

A view from an exile in Cornwall

Jane Waites, 2008

I have been in Cornwall since March 2003, living in Lostwithiel, between Bodmin and St Austell. I live on the outskirts of the town, up a steep hill with splendid views down the River Fowey. Just out of sight there is a small reedbed on one side of the river and a salt marsh on the other. I can see the meanders in the river and the estuary beyond and as the river is tidal up to the town, the view changes all the time. The house faces south east so I get lots of sun when it is sunny, but it is a very exposed site and when the weather is rough I am all too well aware of it!

One of the first things I wanted to do when I arrived here was to find another Wheatfen, but alas that has not happened. Fortunately, my arrival coincided with a new initiative in the town. Lostwithiel, along with other small towns in the south west, had joined the Market and Coastal Town Project. A questionnaire was sent out to all the households in the town asking for opinions on all sorts of aspects of life in Lostwithiel. There was about a thirty per cent response and from that a town plan was developed and the Town Forum set up. Various projects were identified and we were asked which groups we would like to join and I opted for the environment group and expected to be out with my secateurs the next day. It hasn't been quite like that!

After many months the Environment Group was selected to proceed with an application for the salt marsh to be designated a nature reserve. That area of land belonged to the Fowey Harbour River Authority but they handed over the ownership to the local town council. A survey of the site was undertaken by Sally, an American MSc student at Plymouth University. From her thesis we were able to develop an action plan in our application to Natural England. This all sounds very simple, but it involved a multitude of considerations. We had several open meetings with the town in order to address any concerns such as dog walking, fishing, access and much more.

The marsh, here known as Shirehall Moor, had until recent times been used as the town dump and was very popular with bottle diggers. The river itself has silted up over all the years of tin streaming further upstream. Lostwithiel had been a busy port long before Fowey but gradually the larger boats could no longer make it up river. The river banks are very fragile and we have concerns about some of the small boats that like to race up the river in the Summer. This year we received a large grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. With this money and other smaller grants we have so far had some hurdles put in to stop the water from draining off the marsh too fast, some scrapes dug by the Environment Agency and higher paths built with the spoil and just recently we had in a firm from Somerset who put a willow structure along a stretch of bank which was eroding badly close to the main path.

We have involved local schools in the project.

One other project we are hoping to do is to regenerate the reed bed on the other side of the river. This area has dried out a lot and we are keen to allow more water in and attract more birds. The whole area is curiously lacking birds most of the time although we have seen several kingfishers and there are egrets and the usual wading birds only a short distance away down stream.

I have recently become involved with the Heritage Group as well. A Characterisation Study has just been started in the town and will last for about a year and is being led by a team from the Cornwall County Council Archaeological Department, again funded by the Lottery Fund.

This is an ancient town which had a bad time in the Civil War. Just up the road is Restormal Castle, home briefly to the Black Prince.

For several years I have also been part of a birdwatching group. Initially it was a course run by St Austell College but we have now 'gone independent'. We meet every Saturday morning at nine at different places. Our leader, Sid, is a great inspiration to us all and we have a wonderful time. Some weeks we see lots of different birds and on others very few but there is always something of interest in the environment itself. So many of the places we visit reveal evidence of Cornwall's industrial past. Goss Moor in particular which stretches both sides of the old A30 (it has only just been by-passed this Summer) is a stunning place - parts of it have already been reclaimed from its industrial heritage and more is to come. Butterflies, dragonflies, moths and an abundance of wild flowers, small areas of water are such a surprise in an area which must have been so

different. We recently went to the opening of a new, very small reserve, Carbis Moor, which owed much of its success to Exmoor ponies who had cleared the ground to the exact needs of the wild life. It is hoped that the marsh fritillary will flourish here soon. www.midcornwallmoors.org.uk will tell you more. I have buzzards flying over the house most days, regular visits from sparrowhawks, a good variety of birds on the feeders including siskin which breed nearby. I have become quite addicted to the sight and sound of ravens, we have seen the choughs at the Lizard and learned how an improvement in the habitat brought them back and this year on one of our trips to Land's End we saw lots of basking sharks.

I visited Norwich briefly in mid July and wallowed in the sight and sound of the swifts. I haven't seen them in large numbers down here - I am often to be seen loitering outside the local tiny museum where I am a steward on Monday afternoons waiting for a glimpse of them in the summer. I have to make do with the swallows who skim down Fore Street almost at ground level unnoticed by passers by. Perhaps if we can regenerate the reedbed here we shall be able to hear the crackling of the dead reeds as they warm in the winter sun! That would be good.