

A Volunteer's View

Rodger Goodrick 2006

First, I will tell you a little about myself. I work in the commercial vehicle trade and have done so for more years than I like to remember, so when I visit Wheatfen either as a volunteer or just for a walk it's like being on another planet.

I became aware of the need for conservation volunteers at Wheatfen in the late nineteen eighties when I heard Phyllis Ellis, on the Keith Skipper show on Radio Norfolk, so I thought I would give it a try. Fifteen years later, with a few breaks, due to other work commitments I am still here and enjoying every minute of it even my unplanned swim in a dyke in December two thousand and four, which was duly noted in last year's newsletter!

When I first came to Wheatfen I could not have been made more welcome from Phyllis and the rest of the volunteers, two of whom are still here every working day and go by the names of Bill and George. The others I remember from those days were John and Beryl Tooley, John becoming the first full time warden in nineteen ninety one. I liked John, we got on well, and I learnt a lot about conservation and the natural world. Sadly, he is no longer with us.

We were all under the direction of Phyllis and if you did not do the job as she wanted it done you soon knew about it, but we still enjoyed it. In the winter months she always made soup for us to have with our lunch. She would bring it out to where we were working and ladle it into cups for us. It tasted very good and when asked what was in it she would only say there is a little bit of this and a bit of that, but she would never tell us exactly what.

I remember the one job we all would all avoid if possible, the mowing of Old Mill Marsh every winter. At that time, we cut it with scythes, loaded it onto litter trays (these were two Hazel poles with a piece of canvas tied in between) then carried these to the edge of the marsh and made what we called 'eco heaps'. All the work we carried out in the early days was done using traditional methods. The reed would be cut with scythes, the dykes would be chromed out, and we had special knives on long handles to cut weed from the bottom and to clean up the edges which was very hard work and took a long time. I was also taught how to use and sharpen these implements.

David Nobbs took over the day to day running of Wheatfen when John fell ill and eventually took the job as warden and is doing a grand job. He has also taught me a lot about conservation and the flora and fauna of Wheatfen.

Even now we still use a lot of traditional tools for the smaller jobs but for the larger jobs like cutting Old Mill Marsh I am pleased to say that David Nobbs now cuts this with a mechanical mowing machine, and believe me, it is still not an easy job! In late winter one of our main jobs is to carry out some coppicing to let light into the under story of the wood, and this lets food plants like Bramble flower and supplies much needed nectar for the woodland butterflies. The wood we cut is not wasted as we use any suitable pieces to make and maintain the paths in the wood. This is called 'corduroy' and it is surprising how much you need for a short stretch of water logged path. This, in turn, has to be pegged down with long thin wooden runners used to stop it floating away when we have an extra high tide.

The easy side of coppicing is that we normally have a nice bonfire to sit beside and have our lunch.

During the spring and summer months, we are busy repairing and keeping parts of the many paths and bridges in a safe state to walk on. This job gives you a great deal of satisfaction when you look at a bridge and think 'I helped to build that', and see visitors walking around the reserve with relative ease.

It is not all maintenance work, we do a lot of conservation work too, but during the spring and summer months we are very careful not to disturb any of the nesting wildlife. We also help to prepare and help on our various open days making refreshments and some of us take visitors on guided walks. I must admit that one of my favourite jobs is when I take a party out. I tell them if I do not know the answer to their question but do my best to find it on our return. This is because there are so many species at Wheatfen it is impossible to know them all.

As autumn returns, we get busy clearing dykes as these soon get overgrown and blocked by reed and other plants. This goes for a lot of the scrub too. If we left it to grow unchecked, it would soon revert to woodland. This is when I really enjoy myself. I get the chainsaw out, but before I was allowed to use this on the reserve I had to do a six day course and take a practical and theory exam which included how to maintain the saw, different types of tree felling and all the health and safety you need to know. As with any job, you always get the boring bits! We seem to have a never ending job of repairing bridges and boardwalks, but then again, if you did not have all the bridges and boardwalks, no one would be able to see the beauty of the reserve.

Over the course of several years of working, you can see the reserve has retained its wilderness of mostly undisturbed fen and woodland and I am proud to have helped in my small way by keeping it like that with 'not too much gardening', as Phyllis would say!

I look forward to many more years of volunteering at Wheatfen.