



**Reserve Office and Chesil Beach Centre
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Newsletter Winter 2008/09

2008 will be remembered! Firstly we won't forget the extraordinary summer rains and winds, and secondly it appears that the financial situation has affected us all. Undoubtedly this combination of factors accounted for low visitor numbers to the Reserve and on our glass bottom boat, the Fleet Observer, and a disappointing response to our appeal for funds for the refurbishment of it. Adding to our woes, it was yet another poor breeding season for one of the Reserve's key species - the Little Tern – and we can't blame the credit crunch and weather for that!

In many other ways however, there is good news. Little Egrets have bred on the Reserve for the first time. Our events have bucked the trend and continued to attract good numbers. The glass bottom boat looks wonderful after its overhaul. Plans are progressing with the proposed development of the Chesil Beach Centre, and we have just heard that our bid for support for the development from the Heritage Lottery Fund has been successful.

Chesil Beach Centre development proposal news.

Following on from gaining planning approval and consent to build upon common land, the focus of the proposal is now to secure the necessary funding. Thankfully our application to the Heritage Lottery Fund has been successful but a number of other important contributions need to be secured before the development can take place. It was a pleasure to welcome the Chairman and First Commissioner of the Crown Estate, Mr Ian Grant, to the Centre recently, who wanted to gain a personal and detailed experience of the proposal. A presentation of the development plan was made by Simon Williams, the Planning and Regeneration Manager of Weymouth and Portland Borough Council.



An artistic impression of the proposed development

Abbotsbury Reed beds management initiative

Fresh plans are being prepared to ensure that the wildlife interests of these beds will be maintained and possibly enhanced. Although the beds total less than 20 hectares in size and are partially cut for thatching purposes, they host a number of reed bed wildlife specialities. Breeding birds include Reed and Sedge Warblers and Reed Buntings, and Bearded Tits which are recorded annually have bred there. In the autumn the beds provide a fattening up post for migrant passerines prior to making that long journey to West Africa. Ringing in the reed and adjacent willow beds over the past 30 years has provided a superb insight into their importance for this function. The beds are also used by swallow, sand martin and yellow and pied wagtails for roosting purposes. Reed bed invertebrates as food items are the attraction for migrant birds and the key prey species is the reed plum aphid. Apart from birds the reed and willow beds are inhabited by Harvest and Dormice, Water and Pygmy Shrews, and Water and Bank Voles. Four species of Wainscot Moth, which are associated with reed beds, are also to be found. Wintering birds include Water Rail, which probably have bred, and the occasional Bittern.

The key to the successful management of the beds is the provision of as much freshwater as possible - the wetter the beds the greater the wildlife diversity. The amount of freshwater is limited but with careful manipulation of its supply some improvements may be made. The importance of the beds for thatching reed must also be maintained. The beds were undoubtedly created for this purpose and there is a reference to their existence back in 1543. Just a few years ago several seasons of reed were used to thatch Abbotsbury's massive Abbey Barn.



Left: reeds by the Fleet are also valuable for providing shelter for wintering birds. Right: generations of wingless, plum reed aphids sucking sap from live reed leaves. (Photo: T Bates, Abbotsbury, July 2004)

The Mute Swans at Abbotsbury

Numbers of breeding Mute Swans were good, 158 pairs, and nesting started earlier than usual. Breeding productivity was however low. Besides predation, particularly by crows, a number of cygnets died from a form of enteritis (not the usual Duck Viral Enteritis) caused by ingesting Clostridia, as determined in PMs carried out by specialist vets. The vets were of the opinion that the unsettled weather throughout the first half of the summer had created ideal conditions for this bacterium. Only 37 cygnets have been ringed to date (this is usually in excess of 100) but one poor season alone will not have any overall impact on the herd.

Little Egret nesting

For the first time Little Egrets have nested on the Reserve in a small wood by the West Fleet. For the time being it is considered important not to reveal the actual location. This event is not that surprising as Little Egrets have made a spectacular spread over southern England since arriving as breeding birds in the last twenty years. This small white heron with its attractive flight and feeding behaviour is a welcome addition to our birdlife.

CEFAS trial

A dye tracing exercise was carried out in the Fleet in September as part of an International Workshop on the Application of Sanitary Surveys. The workshop was jointly organised by Cefas (in its role as the EU Community Reference laboratory for monitoring bacteriological and viral contamination of bivalve molluscs) and the United States Food and Drug Administration. It was attended by over forty delegates from all over the world. The demonstration aimed to show how dye tracing techniques can be used to study the impact of sewage effluent discharges on the contamination of shellfisheries. The completely harmless dye, rhodamine WT, was released from the Bridging Camp on an ebb tide over a three hour period and the resulting dye plume was tracked using a fluorimeter towed behind the Fleet Observer. The dye was also monitored using fluorimeters moored at three sites between the Bridging Camp and the oyster farm. The fluorimeters are able to measure very low concentrations of the dye in the water, thereby allowing the dilution of the dye to be calculated. The dye was tracked through the East Fleet and eventually out into Portland Harbour. The demonstration was considered to be a great success by the workshop delegates, and data collected will make a contribution towards better understanding of water movements in the East Fleet. A report on the study is in preparation, and when it is available a resume will be made in the newsletter.



Red dye monitoring from the Fleet Observer. Photo: Richard Acornley

Rodden sign

A brand new sign has been erected at Rodden Hive aimed at informing walkers of the nature conservation reasons why the coast path moves inland at this point. The sign highlights the importance of Rodden Hive, or the Brook as it is locally known, for thousands of roosting birds.

Little Terns at Ferrybridge reach new low

The first birds returned on 5th April, and from 20th April numbers began to build in the colony. In early June approximately 20 birds were present with a maximum count for the season of 31 on the 7th June. Incubation began on 2nd June with ten nests recorded on 9th June. Despite low numbers, it was a hopeful start with all the nesting occurring within the specially constructed electrified anti-fox compounds. On 11th June however 2 nests disappeared, a further 2 disappeared on the next day and 5 on the day after that. The single remaining nest survived until 21st. Nesting failure was attributed to egg predation by crows which were being seen regularly patrolling the colony, unaffected by mobbing from the terns. Crow predation on one nest was filmed. A fox was seen on 23rd May and two every night between 27th May and 31st May but none after that. A pair of Oystercatchers nesting in one of the compounds hatched 2 chicks around the 9th July, their success seemingly stemming firstly from the protection afforded by the fence against foxes and secondly, from their own ability to keep crows away from their eggs.

It has now been 10 years since more than a handful of fledglings have been produced here and none at all in the last four. This continuing trend of low numbers of breeding pairs and total nesting failure surely signals the end of this colony if some breeding success cannot be achieved in the next year or so.

Fleet Observer – smashing boat but a huge debt is owed

No apologies are made for reissuing in this newsletter a plea for donations towards paying for the cost of the complete overhaul that the Fleet observer was given this year. To date the appeal has only raised just over £2,000 towards its initial target, the estimated cost of the rebuild, £15,000.

Last year the idea of appealing for such a sum did not seem that unrealistic – after a similar sum had been raised in 2002 for the purchase and conversion of the boat. However as we know now the economic environment has changed. Not one single major donation has been received, the two thousand pounds being made up from many small donations from individual well-wishers. There were several pledges but sadly none materialised. The financial situation has been compounded this year by the poor August – the month in which the boat can earn itself some money generally. The weather was so poor that 40 days of potential sailing were lost. Takings for the season are 50% down and for the first time the boat has not managed to cover its seasonal overheads – insurance fees, rents, fuel advertising and so on.

The Fleet Observer is important to the Reserve. Not only is it established as a minor attraction in Weymouth and Portland being the only boat of its sort, but it is also a boat that works for the nature conservation of the Fleet. It carries working parties, tools and equipment to the beach. It is available to help with projects such as the CEFAS demonstration. It has appeal for the media. This season it appeared in the TV programmes ‘Country File’ and ‘Hidden Gems’

The boat is now as good if not better than when it was built, and will last many years. The team of skippers now number six and has built up a wealth of experience. Together with the boat the skippers perform a wardening function. They report on safety issues and several times every season are on hand to help recreational boats in trouble.

The Reserve took this boat on entirely on its own initiative. Despite the high running costs and capital expenditure it is still believed that the decision to run it was a good one.

Should any reader feel that they know of an organisation that would like to help the boat – and we can offer a sponsor some publicity now in the run up to and during the Olympics, please bring this appeal to their notice.



Left: the Fleet Observer's launch is witnessed by a common seal. Centre: The 'Country File' Team aboard. Right: As a work boat collecting bulky items washed up on Chesil

Avian Influenza (AI)

As readers may know, a total of 10 of the Fleet's swans were tested positively for AI in early January as was a Canada Goose in February. Investigations into the outbreak continue and in August nearly 300 swans were caught on the Abbotsbury nest site with blood samples taken from 115. These are presently being analysed for the presence of A.I. antibodies.



Blood samples being taken from leg veins

Common Terns – a colony desertion this year

Whilst the Little Terns on the beach at Ferrybridge have struggled for some while, the Common Terns on their artificial island in the West Fleet have enjoyed a long run of continuous success – over 300 fledglings have been produced here since 2001. This success however took a check this year. On 16th June the birds suddenly deserted the island. The island was visited on 18th June, revealing a total of eleven nesting scrapes with only one egg in each. This was a surprise on several accounts. Around 70 birds were being regularly counted equating to 35 pairs and therefore more than 11 clutches may have been expected. Also by mid June it would have been expected to find some chicks and full clutches of eggs (2-3). These single eggs may have marked the beginning of late first clutches or the replacement of ones that had already been lost. A total desertion has occurred on the island before in 1996 when there was a mass desertion on 51 nests, and it was not until 1999 that the birds returned. A core number however did return to nest elsewhere in the area. In 1997, a few pairs bred on barges in Portland Harbour, and in 1998 some nesting occurred on the newly created islands on the RSPB Lodmoor Reserve.

Litter

As readers know only too well, litter on Chesil is an on-going problem. Tackling it – picking it up and disposing of it is no mean task. The Reserve is indeed lucky to have regular volunteer support for keeping the amount of rubbish down. At Abbotsbury local residents are regularly helped by a team of people from Yeovil under the Marine Conservation Society's Beach watch scheme. Residents from Langton Herring are excellent at keeping the mid Fleet under control as are local residents and the special needs group at Ferrybridge. Additionally this summer we were pleased to have the help of teams from Dorset Trading Standards and Canford School.



Canford School students

Summer safety incidents

There were two scares this summer. The first concerned a live artillery shell that was found washed up on Chesil. The naval gun round was exploded in situ after the Chesil Beach Centre and Car park was sealed off. The second incident involved the Coastguard, two lifeboats, a rescue helicopter and a Dorset police boat conducting a search in the Fleet following the discovery of an upturned boat and the fear that a fisherman may have been lost overboard. As it turned out the boat along with another one had been stolen the day before and had probably drifted unmanned all night. This thoughtless act led to the involvement of over 30 trained personnel who may have been required elsewhere for real emergencies. Anyone seen acting suspiciously or tampering with boats on the Fleet land shore should be noted and reported please either to the Reserve or to the police.

Titan – a planet, three and a half billion kilometres away, with a terrain resembling, in part at least, Chesil.

Titan is one of Saturn's moons, and according to a recent scientific discovery its surface's rocky material may be similar to Chesil. This discovery was revealed in the Radio 4 programme 'Material World' presented by Quentin Cooper. The discovery was made from just 12 milliseconds of data collected from a penetrometer, a stick like instrument capable of measuring resistance, and one of a number of sensors on the Huygens Probe landed on Titan in 2005 from a space craft to look at the physical properties of Titan. It is thought that the penetrometer hit a rock which gave way to granular material. Chesil was chosen from a 'surface material catalogue' as a most likely candidate to match the signature of the penetrometer data, and a field trial proved this to be the case. The work importantly enables other Titan earth data to be validated.

The Reserve's volunteers visit Moonfleet

The volunteers' latest meeting proved to be a very enjoyable afternoon. Meeting in the Moonfleet Manor car park, over 30 volunteers rambled along the coast path towards Langton Herring. Marine archaeologist, Gordon Le Pard, and geologist, Adrian Brokenshire, were both on hand to explain the area's specialities. Gordon talked about the 16th century attempt to drain the bay now known as the Works and Adrian explained the nature of the ground, the Fullers Earth, that was being trodden upon. Back at the Hotel volunteers enjoyed tea and a presentation on the hotel's operation by Emma Gorell, the hotel's conference organiser. Gordon Le Pard talked about another land reclamation scheme that occurred directly below the hotel. It is believed that the idea was to create a formal terrace. The broken walls and other features of this scheme including 'Gun Island' are clearly visible to day. This scheme may have actually represented one of the first known attempts to establish a walled garden in an inter-tidal area. It is possible that the feature was destroyed in the 1824 storm.



'Gun' Island Moonfleet

Chesil Bank and the Fleet Bird News - June to November

June and July are often quiet months for birds. The only true rarities were large wading species – a Great White Egret at Abbotsbury on 2nd June, a Crane over Rodden Hive on 5th June and two Spoonbills at Abbotsbury on 24th June, with another there on 5th July. Otherwise a few Knot and several Sanderlings, mostly at Ferrybridge, were the most noteworthy records. Post breeding dispersal saw the re-appearance of the Yellow-legged Gull at Abbotsbury for its 19th summer, and the first Mediterranean Gulls. There was an Osprey at Abbotsbury on 23rd July.

In August, the autumn migration got underway with waders increasing in number and variety. Amongst the commoner species, Sanderling peaked at eight at Ferrybridge on the 22nd, Knot at four at Herbury on 28th, one or two Little Stint at Ferrybridge on several dates and a Curlew Sandpiper at Ferrybridge on 22nd. The outstanding wader however was a Grey Phalarope on 27th near Ferrybridge. What was presumably a different Yellow-legged Gull rather than the Abbotsbury one was at Ferrybridge on the 5th; Mediterranean Gulls peaked at four at Abbotsbury on 1st; single Black Terns were also there on 5th and 20th; another Osprey (at a more expected time of year) was at Rodden Hive/Langton Herring on several dates; a Black-necked Grebe was very early at Abbotsbury on 22nd and an Arctic Skua was at Ferrybridge on 18th. Passerines and other land birds began to pass through at the end of the month with small numbers of Yellow Wagtails, a few Tree Pipits, Hobbies and single Pied Flycatcher and Grasshopper Warbler among the commoner species.

Stormy weather marked the arrival of September and this induced a smattering of seabirds to seek shelter on the lagoon. A Little Gull was at Ferrybridge on 2nd; further Grey Phalaropes were at Rodden Hive and The Swannery on 4th and 6th respectively and single Long-tailed Skuas were at Ferrybridge on 5th and 6th. Wader passage was still in full swing and among the commoner species Knot peaked at six at The Swannery on 14th, while at Ferrybridge on the same day there was a Curlew Sandpiper and a Sanderling, with two more of the latter at Herbury Gore. Little Stints were also regular throughout the month with sightings from Ferrybridge to Abbotsbury, with a peak of three at the latter site on 20th. On 24th a Ruff and 'wader highlight of the month', a Pectoral Sandpiper, arrived at Abbotsbury, remaining until 28th when remarkably it was joined by a second,

but only one lingered for one further day. A Spoonbill was at Herbury and Moonfleet on 10th and of even more note, a Cattle Egret at Herbury, Rodden and Abbotsbury on 28th. With passerine migration near its peak scarcer species seen included several flocks of Yellow Wagtails, including one of 100 in the Swannery meadows, Grasshopper Warbler, Tree Pipit and Firecrest. Scarce raptors included single Ospreys throughout the month from Chickerell to Abbotsbury, single Hobbies and Merlins, three Marsh Harriers (including two together at The Swannery on the 16th), a Short-eared Owl and a Honey-buzzard. After the initial storms at the beginning of the month 'seabird' passage was less remarkable but even so a Black Tern was noted at Abbotsbury on 16th, a Little Gull at Ferrybridge on 17th, Mediterranean Gulls at The Swannery on 25th and 29th, where a Black-necked Grebe arrived on 17th to reside for the remainder of the month.

Just as in the preceding month, early October saw The Fleet whipped up by gales and a small number of seabirds sought the relatively calmer waters. Highlights were seven Grey Phalaropes (including five together at The Swannery); an Arctic Tern, along with up to four Arctic Skuas at Ferrybridge and a Long-tailed Skua at Abbotsbury. Other 'seabirds' of note included the now expected steady build up of Mediterranean Gulls with a peak of 14 together at Abbotsbury; a Herring Gull of the Scandinavian form at Lynch Cove on 31st, and the Black-necked Grebe was still in residence at The Swannery for the first half of the month. Wader passage continued early in the month with a few Little Stints being the highlight. Raptors too were arriving and departing with Marsh Harrier, Hen Harrier, Merlin and Short-eared Owl being seen. Passerines were also still on the move. At least nine Bearded Tits, four Black Redstarts, a Firecrest, a Crossbill, a Wood Lark and a scarce Siberian migrant - a Yellow-browed Warbler - at Abbotsbury, and two Tree Sparrows at Langton Hive on 10th. To round off the month an arrival of winter thrushes included a Ring Ouzel at Littlesea on 31st. Incoming winter wildfowl at Abbotsbury numbered only one Scaup but it was joined by a Greenland White-fronted Goose on 22nd (and again on 24th), a Whooper Swan also on the 24th and a Long-tailed Duck on the 31st. Further down The Fleet the Dark-bellied Brent Goose flock continued to swell with new arrivals and dedicated searching through their ranks revealed up 17 Pale-bellied Brent Geese (including one paired with a 'Dark-belly' escorting four inter-grade young) and the only true rarities of the month, two Black Brants. An unusual visitor to the Ferrybridge land shore was a Red-legged Partridge.



Left: Black Brant in the Fleet. Centre: Whooper Swan at Abbotsbury Swannery. Right: Female Scaup at Abbotsbury. Photos: Brett Spencer

Ferrybridge sign

Members of the local community and visitors can now be more informed about the Fleet thanks to the provision of informative signs on the north shore revetment by Betterment Homes Ltd., who have completed the residential housing development on the former site of Tod's boat factory.

Getting stoned on Chesil!

The beach now has a traditional pilsner named after it, brewed by the Dorset Brewing Company Ltd.



Brent Geese Magic

Visitors to and residents of Ferrybridge have been enthralled by the Brent Geese wintering on the sand flat this December. At times there have been over two thousand of them flying spectacularly in 100's from the mid Fleet, to loaf around and preen. Arriving usually just after high tide, the geese have paraded in front of the Chesil Centre, and provided superb viewing. A few of the geese are ringed, and information from subsequent sightings of these confirms research that the birds originate from Russia, have Continental staging posts and some move in the wintertime along the southern coast of England.

Events

January

Sat 10 Walk at Ferrybridge

Join us on a walk at looking at the history, geology and wildlife of the area. Meet Chesil Centre, 10:30

Sat 24 Fossils at Ferrybridge

Join one of our guides to help you identify your finds. Meet Crab House Café, 11:00

February

Sat 07 Scavenger Hunt

Come down to Chesil as we explore the natural treasures, flotsam and jetsam thrown up by storm waves. Meet Chesil Centre, 10:00

Sun 15 West Fleet Walk

Join us on a walk to look at one of the more secluded parts of the Fleet. Meet Abbotsbury Swannery, 10:30

Sat 21 Fossils at Pirates Cove

Join our guide to help you identify your finds (sea urchins a speciality). Meet Camp Rd, 10:00

March

Sat 07 Spring clean along the Fleet

Why not come down to help us clean up the Fleet foreshore. Contact the Chesil Beach Centre for details. Meet TBA, 10:00

Sun 29 Wintering Birds on the Fleet

Take a walk along the Fleet with a local guide looking at the wintering birds on the Fleet. Meet Fleet Church, 14:00

April

Sat 11 Fossils at Tidmoor

Join our guide to help you identify your finds. Meet Tidmoor Farm House, 14:00

Sun 26 Great Dorset Beach Clean

Join us at the Chesil Centre, where we will provide you with bags and instructions. 10:00

May

Sat 09 National Low Tide Day walk

Join us looking at the underwater life exposed at low tide. Free event. Meet Chesil Centre, 13:00

Sat 23 Fossils at Ferrybridge

Join our guide to help you identify your finds. Meet Crab House Café, 11:30

Sat 30 Spring Flowers at Ferrybridge

Why not join our local guide as we delve into the thrift and other flora that can be found. Meet Chesil Centre, 14:00

June

Mon 08 Oceans Day

Displays on view at the Chesil Beach Centre.

Sat 13 Fossils at Herbury

Join our guide to help you identify your finds (brachiopods a speciality). Meet Field Gate, Fleet Lane, 14:00

Sun 21 Low Tide Walk at Ferrybridge

Join our guide looking at the marine life on the shore of the Fleet. Meet Chesil Centre, 11:00

Unless stated all walks - children £2, adults £3. Scavenger hunts - children £2, adults free!

Chesil Beach Centre - Portland Beach Road, Portland, DT4 9XE (SY668755)

Crab House Café - at the end of Ferryman's Way, DT4 9AE (SY666763)

Abbotsbury Swannery car park - New Barn Road, Abbotsbury, DT3 4JG (SY846577)

Camp Road - near Wyke Regis Bridging Camp, DT4 9HH (SY652772)

Tidmoor Farm House on the B3157 (SY650784)

Fleet Church, Fleet Lane (SY634805)

Moonfleet Hotel field gate, Fleet Lane (SY619807)

Thank you for reading our newsletter.

We hope you have a good 2009.