



I feel so lucky in having such a lovely job at the Trust. Why? There are many reasons but a major one is to have been a part of the incredible development of the Trust since I joined over 25 years ago. When I travel around Worcestershire it is a journey through memories of excitement, disappointment, hope and success all intertwined with the hard work

done by volunteers, trustees, staff and landowners in building our magnificent array of nature reserves.

Back to the beginning

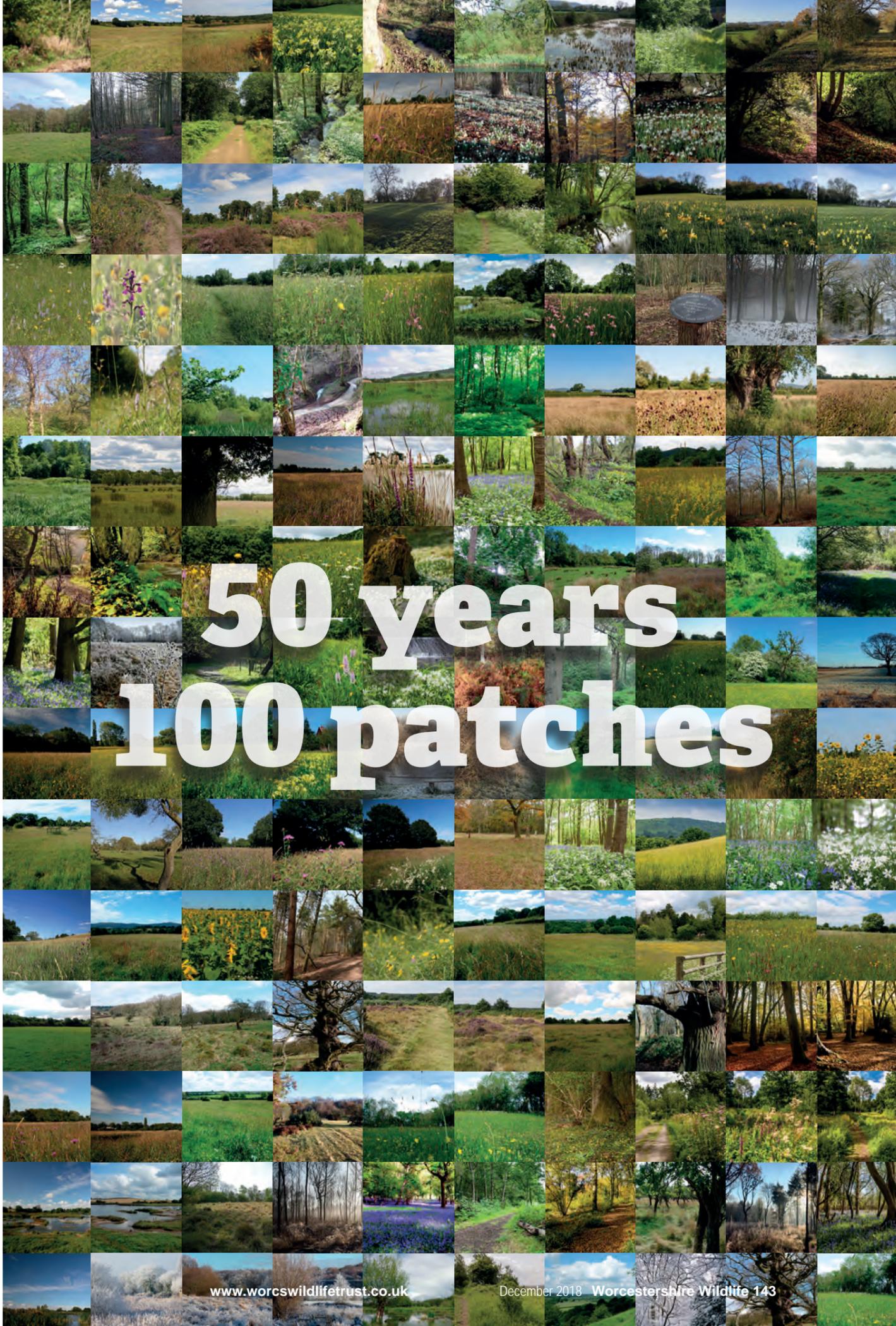
Our history of land acquisition goes right back to the beginning, 50 years ago. Our trustees were bold and far-sighted; without hesitation, they took on the immense challenge of managing land with little resources behind them other than very keen volunteers and lots of enthusiasm for wildlife. Every pound was eked out, every possible avenue to beg and borrow tools, materials and equipment was explored.

It will be no surprise to many of you that some of our earliest reserves before 1979 were Upton Warren pools, the small ancient woodland of Randan Wood, the nationally important and magnificent Eades Meadow and the house, orchard, woodland and meadows at The Knapp and Papermill.

With a keen eye to the unusual and important, we took on several scrubby bits of land adjacent to the River Avon, known for breeding marsh warbler. Even though these migrant visitors are now virtually non-existent in Britain (last noted in the Avon valley in the late 1990s) it did not diminish the importance of the sites in providing undisturbed habitat for river wildlife. This was confirmed when, in the early 2000s, we went on to acquire several of the sites to ensure their long-term protection.

Butterflies and flowers

In the 1980s trustees seized the opportunity to acquire some of Worcestershire's best woodlands, known for their butterflies, birds and flowers. First up, the Church Commissioners agreed to sell Tiddesley Wood. Then, just two years later, Harris Brush company put their large woodlands up for sale and we acquired Trench and Monk woods – renowned for wood white and white admiral butterflies, warblers and bluebells. Little we were to know that in the mid-90s a visiting researcher would rediscover a rare and unusual leaf-rolling weevil *Byctiscus populii* that was dependent on the young aspen in those woods. It has not all been perfect – international reductions in nightingale populations affected by habitat loss in their overwintering grounds, for example, means they are no longer heard in Trench Wood.



50 years
100 patches

These had been purchases of large chunks of land but it wasn't just about big areas. Unimproved flower-rich grasslands and meadows were under threat from agricultural intensification and during this period we bought Boynes, Drake Street, Duke of York, Foster's Green and Poolhay meadows, Windmill Hill grassland and wetlands at Feckenham Wylde Moor, Ipsley Alders Marsh and Wilden Marsh. These purchases heralded frantic episodes of fundraising events including the Green Fayre (now replaced by Tiddesley Wood Open Day), applications with success from the World Wide Fund for Nature (now WWF) and Countryside Commission as well as entering joint purchasing with partners including Butterfly Conservation and Warwickshire Wildlife Trust.

Teamwork

By the early 1990s, the Trust had 1000 acres spread across more than 50 nature reserves. When I arrived, we were a small team – me, John Hodson, two students and quite a few volunteer reserve management groups and wildlife surveyors. It was easy to see we were under-resourced with only a battered Land Rover and trailer, no minibus, nurtured tools, a mower, about six chainsaws and a leaking workshop.

However, I wasn't going to let small things like that diminish my enthusiasm! The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) was recently established so, spurred on by this new opportunity, I submitted a joint bid with Butterfly Conservation to purchase and restore Grafton Wood, a superb ancient woodland that was nationally important for brown hairstreak butterflies. As if by magic a new group of volunteers came out of the trees to manage the wood and record our successes. Partnership working has continued to pay dividends and new reserves established included Stockwood Meadows (Plantlife) and Chaddesley Woods (Natural England).

We purchased further land to buffer The Knapp and Papermill as well as woodland at Hanley Dingle, the plum orchard and fields at Tiddesley Wood and heathland at The Devil's Spittleful. Woodland and wetland were gifted to us at Pennels Bank and Crews Hill woods and Bishop's Field respectively.

How much land we manage now



How many species are on our reserves:



9,935

Investment and momentum

If I thought my first 10 years were exciting, the next 10 years proved challenging and experimental. With trustees' support I put together the HLF Reserves Restoration Programme 1998–2003 with a total project cost of £1,179,667 (75% funded). To enable this project to be completed, the Trust made an in-kind contribution of £176,950 (15%) in the form of voluntary labour along with cash support totalling £117,967 (10%) which was to be generated from grants, timber income and the Trust's own funds. The 15% volunteer support was phenomenal – more than 3500 days or nearly 25,000 hours.

The programme covered heathland, wetland, woodland and grassland restoration and capital works on 41 reserves as well as a new Land Rover, trailer and minibus, two more members of staff and a lot of paperwork and reporting. Andy Harris and Stephen Procter arrived and set up twice weekly Roving Volunteer teams, recruited new volunteers and contracted hundreds of thousands of pounds of work, putting money back into the local economy. Monitoring and survey work gave us baseline information and the stepping stone to build and expand our work and knowledge.

With this great momentum we were able to set our trajectory along the route of buffering and expanding existing reserves with additional purchases at Hunthouse Wood, Wilden Marsh, Lower Smite Farm and Blackstone Farm Fields as well as adding Penorchard Meadows, Hill Court Farm, Humpy Meadow and Naunton Court Fields to our portfolio.

Other generous gifts were made – the Gwen Finch Wetland reserve (gift to WWF to WWT, funding for restoration from HLF), for example, was an exciting new initiative to restore a large area of floodplain wetland in the Avon valley. It made a major contribution to national and regional targets for conserving threatened wetland habitats and species including otter moved in almost immediately. If that wasn't enough

excitement, at Upton Warren the first avocets arrived to nest at The Flashes and a 24-hour volunteer and staff nest-watch was set up in the cold, uncomfortable hide.

Meanwhile the leaking workshop was converted into two warm offices and we moved the heart of the reserves work into the re-modelled Conservation Barn, giving us machinery and vehicle space, a tea room for volunteers and a warm, dry, well-lit workshop. Bliss.

Consolidation

In the Trust's fifth decade my attention turned to consolidation of funding management works on the reserves. The various iterations of Countryside Stewardship and Woodland grant schemes have been a financial bonus, focussing our minds on what it is we want to achieve on the ground and for which species; we currently have 29 contracts covering 56 reserves.

Pleasant distractions were many and the call of the wild has seen continued expansion over the past decade. We've added Laight Rough at Grafton Wood with Butterfly Conservation, two areas of woodland at The Knapp and extended Crews Hill Wood with the purchase of the adjacent Blackhouse Wood. Grassland invertebrates, meadows and orchards have been helped with the acquisition of Hollybed Farm, Piddle Brook, Randan, Sands and Merries Farm meadows, a leased extension to Penorchard Meadows thanks to South Staffordshire Water and the saving of Button Oak Meadow with Shropshire Wildlife Trust. Heathland restoration at Pound Green Common took a great leap forward when we installed invisible fencing and re-introduced grazing cattle.

More kindness by Trust members has given us Jim's Wood at Fetterlocks, Ryefield, Burlton's and Brown's Close and Nash's meadows.

The future

The Government has produced their 25-year Environment Plan with plenty of areas for optimism if its aims and actions are fulfilled but there are unsettled times ahead. With the support of our volunteers and more than 11,000 Trust members across Worcestershire, however, we're ready to face the challenges.

Our ability to react to the sale of land, whether it's been a long-standing dream or an unexpected short-notice opportunity, is possible because of your support. Whether you are able to subscribe at our minimum rate, donate to our appeals, leave us a gift in your will or offer land to us, every bit helps us to help Worcestershire's wildlife and wild places.

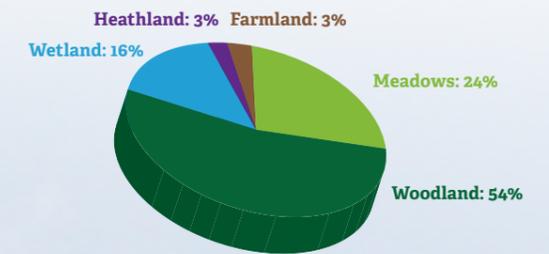
Meanwhile, in a lovely circular way, my journey brings me back to where I started. In our 50th year after so much support from you, our members, we are celebrating the purchase of our 100th parcel of land. In September this year, thanks to an anonymous donor and Severn Waste Services, we purchased another 10 acres of ancient semi-natural woodland adjacent to our Papermill Meadow at The Knapp and Papermill, once again fulfilling a key goal for wildlife success of bigger, better and more joined up.

Thank you for helping us to look after these beautiful havens for nature.

It costs £12.50 per acre per month to manage our reserves; an extra 100 acres would cost £15,000 per year. We'd like to increase our core income to support this – if just 200 members gave an extra £5 per month, with gift aid this would raise £15,000 per year to help these wonderful places and the wildlife that live there. Please get in touch with Julie in our membership team to find out how you can help.

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Split of land between habitats



Our largest reserve: Hill Court Farm (296.53 acres)

Purchase of land by decade



Our smallest reserve: Drake Street Meadow (0.684 acre)

The growth of The Knapp and Papermill Nature Reserve

