** feeding over the wetlands were late passage birds, building up fat reserves before continuing their long journey to wintering areas thousands of miles to the south. Buzzards had realised that large hay bales wrapped in black material retained heat from the sun and both early morning and late afternoon up to ten birds gathered to perch and enjoy the stored heat.

Although wintering wildfowl had already started to arrive by the beginning of the period, numbers remained low, this being in part due to continuing flood conditions. When prolonged flooding occurs, birds tend to move off and congregate in large numbers on extensive flooding further south in the Severn & Avon valleys. Having said that, relatively small numbers did remain at the wetlands, including up to 150 **Teal**, 44 **Wigeon** and 8 **Shoveler**. Large numbers of grazing geese remained throughout with maximums of 420 **Greylag Geese** & 345 **Canada Geese**. Wintering wetland wading birds were low but included up to 20 **Snipe** and 100 **Lapwings**, surprisingly only 15 **Golden Plovers** were seen, this on one single date.

A neighbouring farmer had grown several areas of winter wild bird feed crops alongside the meadows at Wick, hence good finch flocks were seen on the tops of surrounding hedgerows, these included up to 200 **Linnets**, 30 **Greenfinches** & 200 **Chaffinches**. Typically, when large concentrations of small birds occur hunting **Sparrowhawks** soon find the ready food source and during the period four individual birds were present most days. **Ravens** are particularly early breeding birds often with the onset being in January and February. Two pairs were already holding territories near the wetlands and on fine days during late December aerial boundary disputes regularly occurred over the meadows. **Mistle Thrushes** are another early breeding species and a male bird was singing continuously on 20th December as it proclaimed its chosen territory. Three **Stonechats** wintered around the meadows and were seen regularly throughout.

Scarcer birds included a **Dunlin** with the wintering **Lapwing** flock on 28th October, **Barn Owls** hunting over the site on several dates and a **Red Kite** overhead on 28th December. Only the second site record of a **Great White Egret** occurred on 6th November. The bird flew over Lower Moor before landing in wet channels at Wick, it stayed only briefly, leaving the area north east shortly after. Only a few years ago this species was a huge rarity in the UK, but small numbers now breed in Somerset. It seems likely that this species will expand its range quickly, in line with what occurred with its close relative the **Little Egret** which can now be seen at most wetlands in the county during the late summer months. Up to ten **Chiffchaffs** were regularly seen feeding around the car park at Lower Moor during brighter days in December. Although once just a summer visitor, with milder winters more birds are able to remain in the UK. Their preferred sites tend to be around water treatment plants or river meadows where winter gnats occur and emerge on sunny or even grey milder days. Staying in Britain gives these birds the chance to claim the best breeding territories when spring arrives, their body condition should also be good, not having used up body fat on long migrations. Remaining during the winter period is a risky strategy though, as prolonged cold spells can lead to the demise of large numbers of these pioneers (on occasions over 90% are lost), but this winter has been favourable so far.



Chiffchaff



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