

STOWEY GREEN SPACES GROUP AGM: CHAIRMAN'S REPORT: 8 MAY 2025

Roy Osborne

Grateful to Thomas Poole library for allowing us to be here this evening and for allowing us to hold our monthly meetings here. Quite different from the portacabin on the recreation ground!

I predicted last year that this year would be one of consolidation. We had no plans for big new initiatives. That was partly right, but we have nevertheless managed to achieve a lot.

Everything we do is voluntary. We're all getting older, so have to put up with a few more aches and pains, but turnout is always impressive, irrespective of weather.

In Millennium Wood we have maintained footpaths, which are in constant use. Dead hedging has been a success, thanks to support from QLPS and volunteers from Mulberry.

Improved footpaths through Stowey Wood. Installation of new bridge below the "Balfour Beatty" steps. SGSG paid for components. Grateful to Cliff Pook for transporting materials. We've spent many hours keeping the footpaths open, clearing bramble; pulling Himalayan balsam; removing tree guards. Taunton Mid-Week Conservation Volunteers have helped with shoring up the upper loop footpath and installing posts and handrails. Just this week some of you have been working on the picnic table. The Forestry Commission sign had been cleaned and repainted (by Tom Foy) and the muddy footpath layered with wood chip.

A39 Bypass Wood. Trees are doing well. Large areas of brash and bramble cleared. Thanks to the Saturday group.

Bracken and gorse controlled on Castle Mount, although more needs to be done.

On the Recreation Ground SGSG volunteers tidied and burnt the brash from hedge-laying to enable footballers to find their balls.

A quarter of a century has passed since Stowey Millennium Wood was first established and 12 years since the Diamond Jubilee extension was planted. I have always been concerned that the agreement we have with Somerset Council to manage the wood could be terminated at 3 months' notice. Delighted therefore when, in October last year, the Parish Council, with our support, put in an application to have the Millennium Wood added to Somerset Council's register of ACVs (Assets of Community Value). Even more delighted (and surprised!) when the application was approved, with the wood added to the Sedgemoor North ACV list on 7 March. There have been only 6 ACVs approved since 2021. One is a pub, one is the Bridgwater Arts Centre and one is the Thomas Poole library!

Millennium Wood has also been added to the Somerset Wildlife Trust list of PCNRs (Private and Community Nature Reserves).

Managed Platinum Jubilee Wood, both by regular weeding, including removal of giant hogweed. Tom Foy put me in touch with the Probation Service's Community Payback team. They have the advantage of being younger and fitter. They are supervised, have their own insurance and bring their own tools. Their supervisor said they could take on many of the tasks which we undertake, at no cost to us. They did a very good job on the Platinum Jubilee wood.

In March last year the Quantock Hills National Landscape (formerly AONB) took over management of New Stowey farm. We have always said that SGSG would support where we

can. In March this year we planted 420 mixed saplings around the perimeter of what will become Stowey Community orchard. Just across from Barn Close.

Then in April we were told that Matt Peaster of Woodland South-West had had to remove a couple of hundred trees from another site. With National Landscape agreement we planted 200 trees, mainly lime and wild cherry, on land to the SW of Stowey Wood. Matt then came up with another 80 saplings, a mix of lime, crab apple, spindle and field maple which were planted on the same site at the beginning of April. These are thinly spread over about 4.5 acres (50 % increase on Stowey Wood).

In July 2024 we had a visit from the Duke of Edinburgh students from the Field Studies Centre at Nettlecombe Court. Rod Langdon Cole kindly gave a guided walk to point out plants of interest. Rod has also compiled a comprehensive list of the vascular plants in Stowey Wood. We hope that this work will be continued by botanists Ro Fitzgerald and Graham Lavender.

Also in July we purchased the display boards which you can see next door. These have been in good use. On 12 October Nicola Hunt represented SGSG at Somerset Wildlife Trust's "Wilder for Nature" convention in Somerton. In December Nicola and I were at a Bridgwater Blue Heritage Forum at the Bridgwater Arts Centre.

On 7 September, as part of the first CPRE Southwest Countryside Day, hosted by Quantock Hills National Landscape, we were able to explain our activities in Millennium and Stowey Woods.

We're grateful to Dave Davison and Jo Scoines for hosting a social get-together for volunteers and supporters on 8 December.

January this year saw the "Saturday Group" arrange the "Chips are Down" to lay woodchip along a particularly muddy and challenging section of the footpath at the upper end of Stowey Wood. 25 members of the community turned out and lugged the wood chip to the top of the hill by wheelbarrow and by hand.

Looking ahead:

We'll continue management work in the Millennium and Platinum Jubilee woods, Stowey Wood, the Bypass Wood, Castle Mount and the Recreation Ground. We may take on more in the way of footpath maintenance. We have already repaired gates and stiles as issues have occurred or been brought to our attention by walkers or by John Melrose, our Somerset Council Rights of Way area warden. But Somerset Council face serious financial challenges, so are devolving some activities to Parish Councils. Looks like SGSG and the Saturday Group will take on more. Somerset Council Rights of Way team have offered 2 new Stihl trimmers free of charge and NS Parish Council have offered a petrol hedge trimmer. This raises questions about routes, maintenance and fuel costs, as well as storage. Two options under consideration at present. (Describe).

Another area of future activity may well be New Stowey farm, where we may be able to help the Quantock Hills National Landscape team, who in March 2024 took on 10 year stewardship of the farm from Somerset Council. The hope is that changes in land use will make the farm an exemplar of wildlife-friendly farming.

A fortnight ago Judith and I attended an EGM of Quantock Eco. The meeting was to wind up QEco and distribute remaining assets, including financial assets. We were told that SGSG were

one of 5 potential beneficiaries. In the end this was narrowed down to the West Somerset Green Forum and SGSG. Judith and I had hoped we might be given £200.00, but in the end (to our surprise) we received £1300.00, so we begin the year in a financially sound position.