

Brockholes Nature Reserve, Preston April 13th 2016

The Wildlife Trusts of Lancashire, Manchester and North Merseyside.

In 2006 The Lancashire Wildlife Trust had four weeks to raise £50,000 to buy the Brockholes site, near Preston and protect it from development. It opened in 2011. We decided to visit five years later.

With a quick but much needed toilet stop at Chester, especially for those who had left Llanidloes at 8.15 we arrived at the reserve, which is situated just below Junction 31 of the M6. The coach was able to drop us very close to the floating visitor centre which has a drawbridge to cross. In times of flooding this is raised to allow the complex to float built very much like a medieval Arab marsh village and was designed as part of an architectural competition. Members had time now to acquaint themselves with the building, look at the display and have lunch from the restaurant or eat their own picnic.

We learned that the centre has various ecological credentials such as a reed bed system for the waste water, a woodchip biomass boiler, a roof designed to allow heat to rise and escape through vents at the top and this roof is also covered with oak shingles which might only have a 30-year life but will be replaced by shingles made from their own oak trees. The centre is large enough to host conferences and weddings of which 28 are booked for 2016! The visitor centre also has facilities to work with children and schools.

We were issued with maps with several options ranging from a 30-minute walk around the gravel pit on good surface paths to a 2 hour plus walk taking in most of the reserve. Many of us opted for a guided walk led by one of the trust volunteers, named Jim. He has a twin who tagged along with back-up information. Leaving behind the centre we walked past reed beds which attract many birds and on the whole reserve up to that day 207 different species had been recorded including the little owl on the day we were there. Also recorded, were 19 dragonflies, 16 seen regularly along with 18 butterflies. Our walk took us through a field of cowslips to a stone circle. Not unlike those we are familiar with in Wales but this one is made of the natural rock of surrounding areas and each one points to its place of origin such as Pendle Hill which we could see in the distance.

So what of the history of the reserve. Jim told us that Edward 1st had gifted the land to Robert de Latham in return for troops. We could see the remains of the hall across the River Ribble which forms one of the boundaries. More recently the land had been quarried which had made the lakes which were so attractive to the many returning migrants. The reed beds attracting so many birds too. As we gazed across the River Ribble, noting that it appeared to flow away from the west coast due to the many meandering loops, an eagle-eyed member amongst us spotted a kingfisher on the far bank and we took it in turns to borrow binoculars to watch it. At the same time, we saw reserve volunteers returning with giant hogweed in a truck that they had been dealing with. Good to see them getting on top of this nasty weed, so to speak.

We learned that the river flows at 750 gallons per second where it is measured but in those heavy rains in the winter of 2015 it was flowing at 147,000 gallons per second which would fill 57 Olympic swimming pools. What an amazing fact! As well as the kingfisher we spotted a lovely grey lagged goose tagging along with a group of Canada geese. We left this spot and walked past a field of Lancashire Longhorns cattle to manage the grass. Further on we came to the woodland with many species familiar to us. Bluebells were in flower surprisingly. We saw Roe deer tracks and learned that wild garlic or ransoms could be named after the Lancashire town of Ramsbottom ie the valley of the wild garlic. Who knows?

The wood had many oaks, birch, many with the witches broom fungus and hornbeams which we discovered is a very hard wood that ploughshares were made from. Our guide was very informative. On leaving the beautiful wood we found ourselves at the far side of the biggest lake with quite a jaunt to get back, which we managed, in time to have a cup of tea before leaving for our long journey home.

Sue Bosson