

Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership (BVCP) – March 2018

During 2017/18 the Partnership continued its extensive activities throughout the Blackwater Valley area with its workload only being made possible with the support of many individual volunteers and site groups. The Partnership operates with a small but dedicated staff complement. It ended the year with 8 staff members in post – one less than at the beginning of the year – as follows:

Manager	Steve Bailey, B.Sc., M.Phil., MIEEM
Acting Senior Ranger	Stuart Croft, B.Sc., M.Sc
Countryside Ranger	Laura Keighley, B.Sc
Countryside Ranger	Stuart Barilli
Acting Countryside Ranger	Jenny Sibley, B.Sc
Assistant Ranger (Temporary post)	Bobbie Withers
Assistant Ranger (temporary post)	Sam Valente
Senior Administrative Assistant	Emily Moore

The following report is just a snap shot of the work undertaken by BVCP which is of particular relevance to Ash. Details of some of its other activities elsewhere are given in the reports of the site visits which were made before the Annual General Meeting (AGM).

CORE FUNDED WORK

Work Done in Ash

During the year work was undertaken at Hollybush Park, Shawfield Meadow, Lakeside Park, Snaky Lane and landscaping on the Blackwater Valley Route.

The Snaky Lane Community Wildlife Group holds monthly work parties and BVCP supplies all tools and equipment and attends with staff when larger equipment is required. During the year the Partnership supported the group with meadow mowing.

At Lakeside Park fallen trees were cleared and the path network cut. Invasive willow was cleared from the reedbed and meadow and bat boxes were checked and repaired. The meadow was hay cut with the cuttings removed to promote wildflowers.

Paths across Shawfield meadow were mown and hedgerows cut back to promote access. Fencing was repaired around Shawfield bridge.

Hollybush Park meadow was hay cut and collected and the paths cut back twice. The height barrier was replaced which has secured access but it is still proving to be a frequent fly tipping site.

NON CORE SITE WORK

Where the BVCP team has been asked to take on a management role for a site on behalf of a partner or landowner the Service charges for this activity. Fee generating work is only accepted that is in line with objectives for the Valley and the income is used to support core partnership activities and help with economies of scale.

Blackwater Valley Road Landscape

Under the auspices of non core site work land either side of the A331 is managed by the BVCP to ensure that commitments to environmental mitigation for road construction are met. The linear green corridor contains long sections of the Blackwater Valley path, screening tree belts and wildlife habitats. Annual management includes clearing encroaching vegetation from paths and

cycle ways, clearing roadside sight lines, thinning plantations, cutting grass on wildflower areas, litter and fly-tip removals .

BIODIVERSITY ACTION

Habitat and River Improvement

To encourage wildflowers and manage grasslands the Partnership undertook an intensive programme of hay cutting and mowing to improve biodiversity and control invasive species. More sites than ever before were cut, covering 17ha on 21 sites compared to 11ha on 15 sites the previous year. This was made possible through establishing a joint ownership agreement of a large tractor and hiring equipment including a robo-flail which meant that steep slopes and thick bramble could be tackled. A very impressive demonstration of what this latter piece of equipment could do was given as part of the pre-AGM site visits. Unfortunately Councillors were not allowed to have a go at using it much to their disappointment.

One particular project, supported financially by the Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust (BVCT), was the installation of dead wood stumperies for Stag Beetles, a species endangered due to loss of habitat. This project was enthusiastically supported by both staff and volunteers who exceeded the target of 50 stumperies spread throughout the Blackwater Valley. There is now affordable housing for these beetles in and around our area. Look out for them when rambling.

Biodiversity Monitoring

Various monitoring projects were undertaken during the year, for example, inspections of Barn Owl and bat boxes. Of interest to Ash would be the grassland rapid assessment surveys to help determine the effectiveness of the Partnership's meadow management which were conducted by staff on several sites including the Surrey Hills. The Surrey Botany Group also monitored Lakeside and Hollybush Park.

Annual General Meeting 4 November 2017

The day of the AGM started with visits to several sites –

Blackwater Reach, Sandhurst.

This is a small but important Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) looked after by the Partnership on behalf of the owners, Sandhurst Town Council. As this is a flower-rich meadow it is not practical to graze so needs a regular "cut and collect". This method of mowing, then removing the cuttings, ensures that the soil retains the right balance of nutrients for meadow flowers to thrive. BVCP also carries out shrub clearance and during the year used the robo-mower to tackle encroaching bramble. A stag beetle stumpery has been installed and last year 2 footbridges were replaced. Three guided walks visited the pond which is a favourite spot for Daubenton's (or water) bats.

Eversley Sports Association

The ESA site is part of the 285ha Eversley Complex of former quarries. The Blackwater Valley Landscape Study of 1971 identified the need to co-ordinate the restoration of the existing quarries with the excavation of future pits as work progressed westwards. Forty + plus years later the excavation is now complete and a general principle of locating areas for "quiet" uses and the BV path to the north of the river with the more "noisy" and formal recreation to the south has been followed. BVCP have managed the restored Moor Green Lakes since 1993 and the Complex as a

whole has recently received an award for “planned restoration”. Final earth formation is now well under way and the former quarry will be transformed into 151ha of nature reserve/woodland including grazing, 113ha of “formal” recreation (sports pitches, golf, and water sports), 1ha for allotments and the whole complex will incorporate 7.5km of paths/bridleways.

Swan Lake Park, Yateley

This is designated as SANG (Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace) and BVCP manage the park (excluding allotments and angling) on behalf of Yateley TC. Carried out by developers to satisfy planning conditions the initial site set up was poorly conceived. BVCP undertook extensive remedial works to improve access, security and biodiversity involving path re-surfacing, re-siting benches, replacing the car park barrier, installing pedestrian gates and bollards to restrict vehicular access to the meadow and sowing the lower meadow with green hay. Annual maintenance includes meadow mowing, tree safety, cutting vegetation away from paths and seats and maintaining hedges around the car park.

Darby Green Pond

Restoration of this natural pond was funded jointly by Yateley TC and the Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust. The pond and its surrounds had become neglected and overgrown with paths used only by schoolchildren becoming practically impassable and the pond itself disappearing under trees and invasive Parrot’s Feather. Windblown trees were removed from paths together with litter and fly tipping as well as clearing the Parrot’s Feather itself from the pond. As a result of the clearance common duck weed has flourished which provides shelter for spawning frogs and toads and the clearance of fallen trees from the edge of the pond allows light to reach it which in turn checks the growth of the duckweed keeping the pond healthy. A new bench was installed and erection of an interpretation board is planned.

Highlights of the year

These were particularly noted at the meeting.

- Extensive access work across the including 1.7km of paths resurfaced, 5 flights of steps replaced, 3 new benches installed
- BVCP’s highest number of conservation tasks – 222
- Increased mechanisation, using shared, owned and hired equipment enabled more to be achieved including meadow management at 21 sites
- Over 50 stag beetle stumperies created on sites across the Valley with support from the BVC Trust
- Value of volunteers supported exceeded £200,000 for the first time

For the Future – Finance

One exceedingly important issue considered at the meeting was the future financing of BVCP. The need to keep the Partnership going was recognised and it was agreed to have one last attempt to increase core funding and to continue to explore other possible options of financing the service.

Both Guildford Borough and Ash Parish Councils continued to support the work of BVCP throughout the year and this has been much appreciated by the service. Like many local authority funded organisations the Partnership is facing financial challenges and it is looking at alternative means of funding or of delivering its work by different means. Fortunately Surrey Heath Borough Council has reinstated its funding for the Partnership which is really good news as it had been feared that this source may have been withdrawn altogether. The Partnership is currently in

discussion with GBC as to how it could be used more for work in Lakeside Park and there are other possible projects which may come forward in the Ash area.

The Partnership's manager is continuing to explore the various avenues for financing activities and intends to have some options ready for next year's Annual General Meeting. Hopefully the future financial position of the Partnership can be maintained so that the valuable activities of the service can continue unabated.

Councillor Jo Randall
Ash Parish Council 14 February 2018