

Rob Larkin and Holtspur Bottom Reserve

By Frank Banyard



I first met Robert Larkin in the early days of the Holtspur Bank Local Nature Reserve. Having been persuaded by various “friends” to be what Beaconsfield Town Council called their “Consultee from Butterfly Conservation” (the principal reason being that I live less than a mile from the LNR and from Town Hall), I met Shirley Scrivener, now the co-ordinator at Holtspur LNR. In a casual conversation she recommended to me an egg supplier at a local farm. There I met Rob Larkin, a somewhat larger-than-life chap, who

immediately decided I was a good audience for his innumerable stories. For all that, the eggs were good and, at only half the price of the supermarkets, worth the time spent in gossip. Later in the year, plums and apples joined the list of goodies that made the gossip justified.

BC’s relations with the Town Council became such that when the north–western side of the Holtspur valley became available, it was offered to us as a butterfly reserve, to be restored to chalk grassland. As many will know, the land was in a bad state of misuse, with only small areas of actual chalk grassland remaining in odd boundary corners.

This was a very different proposition to Holtspur Bank, which had never been ploughed. We could not even enter the reserve with management equipment because the way led through a vast rubbish tip of early 1900s vintage. By chance, on another visit to the farm, I mentioned to Rob Larkin our problem and he at once said that he would see if he could help. Indeed he could, taking his tractor and saws to it, and we soon had a way through.

From that time onwards, Rob became a constant source of advice and help, being retained as Reserve Overseer. The field of ragwort, which is now our lower meadow, defied our attempts to remove it until Rob ploughed the whole field 18 inches deep, burying plants and seeds. Next summer saw little sign of ragwort and in due course this meadow was sown with native plants, a costly action only possible with generous donations from an appeal to UTB members. The butterflies and flowers that we enjoy now are the result. Over almost ten years Rob supported us and without his help and advice we would not have the reserve as it is today.

At his funeral in January it became clear that Rob was not just a friend to us, but had a huge number of others in the district too. Two hundred and twenty eight people attended the funeral. The nature reserves were represented by myself, Shirley Scrivener and Les Davies, our reserves representative at the Town Council. In the eulogies Rob was mentioned as being the “original recycler” on the grounds that he never threw anything away. His yard is a testament to farm history. Clearly his stories have had a multitude of listeners. Music from the full Church organ added to the atmosphere.

The churchyard is closed for burials but a space has been found for Rob by clearing the compost heap – he would have appreciated that! On leaving, Shirley commented that one doesn't get to many funerals like that in a lifetime. For me it is likely to be the only one. We have been incredibly fortunate in having the support of this remarkable man. He is greatly missed and those of us who are closely associated with the reserve are determined that, while the reserve itself is in fact a memorial to him, we will also dedicate a specific feature to his memory. We hope that the membership will agree.

Holtspur Valley Reserves

Rob's absence has been felt in many ways on the reserve and we have been working out how best to go forward without his help. This is not proving easy and has coincided with the need to complete commitments under our Higher Level Stewardship Scheme (HLS) agreement. HLS is more demanding than Countryside Stewardship and to succeed it was necessary to link the two reserves in a joint application (and now known as the Holtspur Valley reserves). There is great emphasis on the management of our grasslands and more emphasis than previously on educational visits. In the past we received funding for visits by the general public but now there is greater emphasis on schools. These visits in the past have greatly helped to fund reserve management but before we can approach schools we need an Education Pack. Nick Bowles is committed to writing this. We also need a new reserve leaflet covering both reserves. This is being jointly developed by Christine Dennis, Peter Lindsley and I.

On 6th April 2010, Nick, Wendy Wilson and I met at Holtspur to review the works programme. The first year of the HLS ends in June, so we need to ensure that those tasks specified for this year are completed. Almost all the unmet challenges lie in the entrance (tip) area, which previously has had no real attention. Inclusion of it in the "managed areas" has allowed an increase in the annual payment grant. Ironically, this has coincided with the loss of Rob Larkin, leaving us with our main current problem. The scrubby moribund woodland covering the hillside between the 'tip' and grassy fields was completely cleared by Rob, assisted by some "Phantom Foresters" whose identity is not known but who remain welcome benefactors (as they felled a particularly large and awkward tree!). The removal of this scrubby woodland has vastly changed the appearance of the approach to the reserve. The site now seems far larger.

Rob stacked all the cut material in two large heaps in the entrance area, awaiting disposal by burning during the winter. Unfortunately our equine neighbour [ownership of this property has changed since this article was written] decided that the idiots on the reserve had no idea what they were doing. In planning to set fire to the heaps, in his view, we threatened to burn down his barns (75 yards away). So he wrote to the council in protest,



causing them to urge caution and on the occasion when we lit a small fire, called out the fire brigade. Since then the council have asserted their rights on their lands, but the two heaps still remain as it was too late in the season to burn them by the time that legal advice was obtained. These 'brash' heaps lie directly on the route we plan to make a permanent access for maintenance vehicles and across the line of required new fencing.

In the near future we hope to have the assistance of Rangers from High Wycombe to chip the material. Once this is done we can press on with other things. These include the construction of decent vehicle access and monitoring of the existing and newly cleared area. We must act continually to maintain and increase the high level of floral diversity within our re-created chalk grassland. The tremendous improvement (we use the word cautiously, in relation to farmed fields it normally means the opposite to our intent) in the quality of the flora at Holtspur is matched by increasingly large invertebrate populations and the most wonderful coloured displays of flowering plants right through the summer. By now the Cowslips will largely be spent, but Horseshoe Vetch and orchids will be appearing, to be followed by Ox-eye daisy and Bird's-foot Trefoil, amongst others.

Specific conservation plans include a "memorial garden area" in what is a very large extension to the reserve. There will be Oak to add to the Purple Hairstreak habitat, as some of its present tree hosts are a little geriatric. Holly will improve the Holly Blue habitat. This species is not uncommon on the Holtspur Valley reserves, but ivy is far more in evidence than holly. Wych Elm, or other Dutch Elm Disease resistant cultivars, for possible White-letter Hairstreak is strongly favoured by Nick. Anyone who has not heard Liz Goodyear's talk or read her report on this species should do so. It is much more common and widely spread than previously appreciated; it is also quite mobile.

An afternoon opening of the reserve is planned at which members can see recent progress and learn more of the plans for the reserve as well as enjoying the butterflies of peak season. We will also have some summer evenings marked out to deal with seasonal "tasks" such as spot ragwort removal and maintenance of the horseshoe vetch scrapes; leisurely tasks in a beautiful place. If you think that you can help, please contact Nick or myself. Site monitoring might show us other needs that can be met through similar meetings and we would be grateful to any members who can check the branch website for details, periodically, and donate a couple of hours to such a worthy cause.

[This article first appeared in the Upper Thames Branch Newsletter No 79, May 2010. The photo of the Fire Brigade (© Nick Bowles) attending the fire at Holtspur Bottom did not appear in the original Newsletter article. The reference to Liz Goodyear above refers to a White-letter Hairstreak project which ran from 2007–2009.]