

BLACKWATER VALLEY COUNTRYSIDE PARTNERSHIP (BVCP)

MARCH 2022

The aim of the Partnership is to provide a continuous green space alongside the Blackwater River as an attractive, safe, sustainable and wildlife rich environment for informal countryside recreation.

The year in brief

The reporting year for the Partnership runs from October to September and like so many organisations it found the period up to September 2021 very challenging due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Site access remained high all year because of the restrictions imposed by COVID although volunteer activity and events were ceased for a large part of the period.

The Partnership took over the management of new sites at Southwood Park, Runfold Ridge and Bin Wood. Farnham Quarry, now known as Tice's Meadow, was fully restored and towards the end of 2021 a consortium of local Councils led by Surrey County Council, and including Guildford Borough Council, purchased the site from Hansons. Its future as a protected nature reserve is now secure.

Blackwater Valley Path

A new footbridge, paid for by the landowner, was installed allowing access to a section of the riverside path on land west of Swan Lake Park. Delay in the determination of a planning application for North Camp held up the reinstatement of the riverside path which had been diverted. However BVCP continued to clear vegetation from the section of path owned by Surrey County Council (SCC) in Guildford/Ash even though funding from SCC to the Partnership had ceased.

Developing the Green Network

SANGs at Bin Wood (an extension of Ash Green Meadows) and Runfold Ridge were opened in the year. These are owned by the Land Trust and managed by BVCP. Bin Wood is just 2ha in extent but is one of the few areas of ancient woodland in the Valley. It had previously suffered from anti-social behaviour, so the Partnership was pleased to bring it into management. Initial work involved creating a path and blocking others to avoid ecologically sensitive areas, constructing bridges and designing and installing sign boards.

As reported above a consortium of local councils acquired Tice's Meadow ensuring the future management for nature, public access and flood management of this important 55ha site. BVCP also helped SCC develop proposals to bring Tongham Pool under suitable management.

Maintaining the Valley's Green Spaces

The team at BVCP were heavily involved in the management of 24 sites covering a total of 476 ha. Work varied from site to site but typically this involved agreeing work programmes,

carrying out site inspections, tree safety work, repairs to infrastructure, vegetation clearance from footpaths and biodiversity targeted work such as meadow mowing.

The annual programme of hay cutting and mowing across most sites to maintain meadow flora and to manage grasslands was completed. As well as the sites the Partnership is responsible for it also regularly helps when requested on sites owned by partners. During the period this included mowing grasslands and heathland fire breaks for Surrey Heath, woodland work for Hart and pond clearance at Yateley.

Nature Recovery

The Environment Act 2021 set biodiversity targets and duties to achieve mandatory biodiversity net gain in every area of England. Improvements to the biodiversity of the Valley has always been one aim of BVCP. Survey and monitoring enable it to determine what it has to do to allow sympathetic management and to target improvement projects.

During the year surveys included:

- Setting up reptile transects at 4 sites, followed by creation of log piles and hibernacula.
- A bird survey at Southwood Park
- An inspection of the river for invasive Cape Pondweed and Floating Pennywort.
- Mapping invasive species at Wellesley, Blandford and Rowhill followed by the removal of Variegated Yellow Archangel from Rowhill and Southwood woodland.
- Monitoring grassland condition at Tice's Meadow and Weyburn Meadows. Grassland improvement projects were carried out at Weyburn Meadows and Hawley Meadows involving seeds and plantlets of native species. Five woodland sites were treated with ground flora seeding funded by the Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust (BVCT).
- Monitoring of bat boxes continued to be suspended due to COVID restrictions but a survey for Rushmoor BC identified the roosts of a large colony of Noctule bats (a priority species) in Wellesley Woods. A new bat hibernation site designed and fitted out by the Partnership was installed at Runfold Quarry.
- Known stands of Japanese Knotweed were checked and treated at Wellesley Woods, Lakeside, Royal Oak Valley and Rowhill.

Volunteer Activity

A major impact of COVID was the enforced restriction in volunteer activity. However, Tuesday group volunteers were kept involved with regular updates, social media links and nature quizzes. Rushmoor BC sought BVCP's support for the revitalised Friends of Queen Elizabeth Path and the Rowhill Society requested increased help.

Wider Partnership

In addition to Local Authority core funding partners (including Ash Parish Council) the BVCP has close links to other bodies not least the BVCT and the 8 site-based volunteer groups.

Land Trust provides significant funding for the 5 SANGs managed by the Partnership on its behalf whilst smaller sums were received from Cemex and Hanson to help support the dedicated volunteer groups who look after Moor Green Lakes and Tice's Meadow.

BVCP is a member of the Loddon Catchment Partnership and Loddon Enterprise and Conservation Consultative both of which maintain links with the Environment Agency, angling clubs and wildlife trusts co-ordinating work towards river improvement projects.

Links with Natural England are maintained by membership of its Access Management and Monitoring Partnership which deals with SPA (Special Protection Area) and SANG issues.

The Value of the Partnership

The total value of the BVCP's work in the Valley to September 2020 was £650k, slightly up from the previous year. Although the value of volunteers to the Partnership fell it was more than compensated for by increases in management fees from both partners and non-partners due to looking after more sites. The core contribution from partners made up just 14% of income.

The work of the Partnership continues to be a valued and important resource which Ash Parish Council is very happy to support.

Councillor Jo Randall
Ash Parish Council