

News from the Ouse

ISSUE NUMBER 18
April 2017

WELCOME

to the newsletter of the Little Ouse Headwaters Project.

The winter has been relatively kind to us and spring is just around the corner. This is a time of the year when it is so rewarding to walk through our fens as everything is stirring into life. I hope the new season and the contents of this *News from the Ouse* will encourage you to get out even more, and - yes - to bring your friends as well.

I am pleased to report that we have now secured funding for our newsletter for the immediate future and perhaps beyond. We are very proud of the quality and content of our newsletter which has proved so popular and would encourage you to pass it on when you have read it. If you are not already a volunteer or a member, why not join in? See back page for details.

Thank you so much for your continued interest.

Peter Coster, Chair

What to look for in April and May

As soon as the days lengthen and the temperature rises, especially on a mild damp evening, amphibians are on the move, heading for spawning pools. Look out for frogs, toads and newts, and please let us have any records from LOHP sites, preferably with photographs. The spawn, or egg masses, are distinctive: long strings for toads, clumps of eggs for frogs, and individual eggs on the leaves of aquatic plants for newts.

Spring is a good time to hone your skills in tree



R Langston

A toad taken by surprise on its nocturnal journey to its breeding pond

identification as the leaves unfurl, catkins and flowers open, and the varied palette of greens transforms the scene. You may find plant galls amidst the foliage, each produced from the plant's own tissues as a result of other organisms, especially fungi or invertebrates. The oak apple gall is caused by the larva of a gall wasp.



R Langston

Young oak leaves are distinctly yellow-green

Heath violet grows on several LOHP sites, notably Hinderclay Fen and Broomscot Common where it shows up well with its pale blue flowers, nestled in the short turf. Another speciality of Broomscot Common is meadow saxifrage. (see photo, right).

Birdsong is at its best in spring, as birds proclaim their territory and advertise for a mate. Song may be accompanied by display or may emanate from a hidden perch. Keep a look-out for marsh tits on any of the wetter sites, where they still nest, although this is a species in decline in the wider countryside.

The fens are alive with activity at this time of year, so get out there and enjoy it!

Rowena Langston



R Langston

Meadow saxifrage - in flower in early May

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Log your bird records and help conservation with BirdTrack

LOHP is keen to encourage biological recording on our sites. Stephen McAvoy of the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) explains this readily-accessible tool for bird recording that adds value to your birding.

Wherever you go birding, logging the birds you observe on BirdTrack gives useful data for conservation at local, regional and international scales. BirdTrack data have already revealed fascinating insights into the changing patterns of arrival and departure times of some of the commoner summer migrants. However, we still know very little about the arrival and departure times of winter visitors and this is just one area where logging your records will provide useful information. There are also many scarce birds where your sightings will play an important part in keeping track of changing populations and distributions.

BirdTrack is year-round, and ongoing. Anyone with an interest in birds can contribute. Register online and then add your sightings via the website or smart phone app from anywhere in the world. The website gives up-to-date feedback on what's been seen. Graphs of the current reporting rates for each species are available, putting your records into context and showing the latest patterns across the country.

More than 35,000 birdwatchers use BirdTrack, logging around 6 million bird sightings in Britain in 2016 alone. Make your records work for birdwatchers and conservation science by joining the growing community!

BirdTrack is a partnership project between the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), RSPB, BirdWatch Ireland, the Scottish Ornithologists' Club, the Welsh Ornithological Society and BirdLife International.

Online: www.birdtrack.net

App for Android: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=org.bto.btapp>

App for iOS: <https://itunes.apple.com/app/birdtrack/id596839218?mt=8&ign-mpt=uo%3D2>

Stephen McAvoy, BTO

As spring advances, LOHP volunteer and poet Rosemary Jones looks back

Fens, New Year's Day

Another year, and winter not yet come.
The wind has dropped at last and in the pools
Pale reeds stand sentinel, while on the edge
Spring-yellow buds are bursting on the gorse.
On the wet fen, the night's first film-ice-sheets
Cover the flooded, shallow water, sheltering.
The seasons are confused; the birds are singing,
Bulbs are flowering before their time.
And yet the light is low, the days are short;
Winter should come, then spring can follow on.
Winter's a time for staying home, and grieving
The losses that attend advancing years,
For memories of treasured times and friendships,
For secret thoughts and very private tears.

Rosemary Jones

Children's first owl pellet study ...

Beech Tree Class were very excited to have Mr Langston from the LOHP bring some owl pellets into school for them to dissect and to find out what the owls had been eating.



Mr Langston gave us some charts so we could identify the various bones and try to find out which animal they had come from. Each pair of children worked on one owl pellet. Some of the pellets were soaked first to make pulling them apart easier. Mrs Feakes gave each group a scalpel and cocktail sticks to separate the pellets and to tease out the bones.

All the children were delighted to find that they



Reg Langston working with Beech Tree class

could identify many of the bones and some were able to reconstruct the skeleton of the mammals.

The majority of bones found were those of shrews, which Mr Langston indicated were one of the major food sources of owls, along with voles.

Mrs Feakes and Beech Tree Class

So what exactly have our barn owls been eating?

LOHP volunteer Graham Moates uncovered fascinating insights from a detailed study of 22 pellets.

A chance conversation during the 'Bats and Crickets' walk at Scarfe Meadows with Reg Langston led me to ask whether Reg had seen any owl pellets on the meadow. Sure enough, he had collected some for the LOHP Mammal Recording Group when clearing out the nest box occupied over the previous season. These were no longer needed since the group was focusing on otter spraint analysis as its initial activity. We arranged to meet and - a few days later - I had 22 barn owl pellets to analyse for small mammal records.

Each pellet was soaked in water and carefully dissected, all bones were retained and washed for possible verification. The pellets typically contained 3 to 4 prey items each, although this ranged between 1 and 7 (Image 1). As expected, field vole was the largest constituent of the barn owls' diet by number of prey items - accounting for 51% of all items present in the pellets (Image 2). This reflects the field vole's preference for long tussocky grass and the open meadow habitat where barn owls hunt most. Field vole populations typically peak and decline on a four-year cycle. Additional monitoring should help to understand this cycle along with the effects of any changes in habitat management and, consequently, the availability of favoured prey.

The second largest prey group was wood mouse (*Apodemus* species), at 20%. It is generally impossible to separate wood mouse from yellow-necked mouse by skeletal remains, therefore they are usually assumed to be wood mice which are much more common. Common shrew and pygmy shrew together accounted for around a quarter of prey items. The pygmy shrew particularly is under-recorded for Norfolk with only 12 records from 7 tetrads (2 x 2 km squares) submitted to the county mammal recorder in 2014, so this is a useful record. Only three bank voles were recovered from the pellets. This is no surprise since they are much more closely associated with woodland and hedgerows than field voles. The woodland and hedgerows on the edges of the meadow will undoubtedly contain bank voles. Care is required separating field vole and bank vole skulls - it is not possible to separate them by size. The distinctive features are the rooted teeth of the bank vole, which develop with age, against the open rooted teeth of the field vole, and an additional loop on the upper second molars which is not present in bank voles (Image 3).

The remains of a single brown rat (*Rattus* species) were also found. These are not common in owl pellets and indeed it is the first I have come across. It is also possible to estimate the total weight of prey (1364g) represented by the 22 barn owl pellets using realistic average weights (Yalden 2009). This clearly illustrates the importance of the larger prey items since shrews, which account for 24% of the number of prey items, only account for 10% of the total prey weight.

Water shrew was not found in the analysed pellets but could reasonably be expected to be present in the river margins. Previous surveys using small tubes with bait have confirmed the presence of water shrews in the LOHP area.

Reference

Yalden D.W., 2009. *The Analysis of Owl Pellets*, 4th edition. Southampton: The Mammal Society.

Graham Moates



Bill Boston

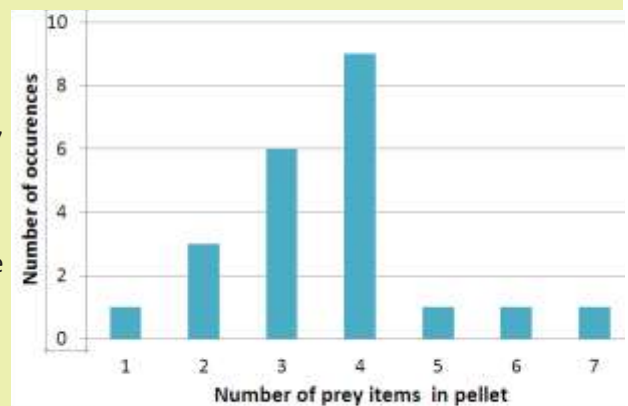


Image 1. Graph showing number of prey items found in barn owl pellets (Scarfe Meadows, January 2016)

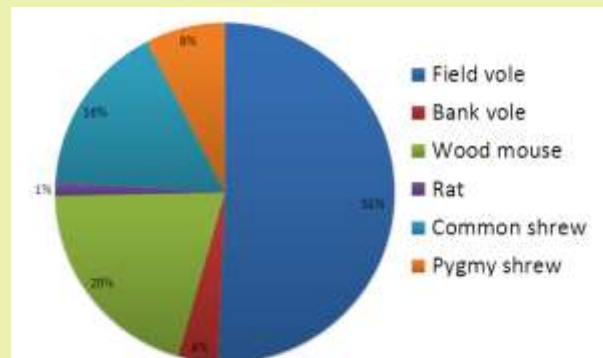


Image 2. Chart showing species of prey items in barn owl diet (Scarfe Meadows, January 2016)

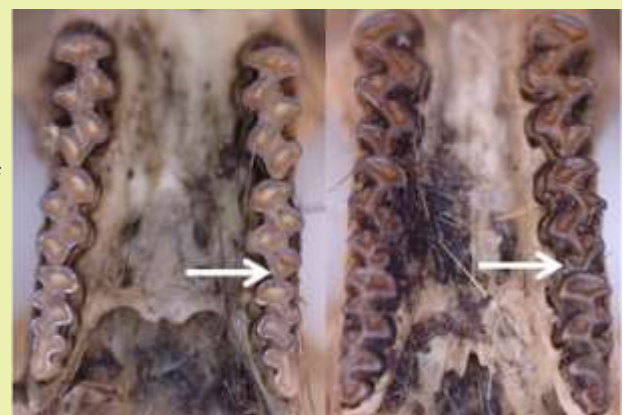


Image 3. Photo of the upper molars of bank vole (left) and field vole (right) showing the presence of an additional loop on the second molars of the field vole

Painting Herbert - a hare with a local theme

The arrival of a giant plastic hare at Garboldisham Primary School as part of a schools' competition sponsored by the Shadwell Estate, Thetford, triggered a wonderful half term of art activity. Rosemary Humphries, LOHP volunteer and artist describes the process.



When the year 5 and 6 children were asked to sketch their ideas, it became obvious that nature and what they have learned from excursions and visits associated with LOHP was going to play a large part. They even considered the effects we are having on our environment with pollution and poor land management. So the local Breckland and its nature became the main theme.

Contrasting day and night

I pulled together a general design, based entirely on their ideas, one of which was having the two sides being 'day' and 'night'. This led to studying how colour looks different in light and dark, and then using different colours on the flowers, e.g. light and dark red, white and then blue. We talked about stars and they then used shades of white - some yellow, some pink, to reflect how they differ in their light.

Children's research

They selected what to work on, researched it, sketched it, experimented with colour, and then painted it on *Herbert*. Everything was painted with knowledge and observation, learning to research and then develop their ideas on paper before coming up with the actual painting. For instance, the children looked at the raft spider and the bee to see the size of the legs in relation to the body and where the markings lie.

It proved an avenue for the children, giving them confidence in themselves, and it showed us previously unseen art talents.



Understanding colour

They noticed colour and used it. D. saw that the badger had a pinky tinge, so he painted that on first. He then had fun making different greys from red, blue, ochre and white. No black! The otter was observed and painted very well, the child seeing how it would sit in water. For the owl in Herbert's ear, I talked to the child about how to select colour and work with it and the result is entirely his creation. The children saw the rabbits as

important creatures. The wooden sculpture on the LOHP site Broomscot Common, is an often-visited place for nature walks, education and projects. They looked at how yellow and ochre



LOHP's Mammal Group - very relaxed but with keen members

The first practical meeting of the new LOHP Mammal Group took place in March last year with Richard Woolnough and Mark Smith from the Suffolk Mammal Group. Volunteers Angela and Alan Beeken tell the tale...

The initial aim was to survey for otters on the Little Ouse from Peddars Way bridge, Knettishall, to the source and Botesdale. Techniques for locating, collecting, cleaning and recording spraint (otter poo) samples were all covered in this session - as well as recognition of the smell, luckily quite sweet. A field trip gave us the chance to practise.

Regular spraint collection

Before the next meeting in October we had been out collecting spraint.

Several regular spots were found particularly along the upper reaches and towards Botesdale. The washed samples were inspected through digital microscope cameras projected onto computer screens. Again Richard and Mark were on hand to guide us through the process of identification. Back bones are the most easily identifiable items but fish scales are also distinctive and therefore useful for ID.

A 'Who's Who' of bones

Our most recent meeting in January 2017, again with

Richard and Mark, saw us carrying out more sample analysis but also our previous results had been collated by Richard who was able to show some initial trends. Bullhead was the most common prey fish of the Little Ouse otters, followed by stickleback but there was a total lack of eel in their diet. This makes an interesting comparison with other Suffolk sites where bullhead are much less prominent in the diet but eels feature heavily.



Reg and Rowena Langston, Angela and Alan Beeken, Graham Moates and Sue Lawrence get to grips with working out which bone is whose at a spraint day. If you think this could be you - do get in touch.

Early deductions - five kinds of fish

In general our otters' diet consisted of about five different groups of fish as well as crustaceans, amphibians and occasional birds. We also came across small snails and beetles - probably the food of the prey rather than of the otters, so presenting the real food chain process in action.

We look forward to continuing our input to the Mammal Group records.

Angela and Alan Beeken

shades work well with purple to create the differences in colour.

The eyes are special

As always, it's refreshing to see many of the children's own ideas appear and develop. For instance, the hare's eyes are the product of ideas of the children who painted them. The pupils are a different size: the 'day' one reflecting the landscape and the 'night' one reflecting the sky, both done with great care.

St John the Baptist Church, next door to the school, is typical of many flint churches in the area, so it was painted

nestling among the trees. Inspiration for the pines came from the artwork on the Breckland village signs.

Seeing the whole project through

They experienced and achieved putting a project together in all its stages. We talked about many things: looking at how colour works, making proportions work, lots of information about our local animals and plants - a real multi-disciplinary task. It proved an avenue for them, giving them confidence in themselves, and it showed us previously unseen art talents in children.

It was evident how art and our environment came together for the children and it was a joy to work with them. The £1,000 second prize was a well-earned reward.

Rosemary Humphries



Loving the outdoor life

The outdoor life has always appealed to Pete Fox, the LOHP's honorary secretary since 2012. Here he is in conversation with LOHP volunteer, freelance journalist and photographer, Judith Tooth.

Pete started volunteering as a boy with Essex Wildlife Trust at Fingringhoe Wick and the RSPB at Old Hall Marshes, and later at Copperas Bay and Stour Wood on the Stour estuary. He joined The Conservation Volunteers while studying ecology at UEA, and later became a volunteer officer for the organisation. He then spent four years working in a cooperative restaurant in Norwich, after which he was keen to work outdoors again, and took a job with local contractor Peter Frizzell.

'Peter has been doing work for the LOHP since it started, carrying out the larger scale tasks like digging scrapes and restoring ditches using heavy machinery,' he says. 'My first job for him was helping to clear a derelict tree plantation on Bleyswycks Bank. My main tasks are chain-sawing, fen mowing and fencing.'

Local volunteers, local wildlife, local organisation

Pete moved closer to the project area in 2009 and started volunteering, too. By then, the LOHP had grown a lot and the founder members were quite stretched. He was co-opted as a trustee and became honorary secretary in 2012.

'That a group of local people, very skilled in their fields, came together and in such a short space of time have been so effective in what they set out to achieve - to buy or rent land for fen restoration - is really impressive,' he says. 'Being able to raise so much money to buy so much land is down to the hard work and dedication of the founder

It's great how many local people have been attracted to volunteer for a relatively small organisation, engaging with local wildlife.

members. It's also great how many local people have been attracted to volunteer for a relatively small organisation, engaging with local wildlife. And everyone's really nice! 'Having achieved so much so quickly the project provides a good template that might be replicated in other areas. Maybe it's unusual to have so many skilled people in a small group, but there are lessons that can be learned.'

Scarfe Meadow is special

Pete's favourite walk - maybe because he lives close to it - is across the secluded Scarfe Meadows, a mix of flood meadows, hedges and reed-filled ditches on the edge of Garboldisham. But he also walks regularly around the Blo' Norton and Thelnetham sites, and seeing the progression of the restored parts of fen there is very exciting, he says. The scrape at Parkers Piece, for example, was not much more than a nettle bed with rank vegetation and grasses, and now some fenland plants are colonising. It's unlikely to become like Thelnetham Middle Fen, he says, but it's still a valuable bit of fen.

A regular wild walk

Every month he likes to walk all the LOHP sites, checking all the footpaths and fence lines. 'It makes me pay attention and I'm building up quite an intimate relationship with the sites. Some of the volunteers have similar relationships, of course, but maybe few of them visit all the sites so regularly. It's really interesting to see the changes through the seasons. Spring time is great for wildlife, of course, and October and November are the easiest months to walk round when it's still dryish and the vegetation is dying back.'

The thrill of seeing plants return

Pete has been developing his botanical skills in recent years, and it's great to have on his doorstep sites where he can see plants that don't occur everywhere. Armed with

his 'Rose' - Francis Rose's *The Wild Flower Key* - he has been visiting sites around Norfolk with a university friend as well as taking it on his local walks.

'Seeing some of the more common wetland plants, like Lady's Smock, coming back on the LOHP sites, that weren't there a few years ago, is really encouraging, because they indicate the start of the process of restoration. And seeing Adder's Tongue on Broomscot Common - maybe it was there all the time, but coming across it was quite exciting.'

Judith Tooth



Pete Fox on The Frith

Fungi thrive in the rain - and so did the fungus hunters!

On the 12th November, 17 hardy souls met in the cold and rain at Broomscot Common, Garboldisham, for a Fungi Foray led by expert Tony Leech.

At first sight the group could be forgiven for thinking that the damp, grey and slightly muddy common would not yield any interesting specimens, or any specimens at all! How wrong we were - for as we wandered around, with eyes glued to the ground, many species were spotted.

What grows where?

Tony explained how to identify each species, including colour, size, smell and appearance (dull, shiny, viscid), but most of all, in what conditions and places they grow. Fungi erupt on many different hosts including dead branches, turf, moss, plants, leaf litter and even cow and horse dung! Tony could name many of the species collected on the spot, but also took away samples for a more definitive analysis and identification later.

Names give a clue

The descriptive names of Velvet Shank, Oysterling, Crystal Brain, Scurfy Deceiver and Saparella, to name but a few of those we found, give an idea of their fascinating appearance. I am sure that everyone who attended learned a great deal about the subject, and will approach their country rambles with new eyes.

Chris McDonald



Chris McDonald



Chris McDonald

The little fingers of the yellow club fungus showed up well in the damp grass

Hares and Eels at the 2016 AGM

Having been to several AGMs in the past I was looking forward to this one, with the talk curiously entitled 'The European Eel - a Slippery Tale'.

The business was concluded very quickly, as usual, and it was reassuring that we have such a great team guiding us on to even greater things.

We then heard from local artist, Rosemary Humphries, about the work she did with the children of Garboldisham Primary School. The school, along with several others, was provided with a giant hare, paint and materials and invited to enter a competition by the Shadwell Estate. The children's imagination was astonishing as they painted Herbert

Hare using inspiration from LOHP work. Night and day scenes showed flowers, raft spiders, a badger and many other fen creatures. They won a well-deserved second prize, and we send our congratulations to all the children who took part. (See pp 4-5).

Then came the main talk by Alan Walker from CEFAS, who specialises



Arthur Rivett

Herbert and artist Rosemary Humphries

in eels. I had not understood the complexity of the eel lifecycle. It is believed that all European eels spawn in the Sargasso sea and can take two years to get there after changing their shape and colour in Britain. Despite many scientists in many countries studying the eel, their real life story is still much of a secret. As with so many other creatures, their numbers are reducing alarmingly, mainly because of human activity (again). Sea and river pollution, water-driven turbines, and cooling water inlets for power stations seem to be among the worst problems they face. We wish Alan luck in his efforts to preserve these amazing creatures.

Martin Forge

(So far, no eel remains have been found in otter spraint collected along 'our' stretch of the Little Ouse. What's stopping them get up the river? Ed.)

Winter walk - blue sky and sun

A large crowd gathered the day after a very wet and dismal New Year. However, this group of around 75 people, no doubt keen to burn off some excess Christmas calories, were

greeted by blue sky and bright sun. It was the start of the 2017 winter walk and we were meeting outside Garboldisham village hall to take a stroll around the village.

The route took us anticlockwise along the edges of fields with fine Breckland views and passing a burial mound, known as Soldier's Hill or Boadicea's

Mound, and two LOHP sites: Scarfe Meadows and Broomscot Common.

Sightings included a flock of chaffinches and half a dozen snipe which took off from Scarfe Meadows. Our efforts were rewarded back at the hall with some delicious soup generously made by LOHP volunteers.

Deborah Key

Membership application

(not renewals)

Name:

Address:

Postcode:

Phone:

E-mail:

I wish to support the LOHP as a:

Friend of the Fens: £10 min a year

Ordinary member: £5 a year

Junior member (<18 years) £1 a year

Please tick one category and write the amount donated below.

I wish to donate £..... to the LOHP.

Please make cheques payable to the 'Little Ouse Headwaters Project'.

We can reclaim the basic rate of tax that you have paid on the gross equivalent of your donation so, for example, a membership payment of £10 is worth £12.50 to us. Therefore, if you are a UK taxpayer, we would be very grateful if you would Gift Aid your subscription by simply completing the Gift Aid section, and date and sign this form.

I want to Gift Aid the above donation to the LOHP

Please treat as Gift Aid donations all qualifying gifts of money made today and in the future.

I am a UK Taxpayer and understand that if I pay less Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax in the current year than the amount of Gift Aid claimed on all my donations to charities it is my responsibility to pay any difference.

I understand the Little Ouse Headwaters Project will reclaim 25p of tax on every £1 that I give.

Signature:..... Date:.....

Please notify the LOHP if you 1) wish to cancel this declaration 2) change your name or home address, or 3) no longer pay sufficient tax on your income and/or capital gains. If you pay income tax at the higher or additional rate and you want to receive the additional tax relief due to you, you must include all your Gift Aid donations on your Self-Assessment tax return or ask HM Revenue and Customs to adjust your tax code.

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.*



The mark of responsible forestry

A big thank you to all those members who send donations along with their renewals. 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 time? If so we'd love to hear from you.

To get involved, and for more information, contact **Bev Blackburn**, Volunteer Coordinator and Event Manager at beverly.blackburn@lohp.org.uk or 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 website for details and confirmation of where to go.*

Apr 9 Parkers Piece - thistle removal

Jul 9 Blo'Norton Fen road verge - vegetation clearing

Aug 13 Hinderclay Fen - Cutting Adder's-tongue meadow

Note: There are no work parties in May and June so as to avoid the bird nesting season.

Nigel Clark 01379 890460 New Fen



LOHP on Facebook & Twitter for news and great photos go to www.lohp.org.uk and click on the icons



Events

April 2 - Spring morning walk from Redgrave Activity Centre, meet 10.15am for 10.30. No booking needed. Dogs welcome on a short lead.

April 9 - LOHP stall run by trustees and volunteers at the SWT Plant Sale at Redgrave & Lopham Fen (10am - 3pm).

May 25 - Thelnetham Fens evening walk, with SWT - meet at Thelnetham village hall car park 6.15pm. Refreshments en route. No booking needed. Dogs welcome on a short lead.

June 12 - Bird identification walk - meet at Parkers Piece 6.15pm for 6.30pm start. Booking needed.

July 8 - Moth trapping evening - details tbc (weather dependent). Booking needed.

Check the website for further details

Bookings and more info: text 07747 691285 or email beverly.blackburn@lohp.org.uk

Donations welcome (suggested £3 per event).

Thelnetham Mill - a walk on LOHP sites makes a good combination with a visit to Thelnetham Mill on a Mill Open Day (11am- 4pm). 2017 dates: April 17, May 13 & 14, May 29, July 23, August 28, September 10, October 8.

To contact the LOHP (Reg. charity no: 1098232)

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Website: www.lohp.org.uk

