

Dear Town Clerk, Communications Officer and Town Councillors

BEXHILL-ON-SEA WILD DOMESDAY PROJECT

FIFTH THREE-MONTHLY REPORT

In accordance with my contract, here is the fifth report on the Bexhill Wild Domesday Project covering the period from 1st July to 30th September 2024. The fourth report was sent to you as an annual overview of Year 1 of the project.

Introduction

This project began on 1st June 2023 and has now been extended for a further year and so is due to end on 31st May 2025 unless continuance is agreed. The overall project is designed for three years of landscape and wildlife evaluation, conservation and enhancement in the nine wards of the town. Extensive progress has been made across a range of projects, however, help and guidance will be needed from the Town Clerk to ensure success of one of the projects detailed below.

Bexhill Volunteer Wardens

The original concept for volunteer wardens was to ask for two wardens per ward of the nine wards of Bexhill to come forward. In the first request, only four people came forward and they have been taken on. An activity Risk Assessment document has been devised with the help of the wardens.

Bexhill Nature Club

To encourage more volunteer wardens, I decided to set up Bexhill Nature Club which now meets on the last Thursday of every month in the Senior Citizen's Club. I have placed a request for grant funding of £480.00 to pay for the cost of room hire (£40.00 a month). Two meetings have been held so far. The first meeting attracted 22 people and the second (in the middle of a heavy rain and hailstorm) still attracted 15. More advertising is needed. The club has so far had presentations:

Climate Change and Future Forecasts, Bats of Bexhill, Ferns of Bexhill, Bexhill Beach Garden.

In the next two months the presentations will be: Small Tortoiseshell Butterfly Conservation, Insects of Sussex by David EP Dennis, Combe Valley Wildlife by Peter Hunnisett and the citizen science presentations by Strandliners and Dr Barry Yates of the Wetland Trust.

Bexhill Field Visits

To encourage more wardens to come forward I have also instituted a field visit once per month. Each month I will be leading a party of people interested in the science behind wildlife and plant life to an area of Bexhill for the close study of all wildlife and plant life aspects. Each event has one or two experts accompanying those on the field visit. The first field visit covered the area from Pebsham Lane to the end of the Old Railway Track that used to go to Crowhurst. During this trip we examined and learned from expert Keith Palmer about a variety of ferns, fungi and gall wasp galls. The next field trip will be to Waypoint 57 in Combe Valley where participants will be able to view many types of wild birds, including ducks, geese, herons and egrets.

Bexhill Nature Club Newsletter

To ensure that Town Councillors and all members of the Nature Club and field visit team are kept informed, I have designed and issued a 6-page full colour newsletter. The back copies will be placed on the Bexhill Wild Domesday website as PDFs.

Free Seeds

So far Bexhill Wild CIC has purchased and distributed around £200.00-worth of free wildflower seeds. Around 75% of the free seeds have been placed in a basket in the Town Council Office for people to help themselves. The other 25% of packets have been given away at two events sponsored by the Friends of Combe Valley at the Discovery Centre in Freshfields, St Leonards. This free distribution will now stop until early Spring when I hope to be able to supply more free seed packets.

Bird Recording

Many Bexhill woodlands and town locations have been surveyed using ultrasonic equipment to catalogue the wide range of bird species that the town has.

Bat Recordings

In an eventful three months, our ultrasonic bat recorders have detected two species of rare bat – Nathusius' pipistrelle (from Latvia) and Kuhl's pipistrelle (from North Africa) in the town, specifically in Pebsham and in the bell tower of St Barnabas Church. I have informed the vicar of this. We expect things to go quiet now as the bats begin to hibernate, but from February onwards they will wake up and we will track them again.

Galley Hill Cycle Track

I have expressed my concerns over the possibility that the south coast cycle track would be routed at the foot of Galley Hill, thus disturbing the rare wildlife there. Natural England have flagged this with the Cycle Association who state that the formal route is over the top of the hill on the solid path. All we can do is hope that their guidance to long distance cyclist enthusiasts will conform to the official route. I will be talking to the ESCC councillor who is organising aspects of cycling in our area to try and get some publicity.

Galley Hill Conservation

Progress is being made in clarification of the process needed to protect Galley Hill's rare wildlife and extend the current Combe Valley SSSI to envelope the Galley Hill area. I am in touch with Natural England and will soon be providing the evidence base for the SSSI expansion.

Sidley Woods Project

The Sidley Woods Project needs help from the Town Council. This is the unfortunate situation.

A crowdfunder was started to raise £10,000.00 to fund the installation of leaky dams to slow or prevent the flooding of Egerton Park by the Egerton Stream when the tide gate is shut and there is high rainfall inland. The project also is designed to plant new trees and shrubs and to set seeds for wildflowers in to increase local pollination.

East Sussex County Council was fully supportive of the project and kindly offered to match fund the project but due to ESCC's recent multi-million financial shortages, they had to shut down their grant fund on 11th October 2024, so paid £1,250.00 to the crowdfunder, resulting, with money we also collect from Sussex Police, and public donations, in a total of £3,800. Due to the ESCC decision, we were forced to stop our Crowdfunder on 10th October.

In the week after it was closed, the Crowdfunder organisation took fees and VAT away from our total and paid us, around £3,700.00.

This is now ring fenced for the Sidley Woods Project, however, at present the project cannot go ahead because Rother District Council have advised that they do not have enough staff to supervise it.

I had a face-to-face meeting with the RDC head of services to explain the project and was asked to submit a detail request for consideration, with maps showing what was intended. This was completed and submitted in September. After several days, a reply was received from RDC saying that as Sidley Woods was their land, the project could not go ahead because of staffing deficits.

The actual wording from Alice Nolan on behalf of the RDC Neighbourhood Services team is "I'm emailing you on behalf of the Neighbourhood Services team, with reference to the attached letter. Please note their response as follows:

Thank you for your letter of 16 September 2024 regarding proposed improvements to Sidley Woods. I am not an expert in these matters but I have reviewed your proposal and it looks to be of great interest and potential benefit to the environment, and I can see that you have completed considerable initial research into the project.

I have discussed your proposal with colleagues and I regret to say that I am unable to give an 'in principle' approval at this stage. The Council has many projects in progress at present and limited number of resources. Although I appreciate you will be funding and leading this project, as it is on our land it would inevitably require council officers time and resources to assess the plan in detail, investigate future risks and liabilities to the council including items such as knock on impacts and unintended consequences of the proposal, impact on revenue costs, maintenance costs, insurance and legal liabilities, and indemnities to name a few.

I am sorry that I am not able to assist more at this time and maybe in time to come, when other projects are completed, resources will be available to support with this proposal."

This seems paradoxical as RDC are already permitting extensive tree planting by Bexhill Environmental Group (BEG) and our aim in Sidley Woods is similarly to plant trees and shrubs as part of the project.

It is also paradoxical because the project is designed to save RDC staff time in having to go to Egerton Park and open the flood valves of the ornamental lakes when rainfall is so high that the lake edges flow over onto the paths. As climate change increases the frequency and intensity of high rainfall, the park will flood more often thus increasing the work of RDC staff. So, from Bexhill Town Council's point of view, the decision by RDC to prevent the project going ahead seems to make little sense.

I would therefore be grateful if the Town Clerk could formally point out to RDC that Bexhill Town Council can ensure that future leaky dam work on the project will be conducted responsibly because it must be 'signed off' by the Environment Agency following a report to them by the South East Rivers Trust.

However, the planting of black poplar trees and berry-bearing shrubs and wildflower seeds does not require Environment Agency permission and is no different to activities being carried out now by Bexhill Community Group or Friends of the Down who have full permission from RDC. It is therefore surprising to find that Bexhill Wild CIC cannot gain permission for at least the planting part of its project while the Environment Agency talks to RDC about future leaky dam work.

I am told that the Heart of Sidley project leaders are keen for the project to go ahead, and I am being asked to do a presentation to them.

So now we have funds to begin and many volunteers willing to help – with full comprehensive insurance cover for up to 50 volunteers, then what is needed for this project to go ahead?

That Bexhill Town Council gains permission for Bexhill Wild CIC to implement the Sidley Woods Project under the supervision of the Town Council delegated by RDC to be the accepted project oversight.

Helping Bexhill Projects

Bexhill Wild CIC has raised funds to pay for watering equipment for the Friends of Bexhill Down and is also trying to raise grant funds from Rother District Council to pay for Bexhill Community Supporters' Beach Garden public information board. The Town Clerk has kindly given written support to the Bexhill Wild CIC bids to RDC.

Combe Valley Stakeholder's Meetings

As MD of Bexhill CIC, I am attending regular meetings of the Combe Valley Stakeholder's Meetings. Current discussions concern Galley Hill and central Combe Valley. The next meeting is today, 15th October 2024 at 18.00.

Promotional Film of Bexhill Wildlife for Television

Because the wildlife and landscape of Bexhill from Pevensey Marshes to the west bank of the Combe Have and Galley Hill is so remarkable, I have been working with a film company (Can-B Media Ltd) to cost a 45-minute TV-quality documentary showcasing Bexhill's wildlife, with a short clip of Sir David Attenborough commenting on the value of the area. While the national parks and other wildlife areas such as the Knepp estate are shown on television both locally and national, the wonderful wildlife of Bexhill and Combe Valley is hardly known at all, even locally and certainly not nationally. My belief is that that the town's reputation could be enhanced by the showing of the film on TV, with later clips for Country File.

Kind regards

David EP Dennis

Bexhill Town Council Wild Domesday Project

15th October 2024

