

WATCHTREE NATURE RESERVE Ltd – Annual Report for year 2012-2013 (1st April 2012 to 31st March 2013)

Summary.

On behalf of the Directors of WNR LTD I am pleased to present our eighth annual report on the work and progress of Watchtree Nature Reserve Ltd.

The Nature Reserve has in the short space of 10 years become an important wildlife site and resource for people to explore and appreciate in increasing numbers, both from the local community and, increasingly, tourists to the Solway Plain.

Driven by our Nature Reserve Manager, Tim Lawrence, we are especially pleased with the continuing progress in developing public access and educational use of the Reserve. We have worked hard to improve the visitor facilities. A large band of skilled and dedicated volunteers assist Tim with the nature reserve management and now achieve much of the routine work necessary to keep the site in good condition. Liaison with and co-operation of the site 'Operational' staff of Interserve is appreciated especially greeting visitors when Tim and Ryan are not available.

The summer and autumn of 2012 was one of the wettest recorded locally and nationally and had an impact on our final visitor totals, although the dry but cold February and March of 2013 made up for the summer with record numbers for this period.

Watchtree Wheelers continues to grow and is much appreciated by the people who benefit. Driven by the enthusiasm of our Watchtree Wheelers Project Officer, Ryan Dobson, we have watched many of the beneficiaries develop and flourish. Wheeler's is largely self-financing and independent of our Defra funding. Wheelers also have a small band of dedicated volunteers who assist Ryan and occasionally cover at weekends when he is away. The post is targeted to helping people with learning difficulties and is in the second year of funding from the Northern Rock Foundation.

Two members of staff are essential to us opening seven days a week but one area where we still need volunteer support is helping to staff the Centre and small café to meet and greet visitors. The key to our success is a blend of the combined efforts of Staff, Directors and Volunteers, whose unbounded enthusiasm makes it all work.

Our key achievements during the year were:

Visitor numbers increased to 8617 visits recorded.

Watchtree Bioblitz - 27 Naturalists recorded 641 species in 24 hours.

Membership: 119 individual, family and group memberships.

Watchtree voted 'Best Wheels Centre 2012'

1078 Wheelers cyclist including record numbers in January, February and March 2013

19 different organisation now using Wheelers

Over 2791 hours of volunteer input or 350 days of estate management time.

Improvements to the paths and general visitor facilities

John Muir awards earned by pupils from Limehouse School and Mobex

Three Lancaster University student dissertations and continued use of the Reserve by the University of Cumbria, Newton Rigg Campus students and for the eighth year Hadlow College Kent.

19 School visits by 1000 children.

Habitat and Estate Management

Grasslands.

The Grasslands, especially the small meadows, continue to challenge us. After ploughing and re-sowing them over the previous three years we moved to grazing them with cattle as part of the plan to establish suitable habitat for the Marsh Fritillary butterfly. The main problem is establishing the butterfly food plant, Devil's bit Scabious. The majority of the plants we have put in have died, and Lancaster University studies suggest the problem is the soil. These fields were very wet this year and grazing with cattle quite difficult. However, the vegetation monitoring seems to show the re-sowing is working out quite well and most species in the mix are still present. At the end of the year we applied a small amount of farm yard manure to an area of field 5.6 and a good dressing of green waste compost to the whole of field 5.4. We commenced plans to install drainage in three of the fields.

Despite the very wet summer our three graziers all managed to take hay from most of the remaining grassland areas with the exceptions of the hollows between the North Cells and the wettest areas around the Lake. All these areas were grazed in autumn and winter. We were concerned by the sudden loss of plant diversity on the North Cells, which the monitoring highlighted, and hope that it will recover. The cause was possibly the failure to cut it for hay in the wet summer of 2011 and then not grazing until spring to try and restore it for mowing. This year most of it was cut then grazed in the autumn.

Our aim to convert field 4d into a wild flower meadow is proving another challenge. It was cattle grazed this season but we aim to return it to hay meadow in 2013 and introduce the flowering plants we wish to see either as seed or as plant plugs grown from our own seed.

The best wild flower areas at present are on the top soil spread over areas of old runway. We have achieved this with a mixture of hay from other Cumbrian meadows or scattering seed. Field 4b (Covey Pasture) has three distinct variations. To the east of the woodland we call The Sticks it is developing as a nice hay meadow. The middle strip, where the concrete runway was removed several years ago, remains quite impoverished and neither produces much hay or plant diversity. Whilst the eastern half of the field is still producing a vigorous crop of grass despite not having received any fertiliser since it was ploughed and resown with the hay meadow mix in 2002.

Restoring wild flower meadows takes time but we shall persevere and apply all the wisdom we have to hasten the process.

The hedgerows are making a significant landscape wildlife feature now and during the year we continued to coppice the hedge round field 5.10 in the Cumberland style. The length cut in 2011 has grown strongly and is already good habitat.

Woodland Management

The new plantations are now a significant landscape feature. The saplings show quite remarkable variations in growth related to the soil conditions and disturbance and differences between species on the different areas. The failure rate is high amongst all species on some of the very wet compacted soils to the east and south of Pond Wood. We have utilised these areas by creating small ponds or just leaving them as 'natural' clearings to add structure and diversity to the woodland. Many Scots Pine saplings show considerable needle die back in the spring, which is probably a fungal attack.

We thinned one area of new plantation at the entrance to Pow Wood to enhance the growth rate of the trees by removing the weaker trees.

Woodland management policy is generally minimum intervention whilst maintaining the areas along the paths as woodland glades and rides for the invertebrates and plants.

The young Alder wood area in Pond Wood is slowly expanding eastwards but the older area is now self-thinning and there is an under storey of young Ash, apparently a common association. We are hoping that the newly

discovered Ash die-back disease will not get to them but according to expert opinion this seems unlikely as they are predicting that the UK will lose ninety per cent of the Ash population.

Wetland.

The Reed Beds, Lake and other water bodies are part of the site operational requirements and as such are not our direct responsibility but we are responsible for the wildlife management of the margins. These water bodies, a significant feature of the site, bring in some interesting wetland wildlife; for example our water beetle expert, Steve Routledge, has found fifty species of water beetle. They hold a good population of Great Crested Newt, Smooth and Palmate Newt, Frogs and Toads. This abundance of seasonal food attracts an otter every year. This spring it must have been resident on site leaving evidence of its presence at every area of water on the site. We manage the Common Reed at the Lake edge to maintain views from the hide. At the pond in Pond Wood we continued clearing the dense tree over hang to let the light into the water area.

The Old Runways

The section of old runway (The Scrubs) is the main stronghold of the Dingy Skipper butterfly, which has now become well established on a section of north perimeter track. Being on the main visitor route this section of track is one of the best for seeing the Dingy Skipper and a range of interesting plants and butterflies. The other area of former runway that is developing interesting habitat is the broken concrete alongside the road to the Operations Plant Building and here we are nurturing the rare Yellow Bartsia, only discovered in 2010 by one of our regular visitors. Overall we have a remarkable variety of habitats at Watchtree attracting an equally interesting variety of wildlife.

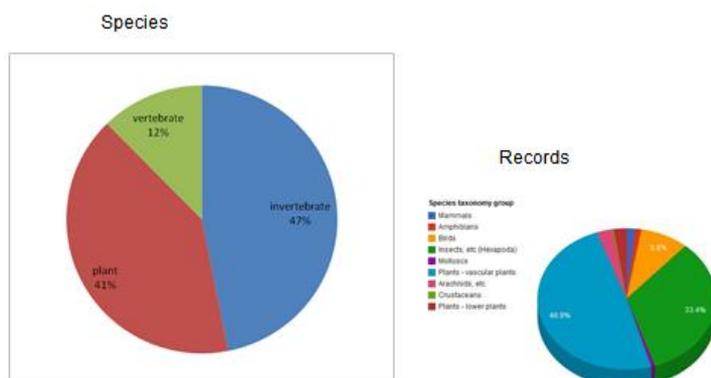
Elemental Garden

We have continued to make steady progress with this area and a major task was the pond construction made possible with a grant from the Bowness, Thursby and Caldbeck Neighbourhood Forum of £1300 to buy the materials. Our Volunteers constructed the pond. We aim to officially open the area and thank the various donors and volunteers during the coming summer.

Watchtree Wildlife.

In conjunction with Carlisle Natural History Society, Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery Trust and The Cumbria Biodiversity Data Centre we ran a 'Bioblitz' over the weekend of 16th and 17th of June commencing on the Saturday evening. Over a twenty four hour period twenty-seven naturalists blitzed the wildlife and found an amazing 641 species including plants, birds, invertebrates, mammals, bats, moths, fungi, mosses and liverworts indeed anything that we could find an expert to identify, we even included the Red Kite seen just hours before the official start time. The 'Bioblitz' results are summarised in the table.

Species breakdown



Despite the cool and occasionally wet weather several visitors joined in and we hope a few were inspired to get involved in wildlife recording.

Watchtree now has a site species total well over 1000 species including 113 birds, 335 moths and 218 plants. Notable sightings this year were our very regular Barn Owl, a Short-eared Owl and the Red Kite; up to 11 Gadwalls were on the Lake in March to add another species to the list. Forty five new species of moth were recorded including a new Cumbria Biodiversity Action Plan (CBAP) species 'Knot Grass' which takes us to 31 CBAP species now recorded at Watchtree. The British Bryological Society held their spring meeting in Cumbria and included Watchtree as a site to visit; they recorded 109 species of mosses and liverworts.

The Great Crested Newt, our only legally protected species, continues to thrive and is present in most of the water bodies on site. We have a wide range of notable species and several 'amber' and 'red' listed bird species. The only target species from the original plan that has not yet bred is the Yellow Hammer. Habitat change means that for at least four years Lapwings or Ringed Plovers have not bred. Two pair of Curlews bred but had a difficult time and three nests were taken by a predator, probably the fox that was often seen on site. However, one nest did hatch three young, the adults moved two surviving chicks to our neighbours cattle field and I am fairly certain on chick did get onto the wing.

The Ringing Group had a very busy year ringing over a thousand birds despite the very poor summer. As we come into the 2013 breeding season it seems that several resident species were affected by the summer and Great Tit and Blue Tit numbers are quite low, they were not helped by a Stoat or Weasel getting into all but one of the occupied nest boxes and cleaning out the eggs and occupant. Our Tree Sparrows were less productive and most only produced two broods. We were pleased that the Spotted Flycatchers returned to a box in Pond Wood after four years absence and fledged 4 chicks. Our Skylarks did very badly and few young were raised. It will be interesting to see what numbers we have in 2013. Willow Warblers are one of the study species and many are colour ringed for identification when they return. The return rate is good and surviving males return to the same territory for as long as they live, which is rarely more than 2 years.

Our Brown Hare population thrives and Otter is now a regular visitor especially when the Frogs and Toads are spawning.

The weather had a big impact on invertebrates and after a reasonably good start, when the early species such as Orange Tip, Peacock and Small Tortoiseshell seemed to do okay, from June onwards most fared badly with the exception of Ringlet. Grey Squirrels are now seen regularly in the woodlands despite our control measures and that of neighbours. A Red Squirrel Group was formed during the autumn and meets at Watchtree, they organise Grey Squirrel control in many of the nearby woodlands in an effort to help the Red Squirrel survive.

Hedgehogs are relatively abundant on Watchtree but nationally there is concern about the long term future of this small mammal. Whilst it is nice to see them they are quite effective predators of ground nesting birds.

Watchtree is meeting almost all of our expectations as a wildlife habitat and is developing into an important site complimenting the nearby National Nature Reserves, Cumbria Wildlife Trust Reserves and the RSPB Reserve. No bird or bat casualties were attributed to the Wind Turbines this year and the bird life shows that in this situation they cause no particular problems.

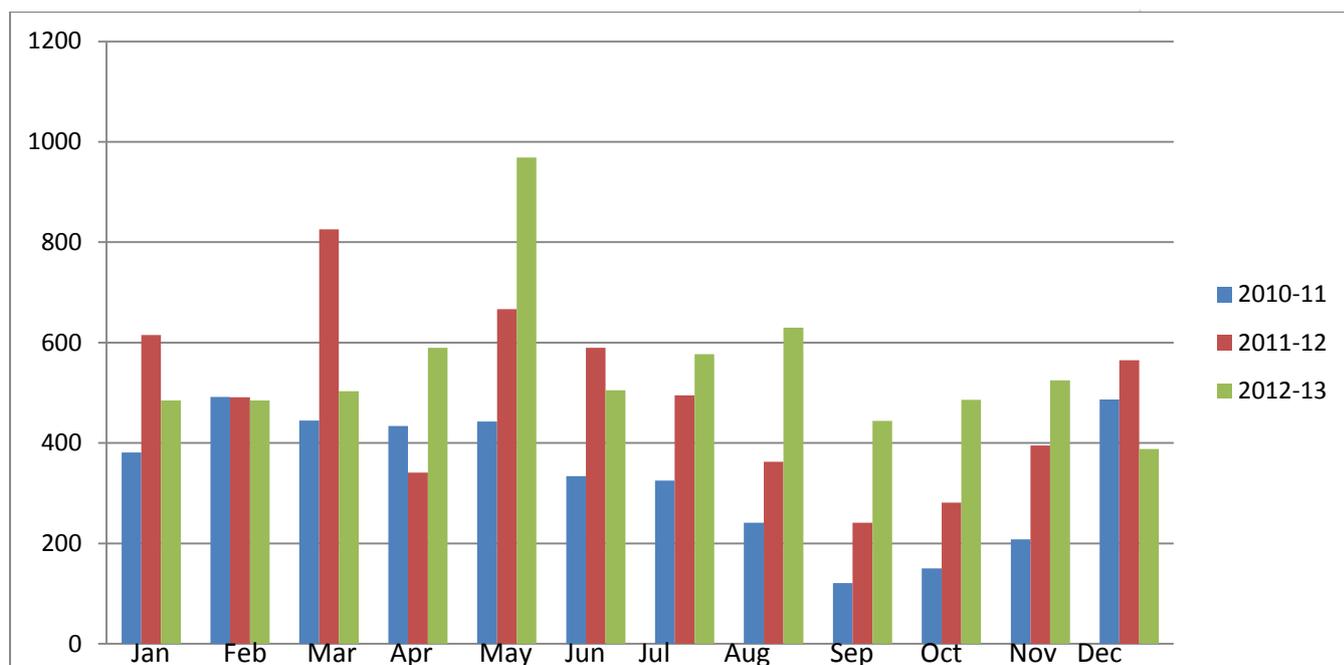
The Marsh Fritillary butterfly captive breeding stock fared rather badly and only two broods came out of hibernation in February; an exceptionally cold and snowy March saw them hardly make any growth. The Cumbria Marsh Fritillary Action group are concerned because ours were not the only ones to do badly; the theory is that captive breeding has accelerated the genetic issues this species seems susceptible to.

Watchtree would meet SSSI criteria for Great Crested Newt alone but we are not sure if Natural England would consider notifying the site. We have enquired about Cumbria Wildlife Site status but Cumbria Wildlife Trust tells us that this process is on hold at present. Whilst none of the habitats meet the criteria many of our species do.

Public Access and Education.

A total of 8617 visitors came to Watchtree this year, and it was encouraging that many were first time visitors both local people and tourists to the Solway. The Solway is steadily increasing its appeal to tourists and we were especially pleased that our leaflet distribution through AHA worked well as many came having picked up our leaflet from the various outlets. Had the weather been better we would certainly have had more. February and March this year were probably two of the driest months of the reporting year and we had record numbers of visitors over this period.

Table showing visitors (general visitors/adults and Under 16's/ schools) to Watchtree on a monthly basis from April 2010 to March 2013. Table based on financial year.



Totals in figures:

2010-11. General = 4061. Cycling = 754. Under 16 = 1055. **Total = 5870**

2011-12. General = 5870. Cycling = 1018. Under 16 = 1479. **Total = 8367**

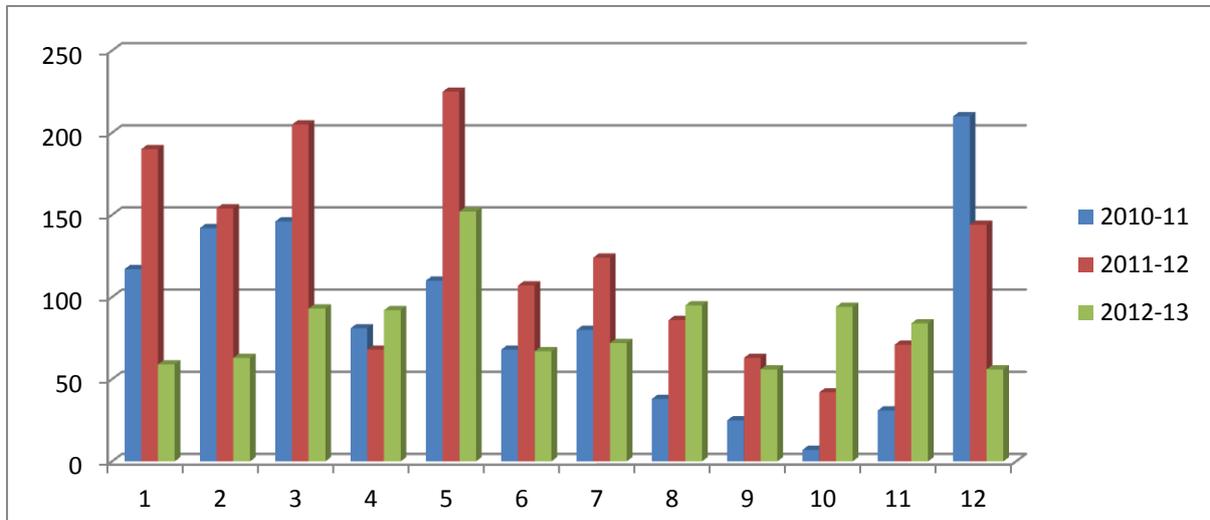
2012-13. General = 6587. Cycling = 1047. Under 16 = 983. **Total = 8617**

The weather had an impact on our café venture with 'Sacred Solway' and they were hard pressed to find volunteers to look after the café because of the frequent wet days. We shall not run the venture in the coming summer. We maintained the coffee machine and a selection of cakes and biscuits during the autumn and winter and it operated well on an honesty box. However, we are appealing for volunteer helpers willing to help with visitor reception at weekends and on Mondays and Tuesdays. Also on the café we now sell 'Jills' Jams and Chutneys for a small commission.

School visits remain at about the same level as last year and as previously reported Tim feels that to take any more would seriously affect his other work. The only way we could increase school visits would be through employing a part-time Education Officer but the Directors feel that this would stretch our resources too much at this time.

Educational Figures 2010 – 2013.

Table showing total number of young persons (Under 16's) who visited Watchtree. Data recorded from April 2010 to March 2013. Based on financial year.



Comments:

Schools and Educational visits 2010 – 2013

2010-11. **Number of school visits = 25.** Number of additional children's sessions e.g. holidays/guides etc. = **11**

2011-12. **Number of school visits = 22.** Number of additional children's sessions e.g. holidays/guides etc. = **15**

2012-13. **Number of school visits = 19.** Number of additional children's sessions e.g. holidays/guides etc. = **19**

Schools who visited Watchtree in 2012-13 (some visited more than once) = Caldew Secondary x 1, Limehouse Secondary x 6, Kirkbampton pre-school x 1, Wiggonby Junior x 3, Wiggonby Pre-School x 2, William Howard Secondary x 1, Upperby Juniors x 1, Pennine Way Juniors x 1, Thursby Juniors x 1, Boltons C of E x 1, Brough by Sands Juniors x 1.

Additional children's sessions included; half term activities x 5, summer holidays activities x 5, Scouts x 2, Guides x 2, Beavers x 1 and Mobex x 4.

The school holiday activities are very popular amongst local parents and the sessions are usually full as are after school activities for the Scouts, Guides, Beavers and Mobex.

Limehouse School and Mobex participate in the John Muir Awards scheme that Tim runs. Garden Linx come every Tuesday and do various jobs and activities, including making various items, which they sell on site.

We thank the **Hadfield Trust** for a grant of £1425 for; small mammal traps, pond dipping kit, waterproof jackets with Watchtree logos and compass's for orienteering teaching, which supports the educational activities.

During the year we installed the Breath of Fresh Hare and Crow trails, the way marker-posts incorporate a small 'rubbing' plate of a site species of which the initial letters all found make our name. The 'rubbing kit' is available for purchase.

Our 2013 Calendar showed a fine selection of our Wildlife but sales were a little disappointing. Members and various key people were sent a complimentary copy.

We continued our working relationship with Lancaster University, Cumbria University and Hadlow College from Kent. Three undergraduates from Lancaster undertook course dissertation projects on Willow Warbler, wetland invertebrates and grassland invertebrates. We hope to take another three students in the coming year. Cumbria University – Newton Rigg Campus students visited and Students from Hadlow College visited for the eighth year.

Watchtree Wheelers

Watchtree Wheelers continues to grow and is very popular. Over the year we recorded 1078 users, several of whom were individuals, but most came with the 19 different organisations who bring regular groups to Watchtree, notably Chrysalis, Cumbria Care, Mencap and The Calvert Trust. Wheelers remain a sustainable and self-financing venture. The **Northern Rock Foundation (NRF) Grant** continued funding Ryan's salary. The hire charges, donations and small grants pay for the upkeep and upgrading of the cycles. Carlisle Tri club come regularly to Watchtree for training their young riders.

A 'Go-Ride' scheme was investigated and commenced by Ryan, which aims to teach people of all ages to learn to ride a bike. Since this was out of the criteria of the NRF grant we sought additional funding for a month of Ryan's time. This came via grant of £4575 from **Cumbria County Council through our County Councillor Duncan Fairbairn**. The grant provided £2575 for one month's salary spread out over the coming year and £2000 towards the cost of the cycles we need. NRF were kept fully informed and allowed us to extend their grant period by one month in lieu to the beginning of July 2014.

We have ambitions to more than double the length of track suitable for cycling, improve the safety and condition of the cycle training area and increase cycle storage. Our volunteers have worked hard widening and improving part of the existing path network for dual cycle and pedestrian use but where the track comes onto the old concrete runways it needs tarmac. Our first applications to Sport England, The Thomas Cook Trust and Biffa were all turned down for various reasons and because there is intense competition for this money. We began a new submission to Sport England and will be looking at other funds for all the improvements. We also commenced seeking funders for our Project Officers Post from July 2014

Members

We ended the year with 119 Members, comprising 52 individuals, 54 families and 13 groups. I am pleased that an increasing number of members visiting the site 'out of hours' and seeing the best of our wildlife. Members can and some do play a key role in supporting our fund raising when needed.

Volunteers

I thank all of our Volunteers for their contribution and commitment to Watchtree. The amount of work they have achieved this year is quite fantastic. Several are very skilled people who know how a job should be done. Their input of 2791 hours is the equivalent of two full time estate workers. They do the majority of our habitat management and site maintenance work and the list of projects they have completed includes path construction and maintenance, hedge laying, coppicing and thinning, painting hides and picnic tables, filling bird feeders, planting Devil's bit Scabious, constructing ponds, planting shrubs and trees, fence maintenance, in fact anything that can be done by many willing, skilled hands. The only jobs we need to do mechanically are those requiring heavy machinery. I wish to thank Gareth Tate for the time he spends helping Tim to sort out and set up work and at times looking after visitor reception. Thanks too to Eileen Rosie who has continued to look after the flower beds along the site entrance, around the centre and in the elemental garden.

Wheelers Volunteers

Thank you too to the eight Volunteers who assist Ryan with and contribute significantly to the smooth running and success of Wheelers, especially Chris Ball, Ian Ludlam and Wendy Woof, also Joe Smith and Sam Cole who are Saturday morning regulars coming to Watchtree as part of their Duke of Edinburgh Award. They all assist with visitor reception and café management in addition to Wheelers duty.

Publicity, talks and general public relations

We retained 'The Big Story' run by Karen Morley to keep up relationships with the local media and we had a number of articles in the papers and interviews with local radio. Ryan was successful in promoting two of our Watchtree Wheelers as Olympic torch bearers, Lauren Armstrong in Wigton and Tom Braithwaite in Aspatia.

We had our stall at The Cockermouth and Dalston Agricultural Shows and would have attended the Skelton Show had it not been cancelled due to the weather. A total of eleven external events were attended by Ryan with Wheelers

Tim, Ryan, William, Bob Timmins and I all gave talks to a variety of groups and organisations, several of whom followed up with visits. We have guidance on fees for talks but often groups make larger donations than we might have charged.

Over 10000 leaflets went out to a wide range of sites through AHA one of the distribution companies and we believe it well worth the cost. We reduced the leaflet in size and content to draw people to find out more about us.

We do not make any charges to visitors but many leave generous donations, which amounted to £2048.

We staged our first Watchtree Show on the August Bank Holiday Sunday which seemed to be going well until heavy showers at mid-day put a real damper on proceedings. We made a small loss but believe there is scope to try again and began planning the 2013 show in August.

Directors.

We remain eleven stalwarts meeting quarterly and occasionally for special meetings. In December a grant application failed and our future sustainability was called into question. As a result a sub-group met and decided to raise the issue with Defra Property Services. Whilst there is little prospect of further funding when the funding ends in March 2016 the Head of Property Services is willing to help us look to the future. We will continue to manage our finances with care and prudence and believe we can accumulate cash reserves and generate income to secure our future for a further five years beyond 2016. This gives us time to develop income streams and obtain grants, donations and sponsors. I estimate the Directors time input to be the equivalent of a full time executive officer.

We do need new Directors, especially people with fund raising skills and contacts in the local business community.

Frank Mawby

May 2013.