

# FSC Slapton Ley

2021 NEWSLETTER



Left: feedback pebbles. Right: activities and locations

## Connecting with nature a path to wellbeing

The pandemic has impacted on many people's wellbeing, so spending time outdoors and connecting with nature can be good way to relax and build resilience. During the autumn of 2020, FSC Slapton Ley worked in partnership with South Hams Area Wellbeing (SHAW), to provide '5 Ways to Wellbeing' sessions for adults from the local community. Participants were able to embrace the great outdoors and connect with nature, alongside learning some useful mindfulness techniques. For many it was also an opportunity to discover this local area of outstanding natural beauty.

SHAW is a local community interest company formed in 2018 which endeavours to support, educate and enable individuals in the local community to be resilient in their own wellbeing. For the past several years SHAW has been developing links within the local Kingsbridge community.

As SHAW's Community Builder, this was the first project I worked alongside FSC tutors Maryanne Wills and Debbie Gregson. I was able to promote the Wellbeing Programme to the local community and referrals came from local GP surgeries and social prescribers, alongside those individuals who self-referred onto the programme.

Maryanne and Debbie delivered a programme that included activities such as nature walks around the ley, finding and clearing dormouse boxes, building a fire, making bannock bread, coppicing trees and making Christmas decorations from natural materials.

At the heart of each of these sessions were the fundamental strategies of the '5 Ways to Wellbeing'; **Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning** and **Give**. With these strategies shaping each session, participants actively engaged with them, taking home the knowledge of how this information fits into their daily life, armed with ideas of how to work on their wellbeing moving forward in their own time.

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The wellbeing group

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Over 10 weeks participants not only gained practical skills, but the group learnt how to work together and friendships were formed. The weekly sessions, during a period of uncertainty, provided a welcome distraction to have some sense of normality in these challenging times. Indeed, the unique 'feedback pebbles' where participants drew on their key memories and experiences, highlighted how important social interactions are; 'hearing laughter', 'sharing this experience with others' and 'connecting with nature'.

Whilst 2020 proved challenging in so many ways, Maryanne, Debbie and I are reassured that these sessions provided some respite from the restrictions imposed on everyday life. Looking to the future it is hoped another Wellbeing Programme will be delivered in 2021 to further support the great work at FSC Slapton Ley and individuals in the wider Kingsbridge community.

**Helen Hamilton** Community Builder, SHAW

## Uniting students with the outdoors

In December 2020 the national nature reserve welcomed twelve Year 9 students from Kingsbridge Community College for a weekly two-hour session spending time getting active and creative in their local landscape. These sessions were run in a Covid secure way to support confidence building and wellbeing of the group.

Miss Tasker, one of the accompanying staff, informed the wider school community about the visits "Sawing and removing old branches from Ash trees that had become overgrown

was an activity that started with some not even wanting to leave the path and venture further in – yet finished with the students working in teams to fell larger branches and then lop them into movable chunks."

As well as this practical conservation activity the students enjoyed a woodland walk with fire lighting and bread making and collecting natural materials for crafting Christmas decorations. "It was a fair old trek but one that treated us to stunning views, it was lovely to see the students range of reactions over the walk and the conversations that stemmed from things seen."



It is great to witness the impact that two hours outdoors has had on the students!

**Maryanne Wills** Education Team Leader

## Take a walk on the wild side



**FSC Slapton Ley are excited to have been invited to join the team at Walkwyse to help engage people with the natural world on their doorstep through audio guided walks.**

The first walk will be around our beautiful Slapton Ley National Nature Reserve, highlighting the conservation techniques we employ on the reserve and suggesting wildlife to look out for. Whilst usually teaching as one of the centre Tutors, during lockdown I have been developing my technical skills so that I can create these walks for the website. Once 'live' a link will be shared through social media and via local notices.

The Walkwyse website has been a lockdown creation from Peter Horne and was developed to help people engage with their landscape without an in-person guide. All the walks are free, but with the ability to donate to charity. The hope is to raise money for a variety of causes close to the hearts of those who develop the walks. This is the beginning of a project that continues to evolve, with a range of creators and collaborators working hard to

produce more walks, whilst restricted by the government guidance due to the pandemic.

FSC Slapton Ley is looking forward to collaborating with Peter and the Walkwyse team on this project. I hope that Slapton Ley National Nature Reserve will be just one of many landscapes we can help you to discover. To keep updated on progress, follow us on social media... Twitter: [@FSCSlaptonLey](https://twitter.com/FSCSlaptonLey) and Facebook: [Slapton Ley Field Centre](https://www.facebook.com/FSCSlaptonLey).

To try out a walk all you need is a smartphone with GPS enabled. To see all walks currently available and instructions of how to use them, visit: <https://walkwyse.com/>

**Rosie Molton** Tutor, Slapton Ley Field Centre



# Not a (board)walk in the park...

Meandering its way through the willowy tangle of wet woodland in Southgrounds Marsh is a boardwalk that provides a public right of way to Slapton village and Deer Bridge. The damp humid conditions within this environment sustain a great diversity of plant, animal and fungus, making it a really important habitat on the reserve. Unfortunately these conditions also lead to accelerated rot and decay; years of sitting in waterlogged ground takes its toll on the posts and successive autumns' accumulation of damp, soggy leaves results in a degraded, dangerous structure. And so the decision was made to replace the thoroughfare.

With sustainability in mind we looked into a number of options, including recycled plastic, which has the additional benefit of lasting significantly longer than timber, but the cost made this option unrealistic. The problem with purchasing from a timber merchant is that it's very hard to ensure the sustainability of the product from its source. It would likely be a softwood which would need treating with preservatives, which may leach into the wetland. So it was decided that the most sustainable solution would be to use timber from our own woodlands.

We recently renewed our 'woodland management plan', which is a document agreed by the Forestry Commission and Natural England that ensures good woodland management practices; one of the recommended actions was thinning out the dense stands of Sweet Chestnut. When trees grow too close together – in our case, as a result of historic planting – they are at greater risk of diseases such as *Phytophthora ramorum*. An infection of this pathogen would be fairly disastrous and would likely result in an order to fell large swathes of the wood. So we decided to combine our woodland management objectives with our need for local, sustainable timber. Somewhat serendipitously, Sweet Chestnut is the perfect timber for a boardwalk as the tannin-rich wood makes it highly resistant to decay.

The logistics of the operation would be challenging: we would need to fell and extract enormous hunks of timber, then mill them into posts, beams and planks. Fortunately we knew the man for the job. Eddie Church is a bit of a wood-wizard who specialises in turning freshly-hewn timber into intricate sculptures and sturdy stiles, rugged railings and burly benches. He had the skill to fell the enormous trees and the equipment to drag them out of the wood. The only thing left would be to



mill the trunks into the constituent parts of a boardwalk (400 posts, 200 beams and 1400 planks). After some calculations it became clear to Eddie that for the cost of sending timber to a commercial sawmill to be processed, it would be more viable for him to buy his own sawmill.

The process of milling the timber was only achieved with the hard graft of three stalwart nature reserve volunteers Nick Swann, Tony Hulatt and Lawrence Hayes. The first task was assembling the machine, as Tony recounts "it arrived on pallets and then we realised it was one very large and complicated 'flat pack' self-assembly! All the parts were in numbered

bags contained within numbered boxes which were referenced in a step by step manual." It took several days to assemble the saw mill and its operation began tentatively. For Nick it was another fun noisy toy to play with but the progress wasn't always easy: "Some logs were very heavy and difficult to manoeuvre on the sawmill and we had to use a tractor with forklifts and straps to rotate each log."

Laurence pointed out one of the challenges faced "Many of the trees dragged in by Eddie had shrapnel deeply embedded within their trunks, each time the saw blade hit a piece of shrapnel, it broke the blade". This shrapnel was a relic of the D-day landing practises on Slapton Sands.



Above: shrapnel

Left: the milling team and the sawmill in action

Setbacks and aching muscles aside, they succeeded in turning trees into the materials required to create a boardwalk. Nick recalls the process fondly "The highlight for me is seeing the pallets of milled timber drying out knowing we have cut it all and it's high quality sustainable timber, locally sourced", as does Tony "The whole exercise was a great team effort, hard work, undertaken in typically changeable Slapton weather, but thoroughly enjoyable nonetheless and we all slept well after a hard day's work". But the last words go to Lawrence: "If Nick and myself had ever wondered what Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn felt like when he was sentenced to 20 years hard labour in the frozen wastes of Siberia... we wondered no more."

All that's now left to do is wait until the timber has seasoned, treat it with a sand-based non-slip surface and get on with the task of installing it. Look out for this wonderful new creation meandering through the marsh later this year.

**Tom Pinches** National Nature Reserve Ranger

# Thank you...

The volunteers at Slapton have worked fantastically hard to help keep the field centre and the nature reserve going through these difficult times. We would like to thank them profusely for their unwavering support. Here is a glimpse at what some of them got up to in 2020...

## Tremendous Tuesdays

After starting the year enthusiastically with beach profiling, monitoring water quality and maintaining nature reserve infrastructure, we spent most the spring and early summer sharing cake and craft creations on WhatsApp during lockdown.

Once restrictions lifted the group reconvened, at a socially acceptable distance, and we got stuck into balsam bashing; the pulling of invasive

Himalayan Balsam by the roots before the flowers set seed. There was also lots of vegetation to tend to and work restarted at the Strete Gate nature trail cutting back brambles and clearing pathways. Tidying the grounds at Start Bay Centre and gardening at the Field Centre continued through into the autumn.

Despite another lockdown we managed to finish on a festive note with mulled wine and mince pies after a morning hedge laying at Loworthy woods.

**Gail** Tuesday Team Volunteer



Whatsup on Wednesdays

Dressed in steel toe caps, waterproofs and with picnic packed, I met Tom and the Wednesday gang to clear the marshes of invasive willow; accompanied by the sounds of sawing, chain saw, banter and bonfires, until rains curtailed.

Change of tack then to platform renovation by the Ley for rotten planks, removing, replacing and re-meshing, so people can stand overlooking the Ley safely and probably completely unaware of the work to maintain this view.

The numbers for Wednesday meets vary, so one morning Tom, Shirley and I renovated and created steps by the Ley, aided by banter, discussion, laughter and cake!

**Jayne** Wednesday Team volunteer



## Thymes in the garden

We were met with a wilderness of uninvited but flourishing vegetation after lockdown number one, which took several sessions and the willing hands of the 'Tuesday Group' to help tame. There was certainly no shortage of material for the compost heaps!

Work preparing a new garden area for guests using reclaimed materials is underway. We have accessed wood for safety fencing, upcycled garden furniture, procured a wealth of donated plants and are now hunting down patio tiles for the barbecue area – and there was absolutely no shortage of compost! We even



managed to procure large quantities of wood chip for under seating areas, from trees recently felled around the Ley. It's certainly not all gentle weeding at Slapton!

**Heather** Lead Garden Volunteer

## Roll up... minibus volunteers

We are looking for new volunteers to drive for us. As an educational charity we have groups that carry out field work in various spots around the South Hams as well as in Plymouth, Torbay and up on Dartmoor and we are looking for some enthusiastic volunteers to drive them. Trips can be a mix of short drop offs, half and all day outings. For more information email [volunteer.sl@field-studies-council.org](mailto:volunteer.sl@field-studies-council.org)



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