



## **The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire and Peterborough**

### **Minutes of the Annual General Meeting at 1215 hours on 11 October 2008 at The University of Northampton**

**Present:** Barbara Young (President) in the chair, Michael Allen (Chairman), Sir Charles Chadwyck-Healey (Vice-chairman), Richard Townley (Honorary Secretary), Richard Astle (Honorary Treasurer), Dr Pat Doody, Margaret Goose, Peter Pilbeam, Bob Cornes, Dr Nancy Dawson, Trevor Gunton and 101 other members.

**1. Apologies for absence:** Miss JM Swann, Mr D Cadney, Mrs J Cadney, Fiona Chesterton, Mrs R Jolley, Little Downham Parish Council, Miss J M Swann, Ioan Thomas, Juliette Wilson

**2. Minutes of the meeting on 13 October 2007** were approved as a correct record on the proposal of Trevor Gunton, seconded by Peter Pilbeam.

#### **3. Presentation of Annual Report**

The Annual Report was presented by the President, who explained that it was written in accordance with guidelines laid down by the Charity Commission, which meant that it began with very important but not headline-grabbing information to reassure everyone that the Trust was being properly run. She assured members that it was well-governed and members should be grateful to the Officers, Trustees and staff for the conscientious way in which they ensured that this was the case.

The Trust was just one of 47 Wildlife Trusts across the British Islands and it played a leading role in the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts. Our Chairman was also Chairman of the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts and two of our staff, Nick Hammond and Brian Eversham, were chairs of two of the support groups for achieving its eight objectives. Three more serve on three other support groups.

Highlights of the Trust's work were our having at the end of the year 129 nature reserves with over 350 volunteers and 16 staff undertaking their management. In terms of acquiring land the Trust had been very active, but had concentrated on consolidating our existing holdings to give us the more robust units that would be necessary to help wildlife adapt to climate change. We had been greatly helped in this by the Growth Area Funds.

Working in partnership was one of the core values of the Trust and it really did deliver on this as the list on pages 2 and 3 of the report showed. We had also worked closely with local authorities, screening more than 15,000 planning applications and commenting on them. Changes to the planning system were being proposed. While we needed infrastructure we must not go back to the bad old days of planning and vigilance would be needed, because we must preserve our living seas and living landscapes.

Unless we inspired people to develop a lifelong commitment to wildlife we should not achieve our objectives. We had contacted almost 37,000 people of all ages at our centres, more than doubling the previous year's figures. At the end of the year we had 9,300 Wildlife Watch members with 16 groups and 92 active volunteers (today there are 18 groups). Our total members stood at 33,812 and we had 10 local groups.

The summary of achievements on pages 6 and 7 was impressive. We were extremely fortunate in the commitment of members and the energy of our volunteers and staff. With these we could face the uncertain economic future with some confidence, but we still needed to ensure that we all do as much as we could to minimise the uncertainties.

#### **4. Presentation and Adoption of the Accounts and Auditors' report**

The Honorary Treasurer, Richard Astle, presented these.

He made no apology for talking through the Trust's financial position. The success of any charity was rooted in its ability to make ends meet and the Trust was no exception. In order to deliver reserve acquisitions; to undertake management tasks or to run wildlife and ecology training sessions, we had to ensure that the funds were in place today, and we had to have clear plans to ensure that they would be in place this year and next year too. Sustainability was not just about the environment and conservation: it was also about sound business planning and risk management.

He had been delighted in 2007 to be able to present for the second successive year a very positive review of the Trust's financial position, which made the opportunity to stand up for a third time to brief the members on an even more successful year financially a pleasure indeed.

The fact that yet again the Trust raised more money than we expected was down to the sheer hard work of our staff and our volunteers and, of course, our members. Before going into the detail of that success, he paid tribute and offered his personal thanks to all those involved – whether it was in planning and delivering fund-raising campaigns, filling out grant application forms, paying membership fees or even attending meetings of the Resources Committee, it all added up and made the Trust the sound, viable organisation we could take such pride in.

Before moving on to the review of the year, he reminded members of the guiding principles of the Trust's financial management:

1. Sound business planning, through the development of a robust development plan
2. Strong risk management
3. The maintenance of current assets that would cover three months running costs
4. And finally, a commitment to maintain balanced budgets

The headline numbers for 2007-8 were very satisfactory indeed. The unrestricted surplus for the year was £223K, of which the Trust could be very proud. It was a very healthy figure indeed, although he did note that a proportion of this surplus is due to several un-budgeted gains and losses including bad debt provision and stock revaluations. As a result our unrestricted net current assets had risen by over £133K to just over £700K, comfortably exceeding the three-month reserving figure of £523K.

Of particular note was the continued growth in our income from subscriptions and Gift Aid – up by 15%. The total members rose from 32,156 to 33,812 – a 5% increase. There was a further increase in the amount raised through Service Level Agreements – up by 13%, and legacies too were up significantly, after a disappointing year in 2006-7.

A new source of income also emerged during the year as a result of our Great Fen land holdings. The Trust received over £80K in rental income – a very helpful contribution to its budgets. As a result of this successful generation of income, it is worth noting that the Trust was in a position to spend over £2.8 million last year on direct nature conservation work, including – just as examples - reserve management (£1.3m) and education (£349K).

He had a couple of notes on the situation. Firstly, as set out in the statutory accounts there has been a change to our accounting policy in respect of how we classified our nature reserves on the balance sheet, which were now classed as heritage assets. This meant they had been extracted from fixed assets and shown separately. This change of policy had resulted in what is known as a prior year adjustment, which means last year's accounts were adjusted to reflect this, in order to compare like with like.

Secondly, it was not all good news. We saw a reduction in some areas of income – most significantly income from landfill tax credits, which has been for some time now a very significant source of revenue for the Trust. As a result, we had to reduce our estimate of the money we could bring in from this source in this financial year too and will need to be proactive in identifying other sources of income.

He said that those headline figures did indeed look very positive, but we needed to recognise just how tough our operating environment had been and would continue to be. At times last year, we had been predicting a quite substantial deficit and making plans for how to deal with that. The fact that we had ended the year with such a substantial surplus showed just how volatile our income streams were and how dependent we were on grants and restricted income. This made managing the Trust's finances particularly difficult.

He was therefore particularly pleased by two key developments during the course of the last financial year.

Firstly, the Trust had sensibly invested in external help to review our business plan and to offer recommendations on the development of a new five year plan, designed to significantly increase our unrestricted income and reduce our dependency on grants and restricted income. This plan was agreed by Council and represented a significant investment in our marketing and fund-raising capacity and capability. It was absolutely the right way forward for the Trust with an outline plan which would result in an increase in net unrestricted income of nearly £400K over the next five years, if successfully implemented. He stressed the word "net" (*i.e.* after the additional costs incurred in building capacity and capability). The plan was based around building our income streams from corporate membership, legacies and individual membership.

Secondly, he was delighted that during the course of the year, we completed recruitment of the Trust's new Resources Director, Terry Hazeldine, who joined us in May this year. This was a very major step forward for the Trust. He believed the Trust is on the cusp of moving from a small business to a medium-sized one. The

development of a new business plan, plus Terry's appointment, were clear signs that we had recognised this transition and were taking the right steps to accommodate it. Terry had already made a very positive impact in putting in place the right processes and systems to manage our resources most efficiently.

At this point he took the opportunity to thank Chris Donnelly for her immense contribution since 1998, when she took over the management of the accounts on a part-time basis, having previously been a volunteer and a Trustee. The Trust owed her a great debt.

From the perspective of the Resources Committee we could look back on 2007-8 as a very positive year on all fronts. The Trust delivered a significant surplus by increasing income and keeping costs level. It had signed off a robust new investment plan that would help to manage the risks of our volatile income streams and put our resources on a firmer foundation. And we had the people and structures in place to take forward the delivery of that business plan.

He said that it was not normally appropriate to reflect on the current financial year at the AGM, but everyone must be conscious of the economic turmoil that was going on all around us. What did this mean for the Trust? The plain truth was that we were not immune from trends in the wider economy. We had not yet seen a major fall in income, in fact in some areas such as legacies and corporate donations income was well up on last year, but we were monitoring all revenue streams very closely. He could assure members that the Trust had no investments in Icelandic banks. Some Trustees and senior staff would be meeting to review likely areas of impact and to consider how we might respond to them. The Trust needed to be ready to act quickly if income did start to fall away significantly.

He assured members that there was no panic and he took comfort from having the right people and the right governance structures in place to adapt our plans as necessary.

He did not wish to end on a negative note. He was very happy to commend this Report and Accounts to you this year. It showed a Trust that was not only financially healthy today, but was ambitious about tomorrow and ready to invest in the future; as well as having the governance and management that could help it to adapt to changing circumstances. That was certainly something to be very proud of.

The President thanked the Treasurer and invited questions on the Annual Report and Accounts or any other matter from the floor.

Nicholas Noades said that he had been in the habit of sending material that he had found to museums, but that recently these gifts had been refused and he wondered the Trust could provide a solution. Brian Eversham, Conservation Director, confirmed that museums run by local authorities were under severe financial pressure and found it difficult to handle some material. However, natural history specimens would be welcomed by the Trust's education centres as teaching aids and he would personally welcome them for use in the identification tests he set for candidates at job interviews.

A member asked whether the Trust made sure that litter was a topic of the Trust's education. Senior Education Programmes Manager, Andrew Kennedy, assured that it was. One way in which children were attuned to this was through "low-impact" lunches, where children had to analyse the environmental impact of their packed

lunches and there were also litter picks in order to draw their attention to the problems.

There being no further questions, the Honorary Treasurer proposed the adoption of the Accounts and Auditors' Report for the year ended 31 March 2008. This was seconded by Nicholas Noades and accepted *nem. con.*

#### **5. Appointment of the Auditors**

The Honorary Treasurer on behalf of Council proposed the appointment of Saffery Champness as auditors for the current year. This was seconded by Peter Pilbeam and accepted *nem.con.*

#### **6. Election of Returning Council Members**

Michael Allen, Sir Charles Chadwyck-Healey, Dr Richard Chandler, Bob Cornes, Dr Patrick Doody, Margaret Goose, Peter Pilbeam, Dr Jeremy Purseglove and John Yates, being eligible, were standing for re-election. They were proposed *en bloc* by Richard Astle, seconded by Richard Townley and were elected *nem.con.*

The President took this opportunity to pay tribute to Michael Allen, who indicated that he would be resigning during the coming year. Michael had served as a Trustee, Honorary Treasurer and for the last seven years as Chairman of Council. During this time the Trust had changed from a failing organisation to being one of the leading Wildlife Trusts. Its membership had more than trebled, its income had increased by more than five times and its land holdings had quadrupled. This was in no small part due to Michael and the Trust owed a great debt. (*Sustained applause.*)

#### **7. Election of New Council Members**

Three new Council Members, Fiona Chesterton, Professor David Gowing and Dr Derek Langslow were proposed by Richard Townley, seconded by Bob Cornes. They were elected *nem.con.*

#### **8. Election of Honorary Secretary**

Richard Townley was proposed by Sir Charles Chadwyck-Healey, seconded by Margaret Goose.

#### **9. Election of Honorary Treasurer**

Richard Astle was proposed by Bob Cornes, seconded by Pat Doody and returned *nem con.*

#### **10. Election of Chairman of Conservation & Education Committee**

Rupert Paul was proposed by Peter Pilbeam, seconded by Margaret Goose and returned *nem con.*

The President thanked all the officers and trustees for all their hard work.

#### **11. Election of President and Vice-Presidents**

Michael Allen as Chairman of Council took the chair for this item. He paid tribute to the President's power and forcefulness. The Trust was extremely fortunate to have her as President and he recalled that she had been seen at a supermarket check-out stripping extraneous packaging from the products she had bought. He also recounted that she had been seen wandering along the train on the East Coast Main Line handing out Great Fen leaflets: Stephen Fry had described her as "the bag-lady of the East Coast main line". He had no hesitation in proposing her re-election as President. In view of the sustained applause he declared her re-elected by acclamation.

## **12. Presentation of the Richenda Huxley Award to Dr Nancy Dawson.**

The President said that Council decided that the 2008 recipient of The Richenda Huxley Memorial Award should be Dr Nancy Dawson. The award in memory given in memory of Lady Huxley is for a member who has contributed significantly to the Trust's achievement of its objectives. Nancy Dawson fully met this criterion. She was the first conservation member of staff of the Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire Wildlife Trust, bringing a professional discipline to the Trust's conservation activities and was responsible for its work's being taken seriously by local authorities. She negotiated the lease that took the Trust's offices to Priory Park in Bedford. Since she retired she has devoted much of her time to the organisation of Plant Sales and Open Gardens across the three counties. The Plant Sales that she has organised over the last twenty years or more have raised over £50,000 for the Trust.

Dr Dawson thanked the Trust for honouring her and said she wanted to share one of the sayings she had on a noticeboard in her kitchen - "It's better to light a single candle than to curse the darkness." It is very relevant to nature conservation, because by our actions we can make a difference.

The President said that Council had also decided to present the Cliff Christie Memorial Award to Tony Balbi, who was not present and the award will be made on another occasion. The Cliff Christie Memorial Award is for anyone who has contributed significantly to nature conservation or the study of natural history in Northamptonshire. Tony was the voluntary warden of our High Wood and Meadow Nature Reserve. He had been involved with the monitoring and practical sides of managing the reserve since its purchase in 1985. He continually updated the botanical records for the site and monitored the status of the rare plants on the reserve, writing an in-depth annual report. He also helped with the stock checks at High Wood, Ramsden and Woodford Halse at least three days a week. Tony had also been carrying out bird monitoring (nest box checks and ringing) on the site. He had led guided walks round the reserve showing the public and funders the delights of the bluebells in full flower.

The meeting closed at 1310.

13.10.08