

## **BERGH APTON CONSERVATION TRUST - AGM, 23 September 2009**

### Chairman's Annual Report

One of the highlights of the year was the production of a professional-quality promotional and membership brochure, graphically illustrating the Trust's work. This was circulated with Bergh Apton Magazine and has already brought in several new members. We are very grateful to Kaarin Wall and Kevin Parker for both the design and production. The Trust's core activity is of course the management of its nature reserve – Church Plantation and Valley Marsh – and this has been our clear focus this year. Our management strategies on the marsh can be summarized as (1) cutting the marsh vegetation, after the main flowering season, (2) felling unwanted trees, (3) managing the water in the dykes and pond.

Thanks to the new Power Scythe (provided by South Norfolk District Council) we had cut and raked-off most of the rank vegetation on the non-wooded parts of Valley Marsh by the end of November. This was the first time we had managed to cut the whole area by the end of the season. The resulting improvement in the floral diversity in the following summer has been striking; dominance by chest-height Stinging Nettles has been replaced by colourful displays of Lesser Teasel, Red Campion, Meadowsweet, Angelica, Purple Loosestrife and many other attractive species. We are now two months into the same procedure this year, with a view to further improvements in biodiversity next summer.

Progress with felling unwanted Cricket-bat willows has been greatly assisted by a synergy with Easton College, as Andy Campbell was able to bring his chain-saw course in the autumn to fell and dismember several of our biggest trees. It took us most of the remaining winter work days to stack or burn the resulting debris. We hope to repeat this exercise this autumn. We have also had some expert assistance from Kevin Parker in tidying up the residue of some of our earlier, admittedly amateur, efforts. We have again received valuable assistance on work days from the Norwich Offending Team and several of their young-offender charges. Mid-winter bonfires have sometimes allowed us to reward workers with a convivial lunch of baked potatoes and sausages, *al fresco*.

On the waterways front, we have successfully dammed the main drainage dyke in order to conserve water in what has proved to be an exceptionally dry late summer. We have plans to engage a mini-digger to deepen and widen the dykes, thus providing more habitat diversity for plants and animals. There are still issues to solve with the large pond, where the persistent, solid-looking skin of Duckweed in late summer reflects its rather nutrient-rich water.

Despite the exciting opportunities for management, we have not neglected our programme of educational and recording activities. An innovation this year was an 'Open afternoon' at the reserve that attracted many visitors as well as our members. It was also a great pleasure to welcome the Lowestoft Field Club to our reserve for a wildflower walk, especially as their collective critical gaze resulted in a number of new plant records. They were rewarded with excellent elder-flower champagne and cakes provided by Jacquie Ratcliffe. The memorable day excursion to the fascinating environment and wildlife of Orfordness in brilliant sunshine was particularly well attended. Calendar of events:

- Fungus foray, kindly led again by Dr Tony Leech (12 October 2008).
- Breakfast with the Birds, led as ever, by David Lester (3 May 2009).
- Village Hedge survey, organized by Bob Kerry (evenings of 7 May and 4 June 2009).
- Open afternoon at Valley Marsh 24 May 2009.

- Wildflower walk, jointly with the Lowestoft Field Club, on our reserve (10 June 2009).
- Day excursion to Orfordness organized by Dr Annette Ford (5 July 2009).
- Pond-dipping on Valley Marsh (12 July 2009).
- 'Breakfast with the Moths' (led by Judy and John Geeson (25 July 2009).

We are most grateful to all of these inspirational people for sharing their expertise with us.

The Christmas party was the customary seasonal success but, in contrast, the summer barbeque was rained off yet again. The trustees met formally four times during the year: 6 November 2008, and 22 January, 9 April and 21 July 2009. At the first meeting, Tony Davy, Stephanie Crome and Bob Kerry were re-elected chairman, secretary and treasurer, respectively; Sandie Schröder kindly continued as Membership Secretary. We are also grateful to Stephanie Crome for hosting the delightful Trustees' soiree on 28 March 2009, an event that was both highly enjoyable and conducive to business.

The main strategic issue, apart from management, that has exercised the trustees in the last year has been the exciting possibility of purchasing some additional land contiguous with our existing holdings. In the next year, we are hoping to rationalize the southern boundary of Church Plantation and add a small area of wet meadow to our portfolio of habitats. In support of this we are poised to launch appropriate fund-raising activities in the near future.