

# **Kemerton Conservation Trust**

## **Report to the Governors**

**John Clarke with Pamela Clarke**

**October 2014 to October 2015**

### *Summary*

*From my point of view this has been a year of mixed achievements. On the one hand I have been raising concerns about the effects on the wildlife habitats of having reduced the amount of man-hours invested in their management. As I see it this has adversely affected in particular orchards and nature reserve areas. Realistically, it would be impossible to replace what Alan Marsh and his small team of volunteers achieved in an estimated 25 hours per week by the 7 hours per week that John Threadingham so kindly provides. I have also expressed my concern that the KCT machinery, used so effectively by Alan & co remains unused and not maintained because JT uses his own equipment. I fear that when John eventually retires the Trust will be faced with the very large expense of restoring or replacing its own machinery.*

*On the other hand – I am grateful for all the support and effort contributed by Pamela and a number of dedicated volunteers, without whose contributions we would not have achieved anywhere near what we have managed. I am delighted with what we have done. We have been able to continue much of the monitoring programme, the outreach work, the greenhouse project and the arable wildflower project. . I am also thrilled with the progress I have been able to make in establishing and developing the Carrant Catchment Restoration Project (CCRP). With seven members/farmers signed up and including about 6,000 acres of land – plus support from national, regional and local bodies, local experts and volunteers – we needed a highly experienced person to coordinate everything – and we have found one!*

### **BUGLIFE**

I have received a broad outline of projects that BUGLIFE would like to proceed with at Kemerton as and when funding becomes available but nothing has started yet. I try to keep Margaret Palmer and Sarah Henshall informed on progress at this end, which, I am delighted to say, has been considerable – viz:

## The Carrant Catchment Restoration Project

Our previous attempts at establishing a 'partnership' along the valley of the Carrant (a small tributary of the River Avon) failed due to lack of resources. However, I was inspired by the KCT/BUGLIFE arrangement to try again. Although I try to work fewer hours for the Trust it has not been possible. Some of the extra work was covered under my work with Overbury Estate – but the remainder had to be voluntary. Potentially, the project could include around 20 square kilometres but in the event I have restricted it to 7 members – the farms covering around 6,000 acres – the land stretching from the summit of Bredon Hill, down to the Carrant and Isbourne - both tributaries of the River Avon and potentially beyond. The land management varies considerably – horse-breeding, conservation sites, arable, sheep, and cattle enterprises are all included. One farm is completely organic and another is trialling a minimum tillage regime. On one farm I was shown an old Elm tree, still surviving after 40 plus years of Dutch Elm disease. Pershore College nursery will be provided with cuttings to propagate 'Nurse Trees' and from these, young trees will be produced and be made available (as with our nine other RELIC elms) for the CCRP and others.

The idea of the CCRP scheme is to work together, whenever possible at landscape scale, for the mutual benefit of local agriculture, wildlife and local communities. No one member will be in charge and nobody should feel any obligation to join in with all initiatives. I am advised that some improvements for wildlife will be possible within existing HLS farm plans without having to rewrite them entirely.

While establishing the project I have been working closely with the local **Environment Agency**, which has drawn up a wish list of possible projects. Meanwhile, it found funding to carry out the restoration of one former **river meander** (oxbow) on Kemerton land and two on Overbury land. In addition the EA is working on restoring/improving the flora of a one mile-long (but narrow) **meadow** alongside the Carrant on Overbury land. In 2014 it bought 6 kilos of Yellow Rattle seed which we spread along the meadow – this hemi-parasitic plant has been used previously by KCT to help reduce the dominance of stronger grass species. This year Kemerton has allowed the EA to brush-harvest seed from one of our river meadows to sow into the target field. Future projects will no doubt fit with BUGLIFE plans as the EA looks to manage water run-off and soil/silt erosion along the valley. I have proposed that volunteers carry out a baseline survey of **water quality** in the area. The **Freshwater Habitats Trust** has offered to help. I have already identified a couple of potential volunteers to do some testing. Working with Gloucester University the EA is establishing a **PhD research project** into soil quality, erosion, run-off etc. I am liaising with the lecturer as to how KCT can help/advise. Professor Dave Goulson is looking at the potential for a similar project but concerning **pollinators**. **Pershore College** is looking at possible projects for its students (see above and later) and is willing to help with **tree propagation**. I have been approached by **The Species Recovery Trust** looking for sites to trial the introduction of several endangered plant species under the **Archaeophytes Project** funded by Natural England. This could fit with some work already being undertaken at Kemerton and elsewhere.

One supporter is supplying **aerial photographs** of the area involved. These will have several practical uses – including as a baseline record, further monitoring and in identifying potential sites for improvements.

Another supporter has been carrying out surveys of **Otter** along the catchment area using infra-red trail cameras.

I have designed a new mapping system to assist with **Pollinator work**. Having trialled it successfully at Kemerton and Overbury I took it to show the local **County Council**. It has offered to help by funding trials to improve the flora of road verges and has provided £1,500 towards the work. I have been working with the CC team to establish a trial. FWAG is also keen to develop my idea and I will be working with Jo Leigh (see later) to progress things.

I have designed a poster/newsletter cover for our pollinator work.

Realising that if the project grew much larger I would be unable to cope, I took the pollinator idea and CCRP details to show Natural England (NE) staff from Gloucestershire and Worcestershire. They expressed the wish to help wherever possible and suggested that I should try to find a '**Facilitator**' via the Facilitation Fund provided by NE. They also suggested that Jenny Phelps would be the ideal candidate. Jenny comes from a farming background, has worked for FWAG for many years and has already established a similar but much larger 'co-operative' in the Upper Thames Catchment area. She also has a good knowledge of natural history. I met with Jenny, who has agreed to take on the role of 'Facilitator' for the group but has asked me to work with her whenever I can. She has already been helpful by looking at the Pollinator Mapping idea and suggesting that with a minor modification it would fit well with present farm mapping methods. Since then Jenny and her associate from FWAG – Jo Leigh and I have met again and on the same day we also met with Jake Freestone from Overbury Estate and with Adrian to outline and discuss what we were planning and to get their approval. Jenny and Jo need to meet the other four members and Adrian has offered KCT funding for this. Jenny, Jo and I will now take forward the application for funding from the Facilitation Fund. If we are successful FWAG (via Jenny) will act as an independent facilitator, developing the project, raising funding, identifying opportunities within the current HLS scheme and dealing with finances.

There are still several more ideas that I will be exploring which would link in with the CCRP and involve the local communities.

## **Support and Sponsorship**

**Cotswold Agricultural Merchants** has offered to sponsor work with Pollinators. This follows on from their generous sponsorship of KCT's Trees and Shrubs Project by contributing £200 per year for five years. See also the funding provided by **Worcestershire County Council**. We need to find more sponsors to help with matching funding in the future. Kemerton Orchard Workers (KOW) and the orchard volunteers at Overbury and Conderton (COCO) have offered their support. I have also been offered support by a number of wildlife experts as and when required.

## **Crayfish**

This year the EA set traps to survey Crayfish in Kemerton Lake. Only one very large male was caught – proving at least that they can thrive there. Since then the EA has positioned a set of monitoring pots/refuges which can be hauled up to check on the crayfish. It is illegal

for unqualified and unlicensed people to check the pots. However, the EA has offered to train up volunteers to do so. It has also provided and installed woody debris refuges in the lake.

## **Outreach**

I continue to be involved with The Marcher Apple Network. Recently, MAN has found a tree of a variety thought to be lost. I have ordered scions of *Wormsley Pippin* which will be grafted and later planted out at Kemerton.

I continue to answer enquires on a wide range of subjects.

Croombe Court is a National Trust property near Pershore. The walled garden is owned separately but works in conjunction with the main area. Pamela and I have been offering advice on the fruit collection that they are building up. Both the Walled Garden and National Trust orchards are hoping to adopt our design of fruit tree labels.

This Winter I will again give some training and advice to COCO (Conderton and Overbury Community Orchard) volunteers.

I am now looking to establish a third community orchard further up the valley.

I am looking to utilise the skilled volunteers from Gloucestershire who have approached me as usual to ask if we need help.

I am working with Pershore College to see if we can find a student to carry out a study of Walled Gardens in this area – their historical, present and future use (see earlier)

Pamela and I attended the funeral of John Clifford from Beckford. I worked closely with John and others when they were establishing the Beckford Nature Reserve. John will be a great loss to wildlife conservation in the area.

**Dormouse** – We failed in our application to use Kemerton as an introduction site for Dormouse. However, as we do have sites which would be suitable in an emergency we will be kept ‘on the books’ for such an occasion.

## **Monitoring**

The annual breeding **Skylark** survey continued. Numbers/density at Bredons Norton and at Days Farm remain far greater than on the main farm at Kemerton – and if anything have increased. . The same applies to Yellowhammer. This has been the situation ever since the other two farms were purchased. It is not clear why. It could be that a combination of modern tree planting and disturbance from dogs deters birds from nesting in the area around the KLNLR. However, few have ever nested down at Wells Farm but maybe the larger hedgerows and numbers of trees (predator perches) deter them? A small population appears to remain stable on what was Grange Farm – on the higher arable land. I have tried to

compare these trends with those found during Butterfly counts – which might have provided an indication of comparative insect availability – but found nothing conclusive.

From our work elsewhere we have seen that Skylark may breed in very high densities where there are larger fields of rough grassland, managed appropriately but it is doubtful if that could be achieved at Kemerton.

**Site Monitoring** should be part of my work. However, I was unable to get to some sites this year but will hope for better circumstances next year.

**Glow Worm** – volunteer Sue Chandler (see also greenhouse project) continues to be involved in the survey. Together with Pamela and occasionally others the transect on Bredon Hill which takes in some of both Kemerton and Overbury land is walked several times every year. We should now have enough data to allow some sort of comparison with a view to identifying trends.

**Butterflies and Bumblebees** – Volunteer George Day has completed his fourth year of monitoring four transects, three times per year. In the early 2000's Pamela and I carried out three which can be compared with George's work. He has now carried out basic comparisons which should provide an indication of population trends. However, I feel we need to get a more scientific analysis of the data. We are extremely grateful for George's commitment to this survey.

**Birds** – Since Charles Morgan and Fergus Henderson left **Rob Prudden** has provided us with a huge amount of valuable data about birds using KLNR. Some 4,500 records entered on Recorder are attributed to him. Without his records I could not have followed up my Coot/Swan Mussel investigation (see later).

Mike Averill has continued his surveys of *Odonata* and has helped us with identifications.

Gavin Peplow has helped with identification of **moths**.

Roger Umpelby has provided some useful records and helps with occasional identifications.

Geoff Trevis continues to monitor *Aculeates* at KLNR and helps with other identifications.

## **Greenhouse Project**

The **Tree and Shrub** part of the project has been winding down and in future we may well be focussing on just three tree species. The EA is keen to encourage tree planting along the Carrant and Isbourne. I have suggested that we focus on **Black Poplar** in the valley bottom, **elms** along the middle ground and **Whitebeam** on the higher ground. Avonbank Nursery at Pershore continues to produce elms from our original joint venture (RELIC), while we hold a few Black Poplar 'nurse trees' and have access to other trees from which we can take cuttings. To our knowledge only two older Whitebeam remain on Bredon Hill – on Overbury land. This Autumn gamekeeper Rod Gillett will help me to collect seed which will be sown next Spring. As part of the CCRP I may ask a local plant nursery to take over some production of Black Poplar and Whitebeam. Meanwhile Avonbank Nurseries at Pershore College has said that they may be able to help.

Pamela continues to supervise the **arable wildflower nursery**. With the help of her volunteers – Sue Chandler, Lis Coates and Victoria Trevellyan – she has sown seed, maintained the nursery and harvested good quantities of seed from seven species. This year we have begun practical trials at Overbury on introducing Shepherd’s Needle and Corn Buttercup into a headland on heavy soils. One of the new members of the CCRP has taken seed from us to try on his farm. The arable wildflower margins on the hill have generated a lot of local interest and have even drawn visitors from further away.

KCT now holds about 2.3 kilos of arable wildflower seed. Seeking advice from Emmorsgate Seeds Ltd on the storage of these seeds I was told that our method of keeping them in paper ‘pay packets’ within individual sealed plastic bags and then in tins was good but the seed needed to be kept cooler. Pamela put a request in the local Parish Magazines and we were given a second-hand fridge, which is perfect for what we require. The only ‘payment’ required was some wildflower seed!

The greenhouse project may well feature in any future arrangement with the **Species Recovery Trust** (see above).

## Swan Mussels

For some years we have been finding dozens of ‘predated’ Swan Mussels (or rather their shells) strewn around some areas bordering the lake - including some in woodland. From the five original adults introduced into the lake in 1999 to help filter the water and as food for fish, diving birds and crayfish there are now probably thousands. I discussed this predation with BUGLIFE and others and received various suggestions as to the culprit – or culprits. These varied from Otter, Grey Heron and seabirds to Rat. Eventually I wondered if Coot could be doing it but at what time of year as our population varies from about 25 to 200? Then I remembered that during a visit to a Radnorshire Wildlife Trust lake nature reserve in Wales we had found dozens of predated Swan Mussel shells along the banks. I contacted RWT and they are extremely interested in this theory. They too have no idea what was predated the Swan Mussel but like us they have large rafts of Coot at certain times of year. During one of my uneducated searches on the web I came across a picture of a Coot with its lower mandible inside a Swan Mussel – the bird ‘resting’ on the nearby lake bank. The caption read something like “Mussel attacks Coot”!!

Based on the above we have started a small survey to try to solve the mystery. George Day, one of our volunteers has cleared two areas completely of predated shells. Thanks to another volunteer - Rob Prudden – we have detailed information on seasonal Coot numbers. George will now carry out monthly checks/counts to see when the predation takes place and I’m hoping that we will then get somebody to set up some trail cameras to try to identify the culprits. Meanwhile RWT hopes to do the same on their reserves.

It could be argued that it doesn’t matter to us what is predated the mussels. However it could have major implications for the Bitterling. This rare British species of fish has a symbiotic relationship with freshwater mussels so is dependant on them for its survival. This fish is found in another RWT lake which also hosts large numbers of Coot and has predated Swan Mussel shells along the banks.

## Recorder

We continue to receive support from Simon Wood of the Worcestershire Biological Centre and to provide him with Kemerton data annually. Simon visited to resolve one or two problems and provided us with a species list for Bredon Hill (less Kemerton).

We now have almost 74,000 wildlife records on our database, of which Pamela and I have contributed about 20,000. Apart from KCT Conservation Officers Rob Prudden comes next highest in the 'league table' with his 4,500.

## Nest boxes

After many years of maintaining the nests boxes in Aldywk Wood and The Bushes **Roy Cox** has 'retired' and the Trust is extremely grateful to him for his efforts, which often included buying materials and making replacement boxes. Richard Coghlan, a friend of Roy, has already offered to take over the work.

I fear that many of the kestrel and owl boxes are now taken by Grey Squirrel and Jackdaw. We do not have many hollow trees with suitable sites at Kemerton and so these boxes were vital. They do need special attention although they are sited higher than most other boxes and therefore more difficult to access. Little Owl nested again in a box (which we maintain) in The Plock. House Sparrow, now comparatively rare at Kemerton nested in one box. At least three pairs of Swallow nested in sheds in and around Stable Yard.

## Orchards

I am no longer involved with orchard management but continue to liaise with **Kemerton Orchard Workers** (KOW) regarding Daffurns Orchard. See also *Wormsley Pippin* elsewhere and **Outreach**. I have tried to find an outlet for the fruit but with little success. Like many orchard conservation projects the one here at Kemerton is experiencing problems in using the fruit.

KOW foresees a problem arising as more of its members reach a certain age when they can no longer contribute physically. We must find a way of attracting the next generation to support this wonderful old community orchard.

## Volunteers

Without the huge support of our volunteers (too many to mention by name here) we could not have achieved so much in so many areas of our work. See mussels, butterflies, glow worm, wildflower nursery, dragonflies, moths, birds, otter, KOW, Geoff Trevis, aerial photos, etc. I am sure that the contribution from Kate and David Aubury will be acknowledged elsewhere. Giles Mathews of the EA organised a survey of amphibians in suitable sites across Kemerton land. Becky Lashley and others conducted an orchard survey to look for the Noble Chafer and the Mistletoe Minor moth, finding the latter in at least two orchards.