

An Estate Designed for Learning

This year seems full of anniversaries, including one which we have not so far mentioned: the 50th of the outbreak of Foot & Mouth disease in the autumn of 1967. The dairy farms of North Shropshire and Cheshire were badly hit, but those south of the river, including Bicton, escaped. Nevertheless routine management was disrupted by restrictions of movement and the closure of markets. These restrictions could not be relaxed until the following summer when drier weather probably helped stop the spread.

Through this period Preston Montford Field Centre also had to adapt the content of its courses which normally would have included sites around different parts of the County amongst the farmland. The Urban environments of Shrewsbury and the Ironbridge remained very useful, as well as the Centre's own small estate of about 20 acres, which included the river bank, pastures and small ponds. The experience certainly prompted thoughts on how the estate could be improved for teaching purposes and fortunately some of those ideas were already in place when 'Foot and Mouth' struck the County almost forty years later.

By then, the new A5 had cut across the corner of the estate, reducing its size, but stimulating changes out of necessity and opportunity. For a start, new trees were planted to screen the road and a new pond dug to replace one buried by the embankment. Other developments followed enabling more 'non-residential' day courses to take place here covering a variety of topics. In 1957, 900 students passed through the doors, but in 2017 this had risen ten times to 9,000, with ages ranging from 8 to 80.

For years, most of the grounds had been used as pasture and this management still continues, but with more parts fenced off to allow different regimes of grazing, which can influence their plant communities. One ungrazed plot is now carefully managed as a traditional hay meadow, in which wild flowers are encouraged.

When run as a private house, the walled garden and orchard would have supplied fresh food and vegetables to the household in a traditional way. Now after many years of neglect, and indeed demolition of old greenhouses and walls, the orchards, at least, are being restored and expanded. Traditional varieties, spaced out to allow under-grazing by sheep, will form another type of farming habitat.

A remaining fragment of wall now supports and shelters a 'bee hotel' where a variety of drilled lugs, bamboo and drainpipes provides breeding nests and hibernation shelter for solitary bees and any other insect that needs dry accommodation. Those that prefer damp soil can be inspected under old carpet squares and boards scattered amongst the undergrowth. Here they can all find refuge from spraying farmers and tidy gardeners.

Most of the kitchen garden area is now a new pond for freshwater studies, but vegetables once again grow in plots nearer the house. Apart from being a source of food it is yet another 'ordinary' habitat attracting its own wildlife as any gardener knows. Indeed, this emphasis on 'ordinary' habitats has always been the aim of this centre, since they can be more relevant to the typical student than distant coasts or mountains. Moreover, some of the work done here could be easily copied 'back home' in school grounds or private homes.

The original ponds occupy glacial 'kettle holes' and at one time must have been filled with peat from decaying vegetation. Open water only reappeared once this had been dug out in the middle ages. Now reed and willow beds filter the centre's effluent as an example of environmentally friendly management.

The river bank was cut over during the war, so that the centre inherited young coppice regrowth. Such pole wood proved useful in constructing steps and paths to give access to the river and exposures of glacial sediment. Further tree growth is, however, a mixed blessing, since it can interfere with the fine view to the west over the river towards Montford.

Several other small 'gardens' have also been fitted in around the estate to cater for special interests and provide opportunities for active conservation. Daily weather records are also taken, along with the nightly 'catch' of moths, which are passed on to the 'Met' office and Rothamstead research station. Meanwhile, almost out of sight, various 'green' systems are heating and lighting the buildings, partly as demonstrations of what can be done.

Indeed, there is plenty to show off, hence the significance of an 'Open Day' on November 18th as part of the anniversary celebrations. Visitors included families and individuals from 'eight to eighty'.

The garden had recently lost its giant sequoia to fungus disease and as part of the celebrations a replacement was supplied and planted by Jessica Pannett of Bicton, the great, great granddaughter of Edward Lewis, who was gardener here in the early nineteenth century. In this ceremony, the past, present and future of Preston Montford thereby came together and we wish both tree and centre further success and growth.



Head of Centre Adrian Pickles

at the bee hotel



Jessica Pannett

planting a giant sequoia