

From the Archive

The Story of the Pang Valley Conservation Volunteers Up to Mid 2018

In the 1980s and early 1990s a series of severe droughts and over abstraction had reduced the River Pang to a dry ditch upstream of Stanford Dingley. Peter Trentham, Chair of Stanford Dingley Parish Council, organised a group of Pang Valley Parish Councils to campaign for a flowing stream, but this is a story for a future Upstream. Together with a group of farmers and landowners led by John Bishop and Richard Benyon who had been campaigning to improve the condition of the valley itself they set up the Pang Valley Conservation Trust. Eventually their lobbying was successful, abstraction virtually ceased and – helped by some wet years – the Pang flowed again.

They were determined that the work should continue, and the Pang Valley Countryside Project was set up with funding for three years and Ed Cooper was appointed as the first Project Officer. Ed was determined that the work should continue even if the funding failed after the initial three years and he set up the Pang Valley Conservation Volunteers to carry on the practical work of restoring and improving the environment of the Pang Valley. An Inaugural Meeting was held on 10 January 1995 and Anne Matthews was elected chair, Dennis Gower Secretary, and Alex Fowles Project Representative. Their constitution stated they were

‘To conserve, monitor and enhance the wildlife habitat of the Pang Valley. To work closely with landowners, farmers, local authorities And other relevant authorities and conservation bodies. To promote an understanding of the need for conservation and countryside management within the Pang Valley. To promote practical conservation through practical work.’

And they are still doing it! Alex Fowles summed this up at the 3rd AGM on 10 June 1998 by saying that *“the PVCV could make farmers and landowners aware of funding for making environmental improvements, but it was the Volunteer force that made it all happen”*.

But the Volunteers have never been stiff and regimented. At the same AGM Anne Matthews stood down and was awarded with *‘the golden bill hook – to be suitably engraved’* - for her work. Colin Layton was awarded *‘The Golden Spade’* for the greatest number of perfectly formed hedge planting holes, with the *‘Silver Spade’* going to Dave Milburn’. *The ‘Golden Tea Cups’* went to Jill Wilson and Jenny Holliday for *and I quote!* “always providing comfort and refreshment during the tasks”! Finally, the *‘Golden Goblet’* went to Dennis Gower for *“nearly always sorting out the best way of doing things”*. The Golden Goblet continued to be awarded until 2009.

In those days the Volunteers met twice a month alternately on Saturdays and Sundays and Tuesdays and Thursdays. Dennis Gower took over as Chair in 1998 and served until 2010 when he was into his 80s. The Archive contains Dennis’s Blue Book that many will remember accompanying him to every task. It lists the task and the team working on it and it shows just how much hard work was done. It is heartening to see that some of the original names are still at it every Tuesday. Over the years the Volunteers won several awards for their work. As well as awards at Newbury Show they won the Dorothy Morley Conservation award twice (2003 and 2010), the Mars Masterfoods Award and a Golden Oak award for hedge laying. Substantial cheques accompanied all these!

Frank Hayward took over in 2011 just as the Pang, Kennet and Lambourn Valleys Project FWAG went into administration and just in time to help found the West Berkshire Countryside Society. He served until 2014 when he moved to North Yorkshire. Frank ran the group single handed, organising tasks, providing refreshments, taking along and caring for the tools, pretty well a full-time job as he had also built up the number of tasks to the point when every Tuesday was booked. Although he managed to shed some of the functions toward the end of his tenure, finding a replacement for him proved nigh on impossible.

Tony McDonald put together a plan to disperse job roles amongst the regular volunteers and managed to persuade a small group to set to and organise the changes which were necessary, persuading volunteers to attend training courses and to take on specific roles. This was a time of great change and growing professionalism – Tony McDonald’s email task notification system, formal risk assessments, power tools and formal training courses, dedicated site leaders ... - all contributed to growing self confidence and efficiency and increasing respect by landowners and parish councils that asked for their help. The group set to with a small management group of Tony, Chris Genge and Tim Clarke.

In 2016 the greatly honoured name ‘Pang Valley Conservation Volunteers’ was changed to ‘West Berkshire Conservation Volunteers’ to suit their greatly developed range and function and this seems a good point to end this first chapter of their story. Long may they continue!

Dick Greenaway

Honorary President

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