



# News from the Ouse

ISSUE NUMBER 15

December 2015

## Work up a winter appetite!

Rowena and Reg Langston share their ideas for what to search out on the LOHP sites this winter

Welcome migrants

Listen out for the “wheezy” calls of siskins feeding in the alders along the river corridor, notably at Blo’Norton Fen and Scarfe Meadows, sometimes accompanied by redpolls. Scarfe Meadows is also a good place to see snipe, probing their long bills in soft, wet mud to feed, but they can be difficult to see as they are superbly camouflaged. Snipe can also be found on The Lows, Bleyswycks Bank and Parkers Piece. Another cryptically coloured wading bird, the woodcock, visits the woods along the river valley, including Hinderclay Fen, New Fen

and Parkers Piece. Woodcock migrate from Scandinavia to spend the winter in Britain. Also migrating from Scandinavia, redwings and fieldfares join the resident thrushes. In cold winter weather, they will continue moving south and west, so their numbers vary locally.

## WELCOME

to the newsletter of the Little Ouse Headwaters Project.

The end of the year can seem gloomy, with short days and bad weather, but as you will see in this issue, there are still many reasons to pull on your boots and see what’s going on in the natural world – our now traditional “Winter Walk” after Christmas might be just the opportunity you are looking for!

With 2016 fast approaching I’d like to thank all our volunteers, supporters and contractors for their great support in the past year.

Jo Pitt, Chair

Tit flocks - and ducks

Keep a look out for mixed flocks of tit species (mostly blue, great and long-tailed) on all our sites. If you look carefully, you might see treecreepers or marsh tits with them. Tawny owls are often very vocal throughout the winter. Webbs Fen wetland attracts



Peter Hughes

A drake teal in all his glory at Webbs Fen

various species of ducks, including shoveler, gadwall and teal, in full breeding plumage. Little egrets are also seen there regularly.

Snowy tracks

If we have snow, it is a good time to look for wildlife tracks and trails, from roe deer ‘slots’, to footprints of otters, water voles, hares and various birds. Even in the absence of snow, check out patches of mud for prints.

Frosty plants

In frost, plant seed heads take on a distinctive architecture. Particularly good examples are the umbellifers (cow parsley for example ) and reeds. If the winter is mild, rosehips, guelder berries and haws will still add colour to the hedgerows and provide winter food for various birds and small mammals.

Hazel catkins are among the earliest signs that spring is on its way.

Rowena & Reg Langston



Peter Hughes

There’s nothing quite like a little egret

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Arthur Rivett

Three in a bed would be spacious by comparison...

Who chose this cramped living space - half way up a tree?

See page 3



## All about peat

On 16<sup>th</sup> October 2015 Beech Tree Class went to Blo' Norton Fen to go peat digging with Reg Langston and other volunteers from the LOHP. Two year 6 pupils take up the story...

We were very excited to be doing something so special. Mr Langston explained how the families in Blo' Norton in the 1800s relied on the Fen for the peat for survival. When we got to Blo' Norton we walked half a mile. We stopped at a weird tree sculpture and when we actually got to the Fen we had to put gloves on and grab a spade. After we got into groups of three, Mr Langston said that even if there's a tiny bit of sand in the peat, it's not as good. It was the vegetation in the peat that actually burned well.

Stacking the peat ...

We started digging and got lots of peat which we piled up. Everyone got really wet and muddy but it was fantastic fun and it took us back to days gone by. It made us realise how much easier we have life now with a flick of a switch for power rather than burning peat for warmth and cooking.

Will it burn?

Once our peat has dried, Mr Langston is going to come back to school and we are going to set up an experiment to see how efficiently it burns when compared to burning wood. We will heat water to see which fire reaches boiling point first.

We can't wait

Thanks

Thank you so much to Mr Langston and his group of volunteers for giving up their time and energy and also to the army of people who transported us down there for the experience!

Alfie and Finn (Year 6)

Heat from peat

After half term Mr Langston will be coming in to school to talk to Years 1 and 2 about the peat digging which took place at the Fen. To coincide with our whole school topic of 'power' he will explain how the peat was dug and how it was used as a source of heat over the years.

Art and outdoor learning

Local artist, and LOHP volunteer, Rosemary Humphries remains a regular visitor in school and continues to support the Year 1 and 2 children with their art. The children love her coming in and have learnt so much

Find more info and pictures of the school's previous peat experiments on the 'Learn more' section of the LOHP website. Just scroll down to 'Children investigate peat as a fuel'.



from her. In outdoor learning we have started looking at the changing colours and what is growing in the hedgerows in the local area and will continue this over the coming months.

Carol McGahan



First bonfire of 2015 - (pyrography and oil on birch ply)

## Restoring New Fen - an artist records the scene...

I am particularly keen on the actual fire, and the various shapes of people working. It was a fast-moving scene, where each pile of wood made disappeared before I could draw it.

Becky Whatley

## Detecting bats while we sleep

The LOHP's new bat detector with inbuilt recorder was set up regularly on different sites with different habitats during this summer. Analysis of the recordings has given a good picture of the bat species (and the crickets) using the area. 2015 was an experimental season to set up a standardised approach, finding good places to use as future fixed points to build up a 'batscape' of the valley. Stuart Newson (see page 7) who is working with the Norfolk Bat Survey and collaborating with the Suffolk Bat Group in Suffolk, was very pleased with the results.



## Arthur Rivett - helping bats in the valley and beyond



Thousands of bats and thousands of people have every reason to be very grateful to this man

### A free range childhood

As a boy, growing up in the Brecks, Arthur enjoyed a wonderfully free range childhood, exploring the local countryside. Lying in bed, in summer, he could hear stone curlews and he was familiar with the fact that bats lived in the roof. No surprise then that natural history has been one of the major passions of his life.

Arthur started taking an active part in bat conservation in the early 1980s, when Richard Woolnough recruited him as a volunteer at Suffolk Wildlife Trust's Redgrave and Lopham Fen (where Arthur was later the paid warden). In early 1984 the Suffolk Bat Group was set up and started surveying roosts and giving advice all across Suffolk. The focus at first was finding hibernation sites, and doing a lot of positive PR. **'It's been good to see attitudes change over the years,'** said Arthur, **'People are not so hostile as they used to be, although I suspect most bat species are still under pressure and there's still a lot to do'.**

### Bat work – the highs

**'Three things about bat work give me particular satisfaction,'** said Arthur, **'When a structure you've provided is used by the bats you've designed it for: whether it's a big thing like a hibernation tunnel or a set of bat boxes. That's a great feeling. Also,** when you can actually rescue individual bats. I remember once we were called out to save 50 baby pipistrelles in a bucket who'd been **'unhoused' in the course of demolishing an extension. They were relocated to a quickly-erected box hung on the wall. From there their mothers persuaded them to join the main colony in the next-door roof-space. And lastly it's being able to help worried people as well as the bats themselves.**



Arthur Rivett

*This year Arthur Rivett was the winner of the national Pete Guest Award given annually by the Bat Conservation Trust, in memory of Pete Guest, an inspirational figure in bat conservation. The criteria are: dedication, innovation, enthusiasm and inspiration in making a difference, to bats and to people.*

### Roost surveys confirm detectors' records

Does Arthur welcome new survey methods? **'The new bat detector/recorders have been a great help in the valley, to find where the bats are feeding and moving,'** he said, **'I was sceptical of the records of natterers bat, at first, from the recordings, but finding them in the box this autumn has happily confirmed their presence.'**



Reg Langston

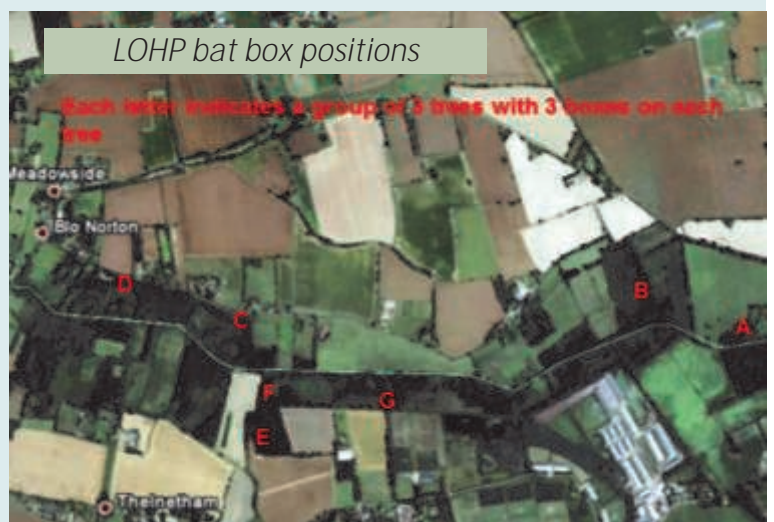
*Just one of the 33 natterers bats found in one box - here being gently held*

## A new bat - in LARGE numbers!

In 2010 we put up bat boxes on groups of trees in seven different places on LOHP sites. We've checked them for roosting bats every autumn since and only pipistrelle bats have been found until this autumn. On the 9<sup>th</sup> September this year we were excited to find about 30 natterers bats in a box on Hinderclay Fen. This is a woodland species and though it likes to roost in holes in trees it will also use buildings, so this colony is probably using houses and farm buildings in the area as well as trees and the bat boxes.

### Have you got a bat roost?

From the Suffolk Bat Group's survey in August 2007 and from surveys this year using the LOHP's bat detector we know that at least eight species of bats can be found in the area, but we don't know where they roost. If anyone has a bat roost or knows of one - we would love to hear from you. *Arthur Rivett*



To tell us about your bat roost please contact Arthur on 01379 740057 or [arthurrivett057@btinternet.com](mailto:arthurrivett057@btinternet.com)



## The five ages of fens

In this second article, Mike Harding explains some of the landscape and social history of the Fens



Helen Smith

Local people digging peat for conservation reasons in 2012: how different from peat-digging 200 years ago?

The valley fens we see today have been developing for thousands of years. Their history can be divided into five episodes, each leaving its mark on the nature of our fens.

### Deep history

Around 400,000 years ago (and let's not quibble about a few millennia), the Anglian Glaciation created the great plain of East Anglia. Huge ice sheets ground down the underlying geology to a flattish surface. This included chalk rock. Valleys and other features were gouged out.

The last of the glaciers retreated around 10,000 years ago. As they drew back, they smeared ground-up rock over the deeper geology. This was a mixture of clays and sands and gravels. Some were left by the ice, other deposits were washed out by huge rivers issuing from the melting glaciers.

East Anglia was then a frigid place of deep and permanent frosts. Deep freezing of the chalk and subsequent thawing and solution sometimes created hollows in the chalk. As the climate warmed, meres formed in these and other hollows created by erosion or deposition of glacial material.

The meres and hollows infilled with sediment – chalky marl, silt and peat. The structure of the land was laid down, creating wonderful conditions for chalk, groundwater-fed fens. The geological materials were variable in their chemistry, and this produces a wide range of soil conditions, ideal as an environment for the development of the fens. East Anglia's unique glacial history and its unusual geology explains why we have such a density of valley fens.

### Early use of the fens

Since the first human occupation of the new land in Palaeolithic times, the landscape has been progressively cleared and increasingly intensively used. At first, the sandy valley sides and heath areas would have been cleared for grazing and later for settled cropping. The heavy wet clay of the plateau top, and the spongy, sodden, intractable peat of the valleys, would have been difficult for early settlers to clear and use. These stayed wild.

As the population grew, the need for resources expanded, and so did technological development. Gradually, the marginal lands came into production. The peat valleys, with their undrainable (at that time)

groundwater-fed soils and their low fertility, would have been exploited for natural products – fen hay, sedge, wood and peat. Local communities would have gathered wildfowl and other natural foods. The margins may have been grazed, together with adjacent, drier land. None of this changed the fens much, but regular management kept them open and free from scrub and trees.

### The great land grab

In the eighteenth and particularly the nineteenth centuries, the Great Land Grab took place. The big landowners started to enclose land that was formerly open and for the use of the community. Highly profitable crops were grown on this new land. The great heaths and grasslands fared worst, with many fine tracts of habitat disappearing. The fens were saved by the infertile peat and the high level of groundwater which made them impossible to 'improve'.

As part of the enclosure process, land was set aside for the use of the poor and landless, to eke out a living. Some areas are the now familiar commons. Usually, it was the worst land that was set aside, all the good land having been grabbed. Most of the valley fens were given to the parishes to manage. Small charities were set up to administer the fens – often called Poors Trusts. They allotted rights to graze, cut peat or wood, or to take hay. Any income was given out to the poor of the village. This was the first organised administration of the fens, and the first formal 'community' management. By their nature, the village charities were conservative, and made little change on the fens, which remained an important resource for local people.



Arthur Rivett

Webbs Fen is now wonderfully re-wetted





Redpoll cattle on Bleyswycks/Parkers: a traditional breed doing a traditional job

Rowena Langston

### Abandonment

Social and economic changes began to erode the importance of fens as a resource. Railways brought cheap coal to rural areas. It burned hotter and **didn't need to be dug and dried**. Peat digging declined. Demand for fen crops such as hay also declined,

People were less willing to spend days standing in bogs doing arduous manual labour for little reward.

especially when the number of horses in the rural and urban economy reduced. Rural wealth increased, so that people

were less dependent on collecting natural products and foods from the fens. People found better paid jobs elsewhere. They were less willing to spend days standing in bogs doing very arduous manual labour for little reward.

Gradually, fens fell out of the rural economy. By the First World War, their use for key resources such as peat and marsh hay had strongly declined, although thatching materials were still cut. Between the Wars, the abandonment of the fens was virtually complete with only thatchers keeping patches of sedge mown. With abandonment came trees – the fens were progressively lost to scrub and wet woodland.

### Modern times: new conservation

In the 1960s the Suffolk Wildlife Trust became established, mainly as a response to local naturalists being worried about the decline of one of the most important valley fens in the UK – Redgrave and Lopham.

Because fens were no longer important for local communities, their care increasingly fell to new conservationists – people who valued them for their wildlife and spent time and money maintaining them.

This effort was matched by government policy. The post-war agricultural revolution, together with development and other rural land use changes, saw the loss of much of our wildlife habitat. Government responded by designating habitats including fens as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, and then

in the 1980s and after, providing significant funding for their management.

Action by government and by conservation charities became stronger and more effective as the work became better funded and involved more people. The European Union helped with new laws protecting wetlands, and by providing special grants and funding through agriculture. It was a new era for fens. The neglect of the previous decades was rolled back as sites were restored and managed.

At first, the new conservationists were slow to involve local communities.

They simply 'got on with it', liaising with parishes only when they needed access to the land or sought help from volunteers. But in the last 20 years, conservation organisations have a better understanding of the importance of local communities in sustaining our fens. They work much more closely than ever before, although there is always scope for more co-operation.

The formation of the Little Ouse Headwaters Project is a good example of communities taking on responsibility for their local fens. LOHP is run by local people who live in the parishes of the project area. Most of the volunteers are also drawn from the local area, as are the contractors and graziers who help manage the fens. More and more communities are now taking direct charge of managing fens that at one time were used by their parish.

Mike Harding



Peter Frizzell clearing scrub. Modern methods may seem brutal but long-neglected wetland habitats recover remarkably quickly



## A welly great day!

*Wellies or boots? Puddle or pond? Boy or girl? The answers to some of these questions became apparent as the day unfolded.*

On a beautiful sunny Friday in early October, the Roads Asset Team from Skanska's Ipswich office arrived for a team-building day on Hinderclay Fen, next to the Little Ouse River. Some were better prepared than others...

The task for the day was to dig a turf pond, which could end up any size between a puddle and a pond. Reg Langston from LOHP was leading the team, consisting mostly of civil engineers who were talking of 'setting



Matt Clark

out', theodolites and levels: a first on the fen!

Contingency plans were in place round Norfolk and Suffolk (due to the poor mobile phone reception in the Little Ouse area) so that Mrs W. could contact Mr W. if the need arose during the day to dash to the maternity ward. No such emergency occurred but if it had, the name 'Pete' would have been



Matt Clark & Bev Blackburn

a favourite!

Reg explained the historical significance of turf digging so we duly set to work with spades, forks and wheelbarrows, and ended up with a rather large pond (which surprisingly **didn't get measured but was definitely not puddle-sized**). Certain members of the civil engineering fraternity tried in vain to screed the terraces level before the spring water **took over; this answered the 'wellies or boots' question as can be seen in the photos**. Within a few days the pond filled naturally.

We all had a welly great day and Reg did us proud – we only hope the wildlife agrees!

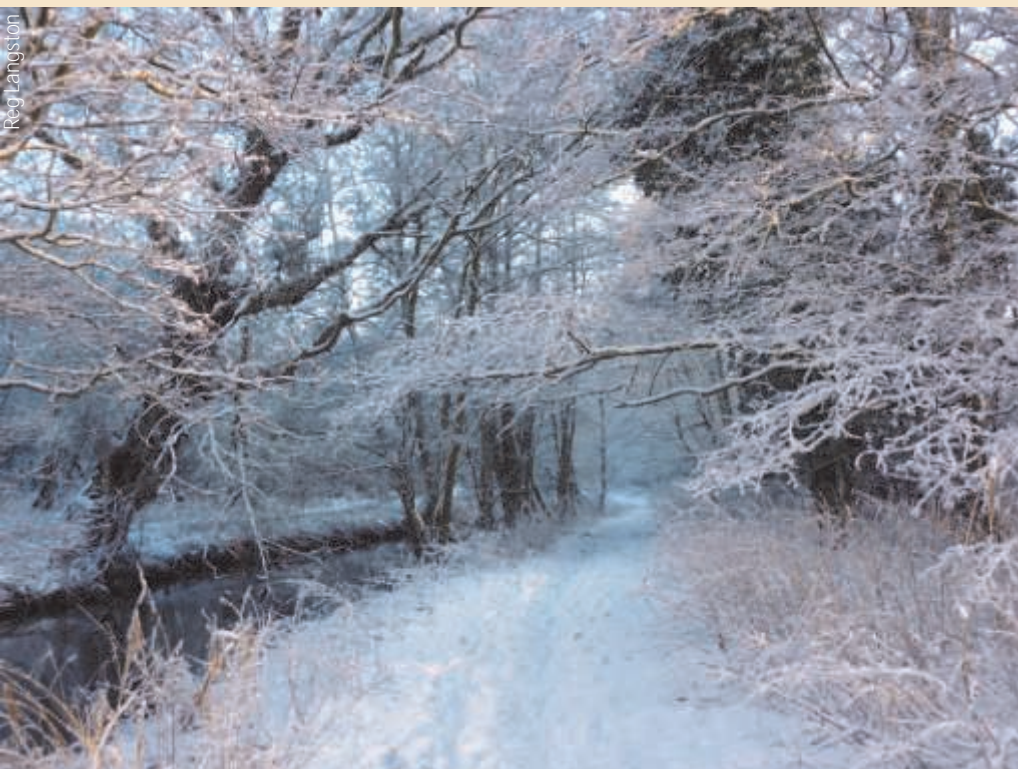
Reg said afterwards, *'I could certainly cope with more team-building days like this - if others are as good as Bev's!'* If your company might be interested, please contact us.

## Snow scene

*'This is one of my favourite winter photographs, taken by Reg Langston in January 2013. We don't tend to get*

much snow in this area, and generally **it doesn't settle for long. Unusually, in the winter of 2012/13, several inches fell and it stayed around, periodically replenished, for many weeks.**

There was also a lot of sunshine, which made for some beautiful snowscapes, like this one. The view is taken from the south bank of the Little Ouse, on Thelnetham Old Fen (Suffolk Wildlife Trust), looking towards **Blo'Norton Fen (LOHP).**



Reg Langston

The swallow bridge, just out of view and our first bridge-building project, links Suffolk and Norfolk, providing one of the main crossing points for the walker exploring these valley fens. I like the way the snow highlights the tree branches, and the glint of soft winter sunlight, all against a clear blue sky. You can see how calm it was that day as the water is like glass.

The well-trodden path shows that others (by no means all human) had walked this way before. A beautiful spot, on our doorsteps, captured in its winter stillness.' Rowena Langston



# Eavesdropping on bats - and insects too

*Tuning in to high frequencies in low places, this was a bat walk with a difference.*

*LOHP member and volunteer, Joanna Meyer, tells the story.*

On a cold, wet evening in September, a few brave souls met at the windmill in Theltham for a 'Grasshoppers, Crickets and Bats' walk. The walk was led by Dr Stuart Newson of the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) who had an amazing bat detector attachment for his iPad computer. This detected

*Perhaps the most miserable weather for a bat walk that I have ever known, but one of the best for people's interest and enthusiasm.*

Stuart Newson

sounds beyond our hearing range, played them at a lower pitch which we *could* hear and displayed the sound as a graph (sonogram) which helped us identify the creatures.

Whilst walking through **Parker's Piece**, some of us could hear the crickets even in the rain, with our own ears, the most common being dark bush crickets. Helped by sonograms, we could almost

find them and interestingly, they seemed to be answering each other.

As darkness fell, we slowly retraced our steps alongside the Little Ouse, crossed the bridge to the

meadow and heard a different cricket. The sound it made was

still high-pitched but longer, rather like the teeth of a comb being pulled. This cricket was a conehead.

Every now and then, a much higher pitched sound showed on the iPad indicating that a speckled bush cricket was present. As for bats, there was just one type

*Speckled bush cricket - a high pitched singer*



Rowena Langston

which appeared as the light was fading and this was the soprano pipistrelle. It was way beyond our hearing range but seemed to be attracted by us and our torches. We also heard tawny owls calling to each other. The evening was so interesting despite the weather.

Joanna Meyer

*Identifying species a modern way: Stuart Newson shows the walkers a sonogram on his computer*



Rowena Langston



▲ Recording showing the difference between the calls of dark bush-cricket (left and right) and speckled bush-cricket (centre). A speckled bush-cricket call is made up of five short straight, very closely spaced high frequency calls of 30-40 kHz. Dark bush-cricket calls are two syllables extending over a wide frequency range (10-65 kHz). A third and weaker leading syllable is sometimes visible.

## One for the stocking?

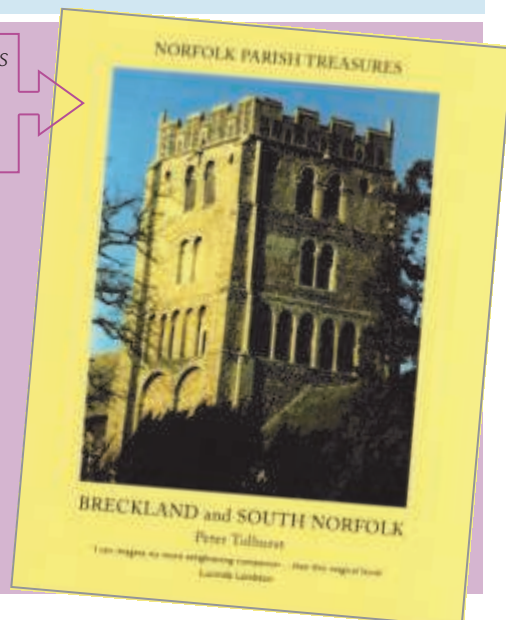
This meticulously researched book, with its magnificent photographs and illustrations, is really two volumes in one. Covering Breckland and South Norfolk districts, it gives a fascinating thumbnail description of the top few treasures – architectural, natural and downright quirky – in each parish.

The author, Peter Tolhurst, was conservation officer for Breckland Council and then a historic buildings consultant for North and West Norfolk Councils. His fascination with distinctive local gems of all kinds leaps off the page, and he shares his opinions, which makes his writing all the more compelling.

The author covers our three Norfolk parishes and credits LOHP with making the valley's fens 'still as charming but more accessible than they were in Virginia Woolf's day'. The only frustration for us in this area is that he doesn't stray over the border into Suffolk! See [www.blackdogbooks.co.uk](http://www.blackdogbooks.co.uk)

Norfolk Parish Treasures, Peter Tolhurst, Black Dog Books, 2015, 330 pp, £20

Recognise that glorious Norman church tower on the front cover? It's South Lopham.



## Membership application (not renewals)

Name:

Address:

Postcode:

Phone:


E-mail:

I wish to support the LOHP as a . . . .

Ordinary member:	£2 a year	
Friend of the Fens:	£10 min a year	
Junior member:	25p. a year	

Please tick one category and write the amount paid for Friend of the Fens. Cheques payable to 'Little Ouse Headwaters Project'.

I wish to donate £..... to the Little Ouse Headwaters Project

I want all my subscriptions and donations to the LOHP to be  Gift Aided until I notify you otherwise. I pay Income Tax/Capital Gains Tax at least equivalent to the value of my contribution.

Signed:.....

Dated:.....

Registered Charity No: 1098232

Note on renewals: All renewals are due in April. We send a letter to all members. Please **don't use this form to renew your membership.**

A big thank you to all those members who have sent donations along with their renewal. We greatly appreciate this extra support for **the work we're doing to enhance the valley and its wildlife.**

## The LOHP needs you!

The LOHP relies on volunteers to run the charity and help with conservation (and other) work.

Might you have some energy and some time?

**If so we'd love to hear from you.**

To get involved, and for more info, send an email to [enquiries@lohp.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@lohp.org.uk) or ring: Bev Blackburn, Volunteer Coordinator and Event Manager on 07747 691285 or Pete Fox, Hon. Secretary on 07500 044587.

## Workparties

Get out and enjoy yourself whatever the weather at an LOHP work party or event. Work parties are monthly on Sundays (dates below) and weekly on Wednesdays.

*Check details on the website for confirmation of where to go.*

13 Dec	New Fen	Clearing for new hedge
10 Jan	Hinderclay Fen	Hedge planting & scrub removal
14 Feb	New Fen	Hedge planting
13 Mar	Broomscot Cmn	Gorse coppicing
10 Apr	The Frith/Lows	Thistles

Reg & Rowena Langston	01379 898009 (Hinderclay/Broomscot)
Helen Smith	01379 687680 (The Frith/Lows)
Nigel Clark	01379 890460 (New Fen)

Want to see up-to-date news and great photos? ... follow LOHP on Twitter



You don't have to have a twitter account to see the latest tweets, just go to the homepage [www.lohp.org.uk](http://www.lohp.org.uk) and click on the little bird.

## New Year - Winter Walk

Sunday 3 January 10.30am

Meet at Parkers Piece,  
opposite Thelnetham Windmill,  
for a walk of around 2 hours

*See website for more details.*

All welcome, including polite dogs and owners on short leads. Wear stout footwear and clothing appropriate to the weather.

To contact the LOHP

Email: [enquiries@lohp.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@lohp.org.uk)

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