

Ongar Wildlife Society 1978 – 2003

Fertilisation

“At a meeting held on Thursday 27th April the above society was formed . . .” So the Ongar Wildlife Society came into being within the ‘umbrella’ of the Ongar and District Community Association. The year was 1978. The annual subscription was set at £1, but members were to be charged a further 25 pence per meeting.

The first meeting was arranged for Thursday, 11th May, to be held in the Budworth Hall. The speaker was David Kerwin who presented a talk, *Natural History Photography*. The intention was to link with the facilities of the Conservation Centre, High Beech for walks and outside visits. For the embryonic society, the early events set the pattern; a visit to The Vale of Dedham Heavy Horse Centre on 21st May; a talk by Jim Griffiths on *Bees*; a *Centenary Walk* from the Conservation Centre in June; an evening walk from Queen Elizabeth Hunting Lodge in July; a visit to Fingringhoe Wick.

Ovulation

At the start of the next season, the first Committee was composed of:

Anne Brooks,
Irene Getgood,
Betty Kerwin,
David Kerwin,

Zoe Lee,
Dora Maple (Chairman),
Anne Roberts, and
Gladys Wackett.

Dora Maple was then Warden of the Ongar Community Association. The speakers for 1979 included well-known names; Dr Ken Adams speaking on *Recording and Essex Flora*; Dr David Corke, *Small Mammals*; George Carrick, *History of Warley Place*. A visit by coach to Sheffield Park was arranged to view the Autumn colours, and the eventual visit was indeed memorable. The Society Barbecue was held at Repentance Cottage in Greensted. Some preliminary steps were taken towards natural history recording. The annual sub rose to £1.50! Brian Turnpenny joined the Committee.

Incubation

By early, 1980, the Society had established some links with the Essex Naturalists' Trust (now the Essex Wildlife Trust). Trust goods were on sale at meetings. However, a crisis loomed in the venue and the Arts Centre (now Essex Rooms) was no longer to be rented by Epping Forest District Council for the use of the Community Association, and the Society decided to explore the option to become independent. The finances were reviewed and by the middle of 1980, the sub had risen to £2, as a consequence. Tony Wilson joined the committee.

Nestlings

During 1981, evening meetings, now held in the Church Room, continued to be varied and lively. The Society organised a boat trip up the River Stort. Very successful moth hunts, led by Jim Smith, were held in Greensted (with over 80 species being identified being the record on one evening). Christmas parties became established. However, membership gave cause for concern. Meetings were less well attended than previously, but the standard of lectures remained high. One well-remembered 'event' was the talk by Bernard Betts, of the May and Baker Research Station, as it was then known, on *Snakes and Scorpions*. Bernard brought not just scorpions but a sabre-toothed frog, an horned viper and an indigo snake to the evening. As guests?!

An occasional newsletter was published by the Society. During this period, Ellie Brettell, later to be replaced by Colin Bailey, was elected onto the Committee. Zoe Lee chaired. The moth hunts continued and outside events included a visit to Fingringhoe Wick. Lack of heating in the Church Room persuaded a winter migration to Essex House for the three coldest months!

In 1983, the Society kept its programme of monthly talks and Summer visits. The visits included one to the managed woods at Bradfield St George, near Bury St Edmunds, and a further visit to Wicken Fen.

Hawsmere Spring Reserve

It was during this period that members within the Society became aware of Hawsmere Spring in Stapleford Tawney. Hawsmere Spring was an area of 4.2 acres, partially wooded, of unimproved pasture, and a rare example of a disappearing habitat. The existence of the pasture was reported to the Essex Naturalists' Trust. The late Geoff Pyman of the Trust took great interest, with the result that Hawsmere Spring was purchased by the Trust from the Church Commissioners. The purchase was completed only just in time as a neighbouring pasture field, of similar interest, had recently been ploughed for the first time in living memory.

The first Honorary Warden of the new reserve was Brian Coombes, but following his health problems in 1987, Brian Turnpenny took over the position. Brian continued in that post for some thirteen years. During this period, Brian gave much time and effort towards the maintenance and preservation of Hawsmere Spring. Brian's dedication to the natural history of this part of Essex during his long wardenship is applauded.

In Flight

In 1986, the Committee now consisted of:

Valerie Appleby,
Colin Bailey,
Anne Brooks,

Irene Getgood,
Betty Kerwin,
David Kerwin,

Zoe Lee (Chairman),
Jean Millbank,
Anne Roberts,

Eddie Thomas, and
Brian Turnpenny

The membership stood at 80, but there were changes. Zoe Lee relinquished the chairmanship to be replaced by David Kerwin, and Betty Kerwin, Treasurer for nine years, also stood down to be replaced by Brian Turnpenny. Brian is still our Treasurer. In nearly twenty-five years, OWLS has had only two Treasurers. Two new recruits to the Committee, Valerie Chetham and Noel Dufield, made the complement twelve!

The full programme of events was maintained. In 1987, a bat watch, led by John Dobson, was arranged at Blake Hall. A committee outing, limited because of the availability of the transport, was undertaken to Minsmere. On the return, a stop was made for tea and biscuits in Rendlesham Forest. Squirrels rained nut husks down onto the Committee from the trees of the forestry plantation, but the visit just preceded that great storm over south-east England, during which the plantation was devastated. On revisiting the wood early the next year, the scale of the destruction was wholly apparent. Covering a wide area, trees lay criss-crossed over the ground such that any path through the wood resembled an assault course. Only a few trees remained standing on the edge of the wood. However, the much older deciduous forest just along the road had survived much better.

During 1988, Eddie Thomas was elected Chairman, and Zoe Lee was titled Vice Chairman. Betty Spinks and Don Poynter joined the Committee. Because of pressure on the meeting accommodation at Essex House, the venue for meetings was changed to the Concert Room at the Budworth Hall.

The outstanding visits during the year included bird watching at Orford Ness in April, when the sun shone on a bitterly cold day, and a further visit to the swans wintering at Welney. Welney had been visited before, and on this second visit the number of swans was seen to be recovering following the earlier Chernobyl reactor accident.

Migration

After fourteen years in existence, the Ongar Wildlife Society had now established a pattern. Eight or nine talks were given outside Summer months, while some visits destinations added to local visits and events. It was noticeable that the enthusiasm for the coach trips has eased and reliance was placed on member's own transport. Nevertheless, an engaging programme was maintained. Social functions, in the form of the Christmas Social and Summer Barbecue, to accompany (and provide entertainment for) the Annual General Meeting, are indispensably included in the annual programme.

In 1995, Dr Richard Wicks was elected Chairman, Eddie Thomas standing down because of work commitments. The members of the Committee were now:

Anne Brooks,
Doris Mosher,

Don Poynter,
Brian Spark,

Betty Spinks,
Lilian Steed,
Eddie Thomas,

Brian Turnpenny, and
Richard Wicks (Chairman).

In 1996, the deterioration of the accommodation at the Budworth Hall resulted in the migration back to the more comfortable Essex Rooms. A slight decline in membership had also facilitated this move, since restrictions on meeting attendance had forced the move out to the Budworth Hall. The Essex Rooms have been the home ever since.

... and Still Flying

This short note is the result of a ramble through the early minutes of the Society. There are a number of personal recollections that can be added. First is the continuity and standard of the programme. The Society has been able to maintain an unbroken programme, unflagging in its relevance to wildlife and conservation. Not only has the programme been continuous, the programme has maintained a standard of talks always to delight. Recent seasons have demonstrated that this standard can be maintained. We have been privileged to engage a surprising number of enthusiasts, who with a strong interest in wildlife, are prepared to talk competently about their subject. Significantly, many of these have been expert photographers who have enhanced evenings with some amazing photographs. Outstanding bird photography at the most recent talks has emphasised this.

Second, there is the continuity of the organisation. Many people have been able to give time to the Society. The number of evening meetings of the Society will now total around 200, the number of visits and event will probably exceed 120. All these activities need planning . . . down to the traditional evening coffee and biscuits. It would be wrong to attribute this to a routine, better the arrangements are the result of experience, and here tribute should be paid to all the members of the Committee over the 25 years. There have been strong threads of continuity within the Committee. It is normal not to mention names, but just for once the rule is broken! Of the present membership, Anne Roberts, one of the first Committee, regularly attends meetings. Anne Brooks is a member of the Committee . . . *still*. Brian Turnpenny, who missed only the first couple of Committee meetings, continues as Treasurer . . . and we have always been solvent! Our thanks are due to all these members who have shared in the organisation..

Finally, omissions! Over 25 years there have been many more incidents, benevolent donations, offers of support, etcetera, that have come from the Society that could have been mentioned here. Some members may have been omitted and to these - apologies. Above all the Ongar Wildlife Society has been consistent success because of the members, often supporting the talks and events through weather that has been 'thick and thin'. With their support, we all look forward to the next 25 years

Rob Brooks
Chairman