

INTRODUCTION.

It is always a joy and indeed a necessity to look back over the last year, the 53rd since our foundation, both to report on our achievements, to reassess our objectives and to address the challenges yet to be confronted and resolved. We may be small but are determined to address the threats, not to mention the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune which confront our environment and our communities. We live in a greatly confused and complex world. Africa, the Near and Middle East are greatly troubled and there is war in Europe. Political turmoil, economic breakdown and considerable population displacement is destabilising our future prospects. At COP 25, the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres said, "The planet is close to the point of no return". No politician should be allowed to deny the reality of climate change. In the forty years that have elapsed since the UK began to discuss a third runway at Heathrow, China has built 216 full airports and the US President is urging more oil and gas extraction. At home the cost of state borrowing is hampering positive investment and our economy is failing to thrive. The Wirral Local Plan, which includes local cross-party agreement on proposed housing numbers here, will hopefully soon be approved [actually Approved 31/3/25]. The issue we face is cross party intention by Westminster to change planning regulations and to impose radically higher housing numbers on local communities across the country in response to complex social needs, affordability, poverty, homelessness, deprivation and immigration numbers. The indicated future housing numbers for Wirral far exceed the perceived need here which have local cross-party agreement. Such new figures would disfigure Wirral and destroy priceless natural habitat and connective wildlife corridors. The concept of permitting development of so-called Grey Belt is also highly damaging to our local environment. We collaborate with the Wirral Green Space Alliance in resisting this profound and irreversible damage in Wirral. We are at greater risk here as three of our four MPs have government jobs and cannot publicly oppose the policy. Following boundary changes to parliamentary constituencies part of South East Wirral is included in Ellesmere Port.

COMMITTEE

Your committee continues to meet on a six-weekly cycle, being greatly assisted by our Secretary Dr. Margaret Jackson whose masterful compilations of reports, minutes and the assistance she renders to our Recorders are much appreciated. We are fortunate to have such a well-qualified and able group to focus on the complexities of the issues. Dr Hilary Ash provides learned responses to Local and Central Government consultations, gives advice to many local groups involved in active conservation such as Big Meadow Willaston, Lowfields, Prenton Dell, Roman Road Meols and has led a botanical survey at Chester Zoo nature reserve and provides courses of training. She is a key member of our recording group. She has attended the National Black poplar conference, and is involved in hybrid identification. She has engaged with the Tree Strategy Advisory Board. Hilary and several other volunteers have helped to develop the Local Nature Recovery strategy for Liverpool City Region and are involved with Ayla Thompson Biodiversity Manager at Wirral B.C. in developing guidelines for Wirral B.C. and trying to revive a local biodiversity group. It has been decided that Hoylake Langfields is one of five proposed Local Wildlife Sites which are awaiting progress by Wirral

Council. Part of the area, Hoylake Carrs, is being developed by CWT as a Flood Relief Scheme and wildlife area with funding from the Environment Agency.

Caroline Smallthwaite, an Ecologist, comments on Planning Applications in Wirral which often request conditions, such as control of lighting to protect bats, bird nesting time protection, habitat regulations assessment of dune grassland, natterjack toad survey, giving advice on veteran trees and advice on new biodiversity net gain metric calculation. It is a most important and time- consuming role, so central to our objectives. Dr Monica McCard, an expert in invasive marine species, follows our work, I suspect she is waiting for a Lion Fish to attack a Natterjack at Red Rocks. We are happy to collaborate with Wirral Green Space Alliance and the Heswall Society to defend significant Green Belt habitats. We are long serving members of the Dee Estuary Conservation Group Chaired by Dr David Parker, which assesses threats to the wildlife of the Estuary. Twenty- five groups and ten observer groups attend the meetings.

Gillian Lacy is our Treasurer, always an essential role, for which we thank her. Linda Higginbottom, with the assistance of her daughter Laura, handles our communications, so central to the impact we can make in the public realm. Kate Hart arranges our speakers for spring and autumn and is also a Wildlife Recorder. Paul Loughnane BEM, a most active conservator sets the programme for conservation at NFBP and at the Dibbinsdale area woodlands which we cover with the active input of Wirral Countryside Volunteers. Cleaver Heath is managed by Dr John McGaw who coordinates volunteer work and engages with CWT. He is also a valued expert on spiders.

We appreciate the support and engagement of Cheshire Wildlife Trust, especially, Trustees, Chair Bill Stothart, Vice-Chair Charles Neame, CEO Charlotte Harris, Kellie Barnard, Rachael Nellist, who liaises and with our committee, and Graham Borden-Young who oversaw the major bracken removal to conserve Cleaver Heath, so generously raised by pupils at Woodchurch High School. He also repaired the bridge at Thornton Wood. All our activities and events are covered by Health & Safety plus Safe Operating Procedures. We are sad to report the passing of two long standing volunteers this year, Sue Craggs and Gill Norton. We are most grateful for the ongoing commitment of Barbara Greenwood who assists at our events, Tim Gannicliffe, a water monitoring specialist, who supported the Our Dee Project has undertaken water monitoring on two brooks and outfalls at Parkgate and also monitors the ponds at Thornton Common and the River Dibbin at Lowfields. We shall if he wishes, retain his records. John Gill continues to provide challenging quizzes to intrigue our supporters. Mike Maher raises much money by selling a profusion of plants at New Ferry Butterfly Park throughout the season and has done so for many previous years. We are indebted to them all.

NEW FERRY BUTTERFLY PARK is a former disused railway goods yard, now a diverse series of habitats arising from its industrial uses and pollution with coal, lime, ash to name but a few, it has been transformed over thirty years by a long standing and committed community of volunteers into an enchanting and outstanding area for nature, much beloved by the local people and by over 25 species of butterfly. The newts may wear tin hats on pond dipping days but children greatly enjoy them. So complex are its habitats and needs that it has its own committee chaired by Dr. Phil Putwain with Paul Loughnane as Secretary, Dr Hilary Ash coordinates much of the input and Linda Higginbottom as organiser of warden rotas, group visits and communication. Much heavy conservation work is undertaken by Wirral Countryside Volunteers, now nearly 40 years old, with Paul Loughnane heavily involved, also voluntary wardens and others such as Yan and Charles who manage a demonstration pollinator flower bed and also take part in butterfly transect monitoring whilst Dr Roy Lowry both records and photographs a wide range of insects. It has to be seen to be believed – which you can do on Sunday afternoons from May until September between noon and 4pm. Other groups – such as postgraduate higher degree and undergraduate and college students, Youth Organisations etc. are most welcome to visit at other times by arrangement. The park has a collection of Green Flags to be proud of and has gained a number of other prestigious awards. It is and shall remain as the jewel in the crown of reserves, especially given its urban setting. Many hundreds of people attended Opening Day this year.

RECORDING, is the bedrock of all that we do, as without precise knowledge of the flora and fauna existing in our reserves and through regular monitoring of changes occurring through time, effective management and conservation would not be possible. For many years we had a low number of dedicated recorders led by Hilary for whom it was difficult to cover all the ground that was needed. Hilary will remain both as recorder and trainer. It is now an immense pleasure to report that we have recruited many more so that we have a core of thirty, some of wide experience, many newly qualified or still learning and happy to receive training and guidance. The committee is most grateful to Susanne Christian, Nif Wilkinson and Margaret Jackson for organising the group. A full training programme is being put in place covering seven diverse courses. They are a supportive and welcoming group who will make a major contribution to our work. A number of our former Recorders have become professional and one recently came to conduct an inspection of Thornton Wood for Natural England. Yet others may feature as future committee members to drive the work forward. Always grab every experience you can, no positive action and experience is ever wasted and it is both stimulating, good fun in good company and addictive. It can also enhance your CV!

PUBLICITY AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT. In this modern electronic world, all effective communication has to be both, always up to date, immediate and penetrating. We are so fortunate to have such abilities available to us. I believe that our website achieves that goal. Those who sign up for our monthly newsletter will receive the latest news of events and activities. Currently it is sent to 920 addresses. We have 2430 followers on Facebook and NFBP has 3229. The Blog is regularly updated so please enjoy it. Following a prod from CWT we agreed to hold an Election Hustings in Wirral focussed on environmental concerns, which I had the pleasure of chairing on 24th June. It was well attended with diverse and well-behaved participants, much to my relief.

EVENTS & ACTIVITIES. We aim to present a wide-ranging spectrum of talks and events addressing wildlife issues and concerns to a wide audience. In April we had a talk by Andrew Brockbank, 'Curlews in the landscape', describing the difficulties they face. We then had a woodland walk in Dibbinsdale. In May, Jane Turner and Josh Styles gave a presentation regarding the naturally developing Green Beach at Hoylake, an effect of changing environment and sandhill establishment. The committee visited the site with the speakers in June when a number of new plant species were identified. We enjoyed a fund-raising day at Poulton Hall courtesy of the Lancelyn-Green family where later in the year we were introduced to the succeeding generation, a memorable occasion. We attended Nature Day at Ness Gardens. We gained publicity by attendance at Wirral History and Heritage Fair held at Hulme Hall in March - always remarkable for its range and content. We engaged with CWT Wildlife Hub/Gaia at Birkenhead Park, Neston Earth Festival and a Bluebell Walk at Rivacre. Our talks continued with John Elliott talking about, 'Hilbre Bird Observatory and Wirral birds'. John Ratcliffe introduced us to 'The World of Fungi through show and tell'. Peter Miller shared his memories of 'Dibbinsdale through time'. In January Kathryn Fegan introduced us to Roman Road Sandhills - seven acres so well hidden in Meols. Ron Thomas discussed Wildlife Photography and Melusine Velde of CWT talked about, 'Biodiversity Net Gain'. Thanks are due to Phillipa Loughnane, Kate Hart and assistants for the refreshments provided at our talks which aid conversation and cheerfulness.

We must acknowledge the valuable work undertaken by the CWT-led, "OUR DEE ESTUARY" three-year project which will end in June 2025. They have opened doors across boundaries – even introducing us to Roman Road Sandhills in Hoylake of which we knew nothing. Openness and collaboration are fundamental to all that we seek to do across the Peninsular and we thank the team for their efforts and wish them well for the future. The Our Dee Estuary website will continue as a valuable resource.

So, another remarkable year has ended and the next is upon us. As we face the increasing impact of climate change, turbulence in public life, in this already nature depleted country, our determination and commitment to protect and enhance our local natural environment is needed more than ever. I trust that you will join and support us in the challenging times ahead and we look forward to meeting you. Your grandchildren will thank you for it, so I repeat, always remember that there is no PLANet B.

Stephen R. Ross

Chair of Wirral Wildlife Local Group