

FOURTEENTH ANNUAL REPORT
FOR THE PERIOD STARTING ON 1ST OCTOBER 2018
AND ENDING ON 30TH SEPTEMBER 2019



Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust
Registered in England and Wales under company number 04898996. Charity number 1109424.
Registered office: Ash Lock Cottage, Government Road, Aldershot, Hampshire GU11 2PS.

Welcome to the Fourteenth Annual Report of the Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust.

1. Structure, management and governance

We are a company limited by guarantee and not having a share capital. Our governing document is our Memorandum and Articles of Association, adopted on 15th September 2003. In addition, we have adopted policies and procedures designed to ensure legal compliance and operational efficiency. These are reviewed and regularly updated.

Trustees are appointed to the Board by existing trustees until the next Annual General Meeting, when they are eligible for re-election. The following trustees managed the charity during the period covered by this Report:

Name	Office (if any)	Dates acted if not for whole year
Mary Ferriss	Chair	
Colin Wilson	Vice-chair	
Jane Biscombe	Vice chair	Resigned on 11 th December 2018
Alan Rolfe	Treasurer	Resigned on 31 st March 2019
Shelagh Heasley	Treasurer	Appointed on 1 st April 2019
Bernard Baverstock		
Sara Kinnell		Appointed on 11 th December 2018
Alan Taylor		
Christopher Smith		

The Board met twelve times during the year.

The following people undertook other roles in the management of the Trust during the period:

- Company Secretary: Stephen Bailey, Manager of the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership (BVCP);
- Membership Secretary: Annie Keighley.
- Webmaster: Sharon Atchley.
- Minutes Secretary: Julie Hannington, Keith Frampton.
- Marketing Manager: Mike Swaddling
- Events Manager: Christine Butcher
- Fundraiser: Jenny Simmonds.

We would like to thank all those who participated in managing the Trust during this period and provided so much of their time and their specialist skills in so many different ways. Thank you too to our friends at the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership who provided their unwavering support throughout the year and all the dedicated volunteers too numerous to mention who helped us with events, workdays and projects.

We recognise that our members and supporters are essential and appreciate that they are key to our continued success. We inspire and enable everyone to do their bit – because the challenge of conserving our natural environment in the Valley is too big to overcome alone.

We are extremely grateful for all donated funds for our walks and talks and to support our projects and our running costs, including individual members, Kebur Garden Materials, Farnborough Airport, Fluor, SC Johnsons Wax and the Camberley Society, Touchstone Energy, Surrey Heath Show (donation for NatureHunt Marketing)

We would like to thank Paul Sanders who organised the programme of members' circular walks and Mike Burns who acted as backmarker again this year. Angus and Marilyn Glen-West very kindly help Paul provide refreshments on the walks.

Our thanks also go to John Mackey, Chris Welch and others for their help in making the bird boxes, swift boxes, swift terraces, hedgehog homes and dormouse boxes.

Thank you also to the "Wood Gnomes", the eager volunteers based at Ash Lock Cottage, who have continued to contribute to Trust funds by cutting timber retrieved by BVCP into firewood for sale to the public.

2. Financial Review

- Expenditure of £13,530 exceeded income £11,359 by £2171.
- Our bank balance remains healthy with the bank and deposit account balances £23,083 at the year end (we have a deposit with Scottish Widows of £10,481, which earned interest of £30 in the financial year) but continual fund-raising activity is ongoing in order that we can respond swiftly to future projects as required.
- Fluor and SC Johnsons Wax generously donated a total of £4000 to our Woodland Flowers project.
- We have been generously supported by our members who, in addition to £1,860 of annual subscriptions, have given £502 in donations.
- Our annual fundraising walk, the Big Valley Ramble”, raised £1,655.
- Our “Save our Swifts” appeal raised £887.
- Charitable Gift Aid amounted to £508.
- We received £369 from walks and talks and £476 from sundry donations including those from Rushmoor, Hart and Bracknell Forest Community Lotteries and donations at our AGM.
- We received £250 in sponsorship for our 2019 AGM from Kebur Garden Materials.
- Various other smaller items of income were received.
- Our expenditure included the following major items: a grant to Guillemont school of £6000 for a nature garden; the purchase of seeds for £2,600 for our Woodland Flowers project (the balance of the £4000 will be spent this year, as we had difficulty sourcing seeds); a grant of £1,700 for a shelter at Tice’s Meadow; “Save our Swifts” costs of £640.
- Various other smaller items of expenditure were incurred.
- We did not have a policy on reserves, although we are about to adopt one. We aim to retain a minimum of two years running costs.

Our accounts were again independently reviewed this year by Phil Caunt, FCMA. We thank him for his review and ongoing support.

Membership

This is the twelfth year that we have had a membership base. At the of the period, we had a total of 312 members, comprising 295 household members, 9 group members, 4 corporate members and 1 affiliated member. As each individual membership is assigned to an address or household which may have more than one person living there, the number of actual individuals covered by household membership is materially higher.

3. Our Objectives and Activities

The objects of the Trust set out in its governing document are:

- (i) To promote the conservation, protection and improvement of the physical and natural environment and promote the management of the countryside, biodiversity and wildlife habitats and characteristic landscapes of the Blackwater Valley by supporting conservation projects and programmes within and around the Boroughs of Rushmoor, Bracknell Forest, Guildford, Waverley and Surrey Heath; the Districts of Hart and Wokingham and such other areas as the Charity may from time to time decide ("the area of benefit").
- (ii) To advance the education of the public on matters connected with countryside management by supporting, promoting and improving public access to the countryside, and promoting the participation of the public in countryside management within the area of benefit.

4. Our main achievements during the period

The trustees have had regard to the guidance issued by the Charity Commission on public benefit when undertaking their activities. The main activities undertaken for public benefit were:

Events

We ran a full programme of varied educational walks and talks, attended local events and fairs, and issued monthly news updates to members.

Our events included the following:

- a joint event with the Camberley Society, when Michael Gove (then Secretary of State for the Environment), Natural England and Daniel Raven-Ellison (self-styled “guerrilla geographer and creative explorer” and originator of the National Park City concept) presented on the state of Nature and the government’s 25 Year Plan for the Environment to a packed audience in Camberley Theatre in November;
- “Big Valley Ramble”, our annual main fundraising walk, which took place in and round Swallowfield and Arborfield in April (the opening of this event by our sponsor Kebur Garden Materials is shown below);



- Blackwater River Festival in September, a new event for us which consisted of 17 walks, talks and conservation activities in held in the Valley over 9 days and attended by over 200 people, organised by the Trust and the Partnership, and other groups and organisations in the Valley;
- 10 circular walks throughout the period, which included talks about the local environment and nature;
- a wildflower identification walk to support the Sandhurst Flower and Cultural Festival;
- bat, moth, butterfly, and bug, dragonfly and damselfly specialist walks and small mammal recording, plus bat box checking;
- a joint stand with BVCP at the Surrey Heath Show and Blackwater River Festival that yielded several new members as well as maintaining our public profile;
- talks to various local organisations and schools which resulted in donations and new members; and
- attendance at meetings connected with a wide variety of environmental issues throughout the year including BVCP Annual General Meeting, Bracknell Forest Council about Horseshoe Lake, Surrey Heath Borough Council about Natural Surrey Heath and several local companies on environmental matters.

Projects and grants

(A **project** was an activity directed and funded by us; a **grant** was money paid to another organisation to use for a particular activity).

Projects

Blackwater Valley Swift Project (led by Colin Wilson)

This project was started in 2017 to provide suitable nesting places for swifts in order to halt a decline of up to 50% in swift populations in the UK. Despite setting aside funds, the project has been largely self-financing by requesting donations as the swift boxes were erected.

During the period to 30 September 2019, we continued installations and installed further speaker systems to attract the birds. S C Johnson of Frimley kindly invited us to install two nesting terraces and speakers at their offices. At the northern end of the Valley, boxes were installed at private premises and at the Medical Centre at Swallowfield. Due to limited Trust human resources, the project is now largely ticking over in responsive mode. Boxes installed now exceed 150.

Natural Surrey Heath (led by Colin Wilson)

This project was run in conjunction with The Camberley Society (TCS) and launched in March 2018 to focus on public awareness of the decline in wildlife within Surrey Heath and encourage public action to reverse it. In 2019 the fruits of our efforts were reflected by some wildflower meadow and verge progress. A direct approach to Watchmoor Park Business Park led to planting of two large areas of wildflowers in their lawns providing a spectacle and insect feeding site through the summer months. We also worked with SC Johnson at Frimley leading to an area being set aside to allow grass to grow and wildflowers to flourish.

Further progress has been seen from Surrey Heath Borough Council who planted several verges with wildflowers during the year.

Due to the winding up of TCS, in 2019 limited progress has been made except for our major NatureHunt project which is explained later in this report. We are grateful to the Trustees and members of TCS for granting one third of their balance of unspent funds for the purpose of the NatureHunt project.

Frimley Reedbed (led by Colin Wilson)

This ongoing project aims to manage a reedbed habitat at Frimley which is of high ecological importance. After major funding in 2013 to control growth of willow and birch causing drying out of the reedbed, regrowth is impacting the specialist bird species and received further action in 2019.

During the year, a major work party, managed by Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership, reduced the regrowth of willow in the reedbed and installed stronger walkways to provide safer access to the site. Structured surveys every summer for the British Trust for Ornithology revealed the gradual changes in species at the reedbed due to the regrowth of scrub and 2019 results were undoubtedly slightly adversely affected by the clearance work in the winter. We anticipate better results in future years.

Blackwater Valley Path Signage (led by Alan Taylor)

The aim of the project was to survey all signs along the Blackwater Valley Path between Rowhill and Swallowfield. Volunteers were asked to walk a stretch of the path and collect this information. The object was (a) to give a quick overview of where repairs and replacements are needed; and (b) to provide information which could be used to consider whether and where additional signs are needed, and if so what sort of sign.

The project was originally launched in 2017 under the direction of Ken Bigrave. Some survey returns were made, but the project effectively lapsed when Ken resigned as a trustee. Alan Taylor took it over, and in October 2018 appealed through the BVCT Newsletter for volunteers to complete the work. An encouragingly large response meant that no individual volunteer has to survey more than a few miles of the Path. We are very grateful to Nige Howarth, Denise Keen, Ian Pittock, Geoff Sayer, Ron Stephens and Mike and Di Swaddling for their surveys and to a number of others for volunteering even though their help was not needed.

Volunteers were asked to walk a stretch of the Path, mostly during October 2018. They were asked to note all the signs seen, and reporting for each:

- its location;
- the type of sign, whether a Blackwater Valley Path waymark with the coot sign, a public footpath or other sign showing routes on or off the path; a sign, board or plaque giving information about the area, or about a donor; or something else?
- whether it is in good repair?
- whether it is easily visible or hidden by foliage?
- and anything else they wished to report.

The report was completed in April and awaits a joint decision between the Trust and BVCP about next steps.

NatureHunt (Part of Natural Surrey Heath) (led by Colin Wilson)

This project commenced as a result of an idea developed at NSH. The idea is focused on getting children involved with wildlife and to encourage recording of wildlife found. Knowing what we have today will tell us what we have lost in the future. The project will provide young children with an incentive whether at home, at school, at cubs, brownies etc to learn about and seek wildlife targets. It will reward them with points, certificates and badges and hopefully give them encouragement to continue to spend time outdoors looking for nature. A special website will enable recording of their finds.

The project involves producing a book with information and images and the specially developed recording website. We have already secured funding for the main costs and await the result of a further grant bid. The Trust has set aside funds to ensure a successful launch.

A survey to inform the project of strengths, weaknesses etc has been issued and the many responses are being analysed to ensure full understanding.

We hope to do an initial launch to the public in the summer 2020. We will then be working with schools to help them understand how they can use the activities to meet a number of parts of the National Curriculum Key Stages 1 and 2 and give them time to integrate into lessons.

Rebranding (led by Colin Smith and Mary Ferriss)

With the kind help of graphic designer Ian Carley, our logo, headed paper, etc., were modernised and simplified. Our new logo appears on the front of this Report.

Holy Trinity Eco Church, Aldershot (led by Annie Keighley)

The Trust became involved in this project as a result of the Saving Our Swifts campaign. The church would like to provide for swifts but on inspection it was more difficult than anticipated. Discussions identified their new eco-church status and what we could do to improve the area surrounding the church.



Annie, our expert wildlife gardener, created a mood board reflecting Butterfly Conservation and The Beekeepers Association ideas. Annie then provided a detailed project and work plan and plant list enabling the church to work autonomously. Work focused on two areas in particular, a small Canadian memorial garden and a large paved area planted mainly with yews.

We have actively supported some of the work during the year and kicked the project off by planting lavender around the church entrance. Heavier work lifting paving slabs and digging ground has to be done by church congregation volunteers or another group we are actively seeking.

Work continues connecting the plants and wildlife potential. To recognise the Plant a Tree campaign, two rowans and a cherry were planted plus a pyracantha hedge has been placed in the 'yew garden'. Elsewhere, buddleias and crab apple trees have been added. The area will be transformed by next spring. A pond is planned and specially designed swift boxes will also be added during 2020.

Trust funding has been limited to small amounts, e.g. large, specially made garden planters to add colour to the outside of the church. We also provided planters for the kindergarten next door so the children could plant and grow there. Annie is continuing to advise and mentor the volunteer group.

Guillemont School (led by Bernard Baverstock)

Activity this year has not really worked out as envisaged, although the outdoor classroom was officially opened by the Mayor of Rushmoor Borough Council in May (shown opposite).



The Trust has been working with the school to enhance their woodland area, so that it can be used for education but remain a valuable habitat for wildlife.

Apart from the specialist knowledge, we provided a grant which enabled the project to go ahead. The tireless school governor, Georgina Compton, managed to get path making gravel donated by Grundon and this was laid by workers from Bellway Homes, who also provided base material for the decking.

The woodland now has a decking area with storage box seating, which will be used by the whole school for outdoor learning sessions. It will also be available for the local community. We will

continue to increase the wildlife value of the site with woodland flowers and hedging, while providing various nesting opportunities within the school grounds.

We had planned that the woodland would have been opened up and seeded/ planted with woodland flowers and there was to be a children's tree planting day in November. Unfortunately, the company who had offered the volunteers found it impossible to organise three different dates that had been set up. So, July, Sept and October were all cancelled and it was impossible to plant the Woodland Trust saplings in November. This work will be rescheduled.

Installation of nesting and roosting boxes (led by Bernard Baverstock)

The Trust provided tit nest boxes for Surrey Heath Tree Wardens at their Warren Wood site. We also supplied 50 further dormouse boxes to Surrey Dormouse Group.

Six hedgehog homes were made and installed at Farnborough Airport in their biodiversity area.

The birdboxes were checked, as usual. Those in Warren Wood suffered a higher than usual predation from Great Spotted Woodpecker, so the fronts of all those boxes were modified.

The Bat boxes at Tice's Meadow had their first check, with no signs of bat use. This is not unusual but the Frimley Fuel Allotment boxes which have been up for a year longer had one brown long-eared bat and some Pipistrelle droppings in a couple of boxes. Warren Wood had new bat boxes installed.

Grant's Moor and the Frimley Hatches path reptile area (led by Bernard Baverstock)

These have had work done as part of the BVCP maintenance, in May, Aug and Oct.

Blackwater River Festival (led by Chris Smith)

This major project comprised a week-long event programme to show case the work undertaken along the Valley and to give BVCT wide exposure of its environmental credentials. The timing was arranged to coincide with Loddon Rivers Week, World Rivers Day and embraced a celebration of the 40th Anniversary of the formation of the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership.

The principal objectives of the initiative included:

1. benefit wildlife and plant life along the Valley;
2. raise public awareness of Valley issues;
3. enhance public experience of the Valley;
4. bring together partners and develop new partnerships; and
5. raise our profile.

Increased Membership was considered to be a potential byproduct of the exercise.

These objectives were met with a nine day programme that ran between 21st to 29th September 2019.

The majority of activities were passive, such as walks and talks rather than task-related, two of the latter had to be cancelled due to BVCP staff illness. Unfortunately, the weather broke on the first weekend and led to many events attracting fewer attendees. We ended up with a final programme of 19 activities of which 17 were delivered.

We thank all the conservation groups, organisations and individuals that participated and helped make the Festival a success.



Volunteers at work during the Blackwater River Festival

Rail to Trail (led by Chris Smith)

This was a joint venture between us and the Community Rail Partnership (CRP). This project started in December 2018 based upon a similar initiative undertaken by the Community Rail Partnership in the Surrey Hills. The idea is to encourage people into the countryside using the railway network, rather than cars, as the mode of transport hence reducing individual carbon footprints.

Working closely with David Daniels (Community Rail Development Officer for Sussex Community Rail Partnership) and with funding from GWR, the project has resulted in an agreement for signs being placed initially at four stations along the Valley (North Camp, Farnborough North, Blackwater and Sandhurst).

The initiative fits most of BVCT's aims and objectives being eco-friendly, educational, raises awareness of environmental issues and gains publicity for the Trust. It links communities throughout the Valley in an innovative way. The signs show the relationship between the railway and the Valley Path as well as places of local interest en route.

Planning is underway for a launch of the project on Saturday 28th March 2020.

Further discussions are looking at expanding the scheme since there are many more stations that have the potential to connect visitors to the Valley Path.

There have been a number of spinoff benefits as a result of the project. New partnerships may be helpful to the growth and profile of BVCT. CRP participated in the Blackwater River Festival and the introduction of a QR code onto each sign means we can promote BVCT and the circular walks in the Valley, using digital technology. There will be a line guide pamphlet to accompany the project produced by CRP.

The new map we have commissioned for the project will also be used by us on our website and in our own publicity.

Grants to BVCP

Woodland Flowers

This project is ongoing. 16 sites have been sown since its inception.

Seeds and seedlings were purchased during the period for £2,600 during the period and sown across several sites. Due to difficulties in sourcing suitable additional seeds and seedlings in the period, the balance of the monies donated for this purpose will be spent in 2020.

Invasive non non-native laurel removed from Claycart and yellow archangel removed from Southwood Woodland in advance of planting. Plantings at Thorn Hill, Puckridge and Claycart (all part of Wellesley woods), Hawley Meadows and Southwood have been completed during the period.

Grants to Other Bodies

Environmental improvements at Guillemont School

A grant of £6,000 was made to Guillemont Junior School towards the cost of redeveloping the school grounds to encourage wildlife.

Renovation of shelter at Tice's Meadow Nature Reserve

A grant of £1700 was made towards the cost of renovating the bird watchers' shelter at Tice's Meadow.

Small Grants

A grant of £250 was made from the Small Grants fund to the Happy Hedgehog Rescue.

Other activities

Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership - we continue to actively support the BVCP by partnering them in projects and their programme of local events.

Website – updating and upgrading of the website has continued, with new functionality and content being regularly added.

Social media - our growing presence on Facebook continues to attract public interest and support. We also have a limited presence on Twitter and a new Instagram page which has a rapidly growing following.

Newsletters – we have continued to issue monthly newsletters to our members.

Fundraising – we have been successful in attracting new funds from corporate donors for our projects and initiated new methods of fundraising to complement our existing methods, including community lotteries, Amazon Smile and Recycle for Charity.

Policies - we continued to review our existing policies against the most recent guidelines and legislation and developed new policies where appropriate. All other policies and procedures have been reviewed.

Firewood - the "Wood Gnomes" have continued to contribute to our funds by cutting timber retrieved by BVCP into firewood for sale to the public. Sales of this wood and scrap metal generated income of £450.

5. Looking towards the Future

2018-9 has been another year of change and consolidation for the Trust, with a new structure in the management team, more governance tasks undertaken and an improvement in public awareness of the Trust and its aims with a new focus on our website, social media and newsletter.

Our Business Plan for 2020 will soon be available on our website at <http://www.bvct.org.uk/>. A selection of projects listed in the Plan will be undertaken during the next twelve months.



We are looking forward to 2020 with a great new initiative planned to engage children with nature and recording and a Rail to Trail project launch with the Community Rail Partnership.

With pressure on its funding expected to increase, the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership is moving to alternative means of working and fundraising. We will have a significant role to play in supporting Partnership staff in fundraising and project delivery in the future.

Declaration

The trustees declare that they have approved the trustees' report above.

Signed on behalf of the charity's trustees

Signatures:

Mary Ferriss

Shelagh

Heasley

Names: Mary Ferriss
Positions: Chair

Shelagh Heasley
Treasurer

Date: 19th January 2020.