This has been a year of consolidation for the board of Trustees following the retirements in quick succession of our Chair, Treasurer and Administrator: Richard Douglas and Andrew and Lisbet Clements respectively. Each of them contributed so much to the Trust for many years that losing them left a huge potential gap in our capability. Happily, both Andrew and Lisbet continue as volunteers without specific responsibility, so we have not lost their enthusiasm and energy.

We have been very fortunate to recruit Roger Seabrook as successor Hon.Treasurer to Andrew, and he quickly grasped the nettle in dealing with our finances and relations with the Charities Commission. Gillian Johnson has absorbed the work previously done by Lisbet, realising how much Lisbet did behind the scenes. Mike Southon has taken over administration of our agricultural grants, which has demonstrated how grindingly bureaucratic the claim process can be. Chris Smith, a
volunteer until he became a trustee in November, took over from Andrew the organization of our weekday volunteer work parties. Other trustees continued to oversee their designated specialist roles: Louise Auckland overseeing education, Graham Beland and Mike Southon large project and weekend volunteering, John Metcalfe ecology, and Shammy Puri hydrology. As a result of all their efforts, the transition into new hands has proceeded uneventfully and in only one area are we conscious of significant loss of effectiveness. This is the website, where we have been unable so far to replace the skills of Andrew and Lisbet. It will be a focus of attention in the next year.

It was with great sadness that we heard, all too soon after his retirement from the Trust, of the death of Richard Douglas (Chairman from 2006 to 2017) on 8 June 2017, and more recently of Peter Pritchard (founder Trustee and Hon. Secretary) on 6 January 2018. Without Richard Douglas’ benevolent support and oversight, it is unlikely that we would have succeeded in purchasing Old Bridge Meadow and Overy Mead Piece, thereby expanding our properties from the Hurst meadow down to the Thame confluence with the Thames. Without Peter’s energy and determination the Trust might well not exist at all. An appreciation of Peter’s contribution to the Trust can be read in the Dorchester News, February 2018, available on the village website www.dorchester-on-thames.co.uk/dorchester-news. They are both sorely missed.

Land management

The ten year land management plan, which was drawn up for us last year by our consultant Rod d’Ayala, is operational and providing the basis for all working parties on the meadows. The core theme of the plan is multi-year rotation of the land’s management, so it will be several years before its full benefits can be properly assessed. But it has started well. Trustee Chris Smith is finding the plan invaluable for planning weekly, monthly and seasonal work. Volunteers worked with Chris on the meadows on Tuesdays from mid-April until early December, averaging 5 people per session. We are grateful for their support and hard work. Views of the river Thame have been opened up along the bank, as well as views the other way from the riverside path across to the main meadow. Vegetation control in the two scrapes in the Hurst and in the ditches of Old Bridge Meadow has encouraged a greater number and variety of flowering plants. Further experimental ditch work is proceeding on the Hurst to try to create an all year wet area by the causeway.

Once again the trustees are grateful to Andrew Townsend who cut and baled the hay in the Hurst between 26 and 29 August, and to Mr Cook of Shillingford Farm whose contractor took the hay from Overy Mead Piece. Our thanks also to Toby Pejkovic whose polo ponies grazed the Hurst from 11 November to 1 March.

Because much tree surgery was carried out in previous years there has been considerably less required in the last twelve months but Nick Keighley (Face North Forestry) reliably steps in when necessary. There has been more tree planting this year with a Saturday working party in early December, bolstered by members of Sonning Common Green Gym, planting 120 hedging plants alongside the post and wire fence on Overy Mead Piece. Meanwhile another stretch of hedging between Old Bridge Meadow and the car park has been expertly laid by three new volunteers: Will, Max and Peter. Still on the subject of trees, Trustee John Metcalfe and

Trustees: R Farrant (Chairman), G Johnson (hon. secretary), R Seabrook (hon. treasurer), L Auckland, G Beland, C J Hill, J H Metcalfe, S Puri, M J Southon, C Smith
volunteer Richard Tilley completed a major piece of work recording approximately 280 trees (excluding willows) on the three meadows. Each tree was photographed and logged by GPS, ready for digital mapping.

Wildlife

Fauna
Much of the work recording fauna on the meadows is undertaken by a group of volunteers: Richard Tilley, Dave Scott, Nigel Evans and Jon Rosby, assisted by Rebecca Read who is licensed to handle bats. We are very grateful to them all for their diligence and enthusiasm.

Richard Tilley reports that after a very dry spring in 2017 the wet summer encouraged plenty of frogs and toads on Old Bridge Meadow and Overy Meadow Piece. Several bat boxes and most bird boxes showed signs of occupation although some bat boxes were favoured by nesting tits rather than bats. Pipistrelle and Daubenton’s bats were frequently seen over the Hurst meadow and the river in summer. Among the bird species, highlights of the year were a pair of barn owls hunting over the Hurst on summer evenings and six species of warbler singing on Overy Meadow Piece (blackcap, chiffchaff, whitethroat, garden-, reed- and sedge-warbler). The trail camera produced good results capturing videos of mink, otter, weasel, badger, fox, muntjac deer, brown rat and wood mouse. The two mink rafts have also provided evidence of the presence of mink and otter.
Flora
Snakeshead fritillaries on the Hurst have gradually increased in number, as have cowslips which are now distributed widely over the meadow. There was a colourful profusion of flowers in the main scrape during the summer and the late hay-cut permitted more meadow flowers to set seed, especially knapweed whose seeds were enjoyed by ‘charms’ of goldfinch.

Education
Trustee Louise Aukland promoted the Trust at the 2017 Dorchester Festival at the beginning of May. An expertly led wildlife walk around the Hurst surprised participants with the amount of information that could be gained from quiet observation, and an activity afternoon involved children and their parents creating ‘bug houses’ to take home or to be incorporated in a larger ‘bug hotel’ on the Hurst. The ‘bug hotel’ was formally established on 1 July when we hosted a morning’s celebration for National Meadows Day. There was story-telling, video footage of animals captured by the trail camera, live capture and release of several small mammals, a scything demonstration and drinks and cakes! Fifty-five people participated, four of whom had never visited the Hurst before.

Apart from such special events it is a delight to see children from Dorchester St. Birinus Primary School visiting the Hurst with their Forest School teacher and parent helpers. The enthusiasm of the children is undiminished by bad weather and they are all in rain-proof outer clothing and high visibility jackets thanks to generous funding from Dorchester-on-Thames Parish Council.
Older students from schools beyond Dorchester visit to undertake river studies and the MSc student from Birmingham University successfully completed his hydrological survey of the meadows during the year.

Publication

In February 2017 a book entitled ‘A Year in the Life of Three Water Meadows’ was published by Clive Ormonde, one of our volunteers. The book is packed with photographs of the Trust’s three meadows and of volunteers at work, with a small amount of text relating to each month. It can be purchased through the web-link www.blurb.co.uk/b/7742269-a-year-in-the-life-of

Thanks

We express grateful thanks to our loyal and generous friends who support the work of the Trust either financially or by gift of voluntary time and labour. We hope that you will enjoy another year of walking, working or just relaxing in the meadows. More than that, we want you to feel that these are your meadows.

Gillian Johnson, Hon. Secretary

Richard Farrant, Chairman

On behalf of the Trustees

April 2018

Photos: D Scott, J Brooker, G Johnson