

HADRIAN COOK'S REPORT

Dear Friends,

There is never a dull moment down on the watermeadows. The Environment Agency confirmed that we have experienced the driest January to June since the drought year of 1976. This was a year I recall well - I was taking finals at Sheffield University during un-seasonally hot and dry weather. The experience made its impression on me because, ever since, water (or the lack thereof) has played a major part in my life. As I watch the grass being topped during July, I note the historical resonance, yet we could not drown even if it were allowed at the time of writing, due to low river levels. Actually, there could have been summer drowning this time of year in order to bring a hay crop or two. We know the importance of hay at Harnham, from the large number of Victorian hay cart bridges located across the meadows. Once harvested, the hay would have been taken through the fords into the coaching inns in the City. If you are following the discussion on bio-fuel production, you are now aware that it happened here first of all!

And the good news? We can, and have, undertaken the first systematic winter of drowning under our Higher Level Stewardship agreement with Natural England. You will recall the generosity of the Environment Agency, and of the recently re-organised Salisbury District Council who jointly funded a new sluice and double-bunny hatch at strategic locations for the watering of upper Seven Acres. Following a trial session before Christmas when, assisted by John Beckett, Martin Wright and others, we worked out a protocol for raising and lowering water levels for demonstration purposes. This worked well. In fact, so well, that by the close of drowning season (31 March), I estimate we had hosted 480 visitors, of whom 180 were children. Most were on the Saturdays when the community and invited professional

groups attended in order to witness the raising and dropping of water in the carriers and drains at times of switch over of the meadows. Then, during March, Lesley Wright and Jan Fitzjohn organised no fewer than seven additional visits from local primary schools when we could all watch the delight of children in wellies paddling on our meadows. It makes you wonder if all these video games are really needed?

With the winter behind us, and with Martin having earned his spurs as a drowner, the concerted drive was on to open the cottage more in the summer months. Following the successful (but cold) Open Day in March, and Environment Event in May, I can confess being a little sceptical as to whether the interest remained for regular open events and tours during summer, and when there is virtually no water. I was wrong, and thanks once more to all concerned (be they guiding, making refreshments or mere mingling in the interest of public relations), the plan to open the Cottage between 2.00 and 4.30 pm throughout July and August is going well. Meanwhile, we kept weekday school visits more-or-less rolling to the end of term.

There continue to be regular guided walks, including the Festival Walk, led by Jenny. I delivered talks to Bournemouth University, to the Institution of Civil Engineers (Salisbury branch) and to the Spire group of the University of the Third Age so far during this year. More are planned in future.

We remain very much engaged with the British Trust for Conservation of volunteer groups. Also, as part of the Salisbury Festival, BTCV organised a series of Young Carers events, that enabled young people who are otherwise pre-occupied with looking after an infirm relative to undertake some conservation work, to have an

outdoor meal on the meadows and learn about storytelling from a professional actor and work with a community artist. As well as repairing a bank on upper Seven Acres, the young people created a curious woven willow hut-like garden feature at Rose Cottage. Some of us attended the final Young Carers event in the Cathedral Cloister in early June, when we heard some of the stories being read.

There has also been a change at the top. We say farewell to Lord Marland following some ten years as chairman of the Trust. Jonathan, you will all be aware, was highly successful at raising funds and during his tenure the purchase of Rose Cottage was possible. This proved invaluable. I would like to offer my thanks to him for making my own engagement with the Trust possible in the first place and wish him well in his ministerial career. We now welcome Helen Marriage together with her considerable experience in arts management, to be the new Chairman of the Harnham Water Meadows Trust. I am sure that, with me, you are looking forward to a productive future.

Thank you all, once more, for your fantastic support during 2010. We would be especially pleased to hear from you, if you feel you might help us with volunteering for the Friends of the Harnham Water Meadows Trust. So far we have achieved much and more is possible in the future. You are all, naturally, cordially invited to the public demonstrations of drowning between January and March 2011, at times to be announced on the website. (with thanks to you, Pip!)

Oh yes, the garden hut? Lesley and Jan now threaten to banish me to it during the next winter if I misbehave during drowning.

*Hadrian Cook,
July 2010*