

Ponds on Mill Meadows, Henley-on-Thames

In 1991, a newly elected Town Councillor in Henley asked me to help improve Mill Meadows for wildlife. This is the Council owned land, between March Lock and the town centre. I was known to the Councillors through Friends of the Earth campaigning but at that stage, I knew next to nothing about wildlife. I approached the Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust, or BBONT as it was then, who, very helpfully, produced a report (June 1992) identifying areas suitable for management for wildlife, i.e. the reed bed, the stream and its margins and the grassy triangle.

While considering setting up a wildlife group to start the project, I discovered that the River and Rowing Museum already had planning permission and their car park was to be built over the reed bed. I wondered whether it was worth proceeding given that we would lose one of the best parts for wildlife before we even started. Also, an article in the Henley Standard only attracted 2 potential members, but BBONT came to the rescue – they gave me the names of their members in Henley and this brought together enough people to form the original Henley Wildlife Group committee. This may now be more difficult under the Data Protection Act. The committee first met in November 1993.

Nigel Phillips (BBOWT) suggested that we consider asking the Council if we could manage part of the meadows for wildlife and dig some ponds there. With the help of Nigel and Rod d’Ayala, both of whom worked at BBOWT’s Warburg reserve for many years, we surveyed the plants in summer 1994. The best wild flowers were growing along the eastern boundary of the R&R Museum so we asked if we could manage that area and wrote a management plan detailing our proposals. This formed the basis of a licence agreement between HWG and the Town Council.

Most Councillors agreed in principle but there was a lot of talk about whether the ponds should be fenced – a concept we found strange given the proximity of the Thames, which is not fenced. We found that we would need planning permission for digging the 3 ponds we had planned. We got this but only just – it went through on the Chairman’s casting vote – and, at the request of the Environment Agency, there was a condition which said that because our area was in the flood plain all spoil would have to be removed from the site. In 1995, a contractor quoted us £1,950 to excavate the ponds and grade the spoil around them but £8,100 to excavate and cart away the spoil.

We looked for alternative solutions. We found a local contractor who would cart away the spoil from the smallest pond. He parked a trailer on the Museum site, we dug the pond by hand and he carted it away (September 1995). This worked well for our small pond – 15m x 5m and 0.5m deep – but was not feasible for our second, much larger pond – 30m x 7.5m and 1m deep. However, we found a local landowner who was doing a lot of earth moving on his land and asked if he would help. He arranged for a local hire firm to give us a digger for a day and he lent us a driver. He also lent us two tractors and trailers and men to drive them. With those resources the pond was dug in a day (February 1996). In the following spring, local school children had great fun helping to plant the ponds with plants from a pond at the Warburg reserve. The ponds were not lined because there is solid clay underneath the topsoil and they are in the Thames flood plain.

The third pond was not dug until 2004 partly because the R&R Museum was not fully in favour of a wildlife area next door in the mid 1990’s. They were concerned that mosquitoes would be a nuisance to people using their outdoor café so, in the interests of maintaining good relations with neighbours, we decided to postpone digging the third pond. The requirement to remove the spoil was rather off-putting so we didn’t attempt this task until we had a solution. This came in the form of some young lads who wanted a BMX track on Mill Meadows in Henley. We thought the spoil from our pond could be used to build the track. It had also been suggested that we construct a berm and some crossing places on the stream. Plans were drawn up and costed and we decided to engage contractors. Following a number of grant applications we had the money for the berm, a low lying marshy area beside a stream, and the crossing places, and we asked the contractor to quote for the third pond. He gave us a very good price on condition that the Town Council took the spoil to the site of the BMX track. Thanks to the generosity of our members we had enough to pay for the pond so all the work was done in August 2004.

The wildlife areas on Mill Meadows have developed very nicely over the years. The stream and its margins are attractively wild with lots of Pendulous Sedge upstream from the R&R Museum. The meadow area around the ponds which had been close mown grass quickly reverted to something much more natural.

Between the ponds and the Museum boundary there is now a dense patch of Common Reed and Pond-sedge, and the other side of the ponds is cut annually to retain it as a flowery meadow. Mid-May to mid-June it is usually thick with Buttercups, Ragged-robin and other wildflowers. Most years the Nettles and grasses in the drier woodland edge strips in the grassy triangle are very good for butterflies. Water Voles used to be found along the stream but unfortunately they haven't been seen since 1998 although Rob Strachan found signs of them when surveying the area in 2001.

The Henley Wildlife Group continue to maintain these areas with work parties from 9.30 to 12.30 on the first Wednesday of the month. The work mainly involves containing invasive and non-native species, and litter picking. When plants like Great Willowherb, Nettles and Bramble spread too far we cut them back, and we work hard at eradicating Himalayan Balsam, Japanese Knotweed and New Zealand Pygmyweed.

Local schools and the R&R Museum use our wildlife areas for educational purposes and we hope this will increase. We are very pleased to have been able to make wildlife more accessible by returning sections of a well used recreation area to a more natural state but this would not have been possible without the co-operation of many people, not least, the Town Council, the land owners. Judging by the worn paths to the crossings on the stream people are making good use of them and our work enables the town to score points in Britain in Bloom. Our thanks go to HWG members for their subscriptions and support, BBOWT for advice and guidance, the Town Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment, the Environment Agency, the R&R Museum, the Chiltern Society, the Green Gym and various local businesses for all their help, financial and otherwise.

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January 2007