

Holtspur Bottom Reserve

2003 saw the Branch Reserve, in the Holtspur valley, between Beaconsfield and High Wycombe, reach its fifth year under UTB care, and the halfway point in the Stewardship scheme that helps to support our efforts. It is a fitting time to review what we have achieved during the five years.

It was offered to the Branch as a potential reserve, following our very successful involvement as consultants to Beaconsfield Town Council for their Holtspur Bank LNR. The latter is sited on undeveloped, but overgrown chalk grassland, and supported an excellent range of Butterflies, moths and flora. It also included an adjoining wood, home to dormice, early purple orchids and the uncommon coralroot bittercress.

Holtspur Bottom lies on the opposite side of the valley and although also owned by local council, been leased for a variety of agricultural uses, the last involved ploughing, and sowing with non-native rye grass. However the upper and eastern boundaries escaped this treatment, and retained the character of chalk grassland. On this good numbers of butterfly species still existed. The terms of the lease are essentially that it should be restored to flower rich chalk grassland.

An application for a Countryside Stewardship grant was particularly gratifying as the site did fall into the range of habitats that were currently being accepted for grants. Our work on Holtspur Bank, that the site bounded the Chilterns AONB, and the hope of protecting the whole lower valley all counted in our favour.

No vehicle access existed from public roads; past access having been either from an adjoining farm, or from the remains of a disused sewage works at the bottom. Neither of these being available to us, the first task was to make an access from a nearby lane. This had to be through a disused waste tip, and initially it appeared that we would have to have this cleared commercially, at great expense. It would also have been necessary to fell mature oaks along the lane, which we were very reluctant to do.

A chance comment to a local farmer - he supplies the Banyard eggs - led to an offer to see what could be done. Thus came our first involvement with Robert Larkin who turned out to be not only a man with equipment, but one who has been and continues to be of great assistance on the reserve. In course of one week, an access route was created from lane to reserve, the ground consolidated, and a gate installed. Not perhaps the most stunning access, but one which literally opened the way to real conservation work.

Fencing for grazing was a priority; over a mile was installed under the C/S scheme grants, with invaluable support from our member Chris Dennis, through her professional activity in fencing materials. Fencing created two fields, upper and lower, more accurately northeast and southwest, while leaving a wide perimeter strip all round the reserve. This includes the boundary areas still rich in wildlife, and maintains access for a footpath running along the reserve upper boundary.

Unlike the dense grass on the upper field, that on the lower western field was quite thin and weak and many coarse arable weeds were present, along with thistles and ragwort. No grazing would be possible without these being removed and so the area was treated with herbicide in late summer 1999. In Spring 2000 things looked good, and thoughts turned to the possibility of resowing with a native herb mix, as has been done on the Hampshire branch Hill Extension reserve with great success.

Summer 2000 presented a different picture with a forest of Ragwort covering the field; resowing was not a realistic option. Instead, the top growth was cut down and removed and the ground deep ploughed to a depth of 15" to bury the weeds, and especially the seed bank, which has a life of 20 years, followed by harrowing. An appeal to Branch for funds to resow was very successful, and in late summer resowing, with seed mix supplied by Emorsgate Seeds took place. In 2003, the field looked a picture, with a fine display of flowering herbs, and grasses, and already the arrival of many butterfly species, with Common Blue and our Branch Emblem (Marbled White) prominent. Many locals and visitors commented on the wonderful vista created.

The upper field has left to see what flora develops; It is cut three times a year, with removal of all cuttings. To date progress has been slow with any perceptible change gradual, but all restoration projects need time to achieve results. Our lease from the Council is for 21 years so there is plenty in hand.

Restoration of habitat is a lengthy process, and following meetings in the first years, we have not arranged any formal open days. In the intervening years the Valley Reserves have been designated as Sites of Geomorphic Importance and as a County Wildlife Site. Ironically neither of the reserves is part of the Chilterns AONB, both forming part of the southern boundary.

For 2003, a joint meeting with the local supporters of the LNR was arranged. The reserves themselves looked great and were well supported by butterflies, but by disappointingly few visitors. That this was one of the hottest days of a hot summer may well have had some effect here, as the most popular sightings seemed to be of the refreshment tent.

At the upper field's upper boundary, a raised chalk bank has been formed, angled to warm quickly in the sun, as a possible area to re-establish horseshoe vetch, once common in the valley, and (hopefully to once again support) supporting Chalkhill Blue. Over 1200 plug plants were ordered as part of our C/S grant in Autumn 2002. Planting was not possible until Spring 2003, due to excessive wet weather. When finally planted in Spring 2003, the plants were subjected to weeks of drought, but many have survived.

During 2003, the reserve was affected by events on the adjacent Equestrian Centre, which separates the two Holtspur reserves by about 20 metres at their closest point. On a number of occasions horses have invaded the reserve; they have only accessed the outer perimeter areas, but we have had to take steps to improve the boundary fence. Also a dispute the owner, and the Town Council, as to where the boundary should be, led to the loss of part of the unploughed original grassland at the eastern end and the need for further fencing to be installed.

So what of the grazing that was envisaged as a key part of the restoration management? By 2003 it had not happened. There are few local sheep available, the access route while more than adequate for us is not well suited to trailers carrying sheep. In lieu we have had the site cut and cleared on a regular basis. Hopes were raised in 2003 when a National Trust herd visited Holtspur Bank, but before we could reach agreement for them to move across, vandals had stolen the electric fence used to contain them. The intrepid woolly explorers wandered onto a neighbouring farm leading to their rapid withdrawal from the Bank.

However, they are back in 2004 with a permanent fence, and will probably visit our reserve from next season.

And butterflies? The species count remains at 30, some being abundant, others very occasional; Moths: the species count exceeds 150.

The valley contains no species of major conservation concern, but is important as a link of valuable semi-natural habitat within the Chiltern's countryside. Winter 03/04 saw the reserve being visited by Red Kite and Buzzard. three of each on one occasion. Two Kites seem to be taking up residence in the valley. Of course the main purpose of the reserve is conservation, but at any time of the year there are many pleasant walks and much to be seen.

As a Branch we can be well content with progress to date, and hope that with continued support we will maintain the steady improvement.

Frank Banyard, 2003. Upper Thames Branch, Butterfly Conservation: A review of the first 21 years.