



Annual Review 2005-2006

Annual Report of the Trustees for the period 1 April 2005 to 31 March 2006

From the Chair

This has been a busy and successful year for the Little Ouse Headwaters Project, during which we have raised awareness of our work both locally and nationally. There has been plenty of publicity in the local press, both for specific events and the work of the project, and our national profile was increased considerably when we beat off competition from a record number of entries to win the CIWEM/RSPB Living Wetlands Award 2006 – this is a national award, sponsored jointly by the Chartered Institution of Water and Environmental Management and the RSPB. Winning the award really is a major achievement for our small voluntary organisation, and everyone associated with the project should be proud of this success. The award has undoubtedly helped to boost the success of River Link Appeal, which has gone from strength to strength, thanks to the enthusiasm and expertise of our appeal manager Sarah Grieveson and the hard work of a number of the Trustees. This appeal has been particularly important in raising matched funding for some of the larger grants we have received, such as the Heritage Lottery Fund and the European TEN Project. Early 2006 saw the completion of the TEN Project, celebrated with an international seminar in Thetford attended by representatives from all the partner organisations. During the year, thanks in large part to the TEN funding, we were able to continue our work to integrate the restoration and conservation of our unique sites with improved public access and understanding of the landscape and its wildlife. As a result of our involvement in TEN, we completed the initial work to restore Betty's Fen, improved access on Blo' Norton Fen, extended the restoration at Hinderclay, installed unique tree sculptures incorporating information panels on all our sites and finally replaced the old wooden footbridge linking Norfolk and Suffolk at Blo' Norton Fen. It was extremely hard work, particularly given the complex financial requirements of the European project, but I hope you will agree the end result has been well worth it.

Our work during the year has been made possible by the financial support of numerous sponsors and the time given by the many volunteers associated with the project, including the Trustees, and I would like to record my thanks to all of them.

Restoring Habitats

The Project continues to manage six sites, comprising a total of over 36 hectares. In the project area we have a mosaic of different habitats, requiring various approaches to be taken to their restoration. On the Frith, regular topping of the nettles and manual removal of thistles together with sheep grazing continues to bring about improvements to the diversity of this former acid grassland. On the Lows we have used both grazing by sheep and mowing of the wetter areas to continue to improve this wet grassland, although topping of the nettles is still required to supplement the effects of the grazing. We are also restoring the hedgerows on these sites, by planting up gaps in the existing hedges with a variety of native species.

On Hinderclay Fen, further scrub clearance and mowing on the wet fen have continued to contribute to the restoration of the fen vegetation of this site. We also partially filled in some very deep pools which had been dug some years ago but had never supported any aquatic life.

On Betty's Fen, major excavations were undertaken to create two shallow scrapes with a raised path running between them and providing access through the site to the river bank. The intention is to see how these develop as water levels change and vegetation re-establishes itself in this area.

On Blo' Norton Fen we mowed areas of sedge and other fen vegetation, establishing a rotational pattern of cutting so that parts of the fen are mown every 4-6 years – this should help the recovery of the beds of saw sedge that had previously been grown over by trees and scrub, and prevent any scrub from re-establishing.

Along the riverbank many of the crack willows were pollarded last winter. As well as preventing them from falling across the path, this technique prolongs the life of the tree and produced a growth form that provides suitable habitat for a wide variety of birds, mammals and invertebrates.

The winter also saw the installation of many nest boxes, designed both for hole-nesting birds and for owls and kestrels, on our sites. These were funded by generous donations to the River Link appeal, allowing us to afford very durable 'woodcrete' boxes that will withstand attack from woodpeckers and grey squirrels.

Involving people

We have continued to run work parties every month on our sites, and the efforts of our volunteers have made a significant difference, perhaps most noticeably in the planting of hundreds of metres of new hedging. We are very grateful to all those who have helped with practical site management tasks during the year – on some of our sites this work counts as a contribution towards the match funding for our grants, so has a double benefit to the project.

This year saw significant improvements to public access to our sites. We replaced and extended sections of boardwalk at Blo' Norton Fen (using recycled plastic material, which will last longer and need less maintenance than wood), experimented with the use of "Netlon" mesh to strengthen path surfaces and substantially extended the Blo'Norton fens footpath network. A new loop of path was opened along the riverbank and across Betty's Fen to the road.

During the year we also commissioned a number of "tree sculptures" created by local artists, Ben Plats-Mills, Andy Manning and Ray Brooks, which were designed to accommodate information panels explaining the history, management and wildlife of each of our sites. The panels were designed for us by local student Erica Phillips, using text and pictures both provided by the project and generously donated by a number of other wildlife photographers. In this way we have combined art and information to provide added interest for people visiting our sites. Use of the sites by walkers has certainly increased during the year as more people have become aware of the permissive footpaths. Our guided walks often act as an introduction to the fens, even for many local people who have often not been aware that the sites now have open access.

As well as those who volunteer to help restore the sites that we manage, many other people contributed expertise and time to help run the project. We are very grateful to everyone who makes a contribution to the success of this project.

Activities

Twenty People joined us on a hot sunny 1st May for our May Day walk, starting from Redgrave and walking through part of Redgrave Fen (managed by Suffolk Wildlife Trust) before crossing the B1113 and moving on to our own sites, the Frith and the Lows, before returning to Redgrave. The walk was notable for many of us for our first sightings of swifts for the summer. We also held another enjoyable cycle ride around the Little Ouse headwaters in June, when in addition to our sites, two local churches, Thelnetham Mill and Thelnetham Vineyard were open to visitors. Forty people took part in this event. A very successful Bat Walk was held in September when, as well enjoying seeing Alto pipistrelles squeezing out between the door and arch at Thelnetham Church, we recorded some exciting new species for the valley: our bat detectors picked up the calls of Nathusias's Pipistrelle for which there are few UK records, Barbastelle, a species of Conservation Concern, and Serotine, an uncommon species restricted to southern England. Many thanks to Arthur Rivett and Nick Woods for sharing their expertise in bat identification.

Our by now traditional Winter walk was held just as we experienced a rather belated "white Christmas" on 27th December, this circular walk from South Lopham to the Little Ouse was attended by 20 people who braved a grey and snowy start and were rewarded with brilliant sunshine. LOHP trustee Rob Web led us along the ancient green lanes and paths from the village to the fens.

Biological Recording

Local natural history groups have made an enormous contribution to our wildlife records, enabling us to monitor changes in their biodiversity over time. This year the Suffolk Moth Group, and both the Suffolk and the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Societies, have added to the biological records for the sites that we manage. These records help us to build-up an inventory of our remaining the species and to monitor the impacts of the restoration work that we are undertaking in the valley.

These impacts are most obvious at sites such as Betty's Fen, where we have undertaken major restoration work. By the end of the year, the re-instatement of open wetland there had already resulted in an explosion in amphibian numbers, with the new scrape heaving with frogs, toads and their spawn. The first plant life was starting to appear underwater and promising the return of a wide variety of species that had not been seen on the site for many years.

We are keen to encourage biological recording more widely in the valley by supporting the County hedgerow and ancient tree surveys. We also hosted a well-attended training day for the Suffolk hedgerow survey.

TEN (Transnational Ecological Network)

The TEN project ended on December 31st, by which time it had made an enormous contribution to the work of the LOHP. With partnership funding, it enabled us to undertake works that included the major restoration project at Betty's Fen, much of the restoration at Hinderclay Fen, the construction of the new footbridge, other access improvements at Blo'Norton Fen and the installation of our interpretative sculptures.

As well as providing material support, the TEN project enabled us to exchange expertise and best practice with our partner projects in the UK and on the continent. These invaluable contacts will long outlive the TEN initiative and help to strengthen our work for many years to come. TEN also became a vehicle for spreading our own experience and expertise more widely: In October, Helen gave a presentation about the LOHP's work at an international course on river corridor restoration and we are pleased to have been able to contribute to the production of a practitioner's handbook on ecological corridors.

The end of the financial year saw us preparing for the final TEN event, an international seminar to be held in Thetford, including a visit to the LOHP sites, official opening of the new bridge and our second international picnic lunch on the Frith!

Membership

Our membership has remained at about 80 with many members becoming Friends of the Fens and signing the Gift Aid declaration, which allows us to reclaim tax at no expense to the member. These funds are an important contribution to our unrestricted funds. Lindsay Medus took over from Paul Brown as our membership secretary in December. The Board is very grateful both to Paul for all of his hard work and to Lindsay for taking on this task.

Members of the Board of Trustees

Changes to the Honorary Officer posts made at the 2005 AGM took effect in December 2005. At the end of the year the composition of the Board was as follows:

Jo-Anne Pitt (Chair and trustee nominated by Blo'Norton Parish Council)

Reg Langston (Honorary Treasurer and trustee nominated by Hinderclay Parish Council)

Nigel Clark (Vice-chair)

Helen Smith (Honorary Secretary)

Rowena Langston

Mike Wraight

Bob Hayward (trustee nominated by Redgrave Parish Council)

Dan Haskin (trustee nominated by Thelnetham Parish Council)

Rob Webb (trustee nominated by South Lopham Parish Council)

Peter Coster

Funding our work

Grants

Our major grants from the Heritage Lottery 'Your Heritage' Fund and the European Union Interreg Fund (through the TEN project), together with our Countryside Stewardship scheme, funded our core habitat restoration work together with improvements to access and interpretation. We were very grateful to Suffolk County Council for financial help with several of our major projects south of the border and to Norfolk County Council for managing the Blo' Norton Fen footbridge construction project on our behalf. Our River Link Appeal, launched at the end of 2004, made a very significant contribution to many aspects of our work this year (below).

Like most landowners and farmers, we were still awaiting our first payments through the new Single Payment Scheme at the end of the financial year.

The River Link Appeal

Our appeal, primarily to grant-providing Trusts, provided a gross income of over £40,000. Much of this income was raised for specific projects, covering the whole range of our work, but some of it was unrestricted, giving the Board much needed flexibility to fund running and on-going routine management

and land rental costs. The Board is indebted to the Appeal team and particularly to our appeal manager, Sarah Grieveson. The success of the Appeal this year resulted primarily from her extremely hard work, dedication and efficiency. Sarah's work is supported by the appeal's Honorary Vice-patrons, The Most Hon the Marquess of Cholmondeley, Peter

Frost, Esq, Her Grace the Duchess of Grafton, GCVO and Dr Frederick Ratcliffe, CBE, JP, to whom we are also indebted.

Acknowledgements

The Little Ouse Headwaters Project is a voluntary, charitable organisation whose work is dependent on commitment, goodwill and financial support of individuals, partner organisations and sponsors. It does not employ any staff and so is entirely dependent on the volunteers who contribute in many different ways to its success. We gratefully acknowledge their hard work and support. We are also grateful to the following for their substantial financial support in 2005-2006:

European Union Regional Development Fund (North Sea Interreg Programme), Heritage Lottery Fund, DEFRA, Suffolk County Council, Norfolk County Council, Mary Webb Trust, Jack Patson Charitable Trust, D'Oyly Carte Charitable Trust, Marquess of Cholmondeley, Idlewild Trust, Pennycress Trust, Paul Bassham Charitable Trust, Somerleyton Charitable Trust, CLA Charitable Trust, John Jarrold Trust, Fitzmaurice Charitable Trust, Leslie Mary Carter Charitable Trust, Denis Buxton Trust, Dr Frederick Ratcliffe, Aquarius Charitable Foundation, R & J Garner Trust, Charles Hayward Foundation, Mackintosh Foundation, Robert Kiln Charitable Trust, Steel Charitable Trust, Gerald Micklem Charitable Trust, BBC Radio Norfolk Helpline Charity Trust, Kirby Laing Foundation.

The Little Ouse Headwater Project- (LOHP) is a company Limited by guarantee and is governed under company law by Memorandum and Articles of Association. The Company's registered number is 4684054 and its charity registration number is 1098232. Its registered office is Waveney Cottage, Redgrave Road, South Lopham, Diss, Norfolk IP22 2JN