

The Halfway House on the Wrekin and its special landscape

Project Report April 2020

Project reference CF/1920/12

(main project outputs in bold)

Over the past year the Halfway House has continued to develop as a centre and cafe for local people and walkers that can offer courses and experiences on a wide range of themes. Our Pavilion building was totally restored in 2019 and first opened in October. It now offers an attractive indoor area where people can sit and look over the wonderful view and pollinator garden, enjoy the boards illustrating the old local postcards and read information about the local area provided by the numerous leaflets we have in our leaflet display holder. We also took on five part time staff in late summer 2019 which has built both a) our capacity for being open for longer, and b) our ability to serve a wider range of items so we now regularly can offer a small food menu.

One of the main aims of this project was to create a pollinator garden together with a new display board which has been achieved. The creation of the garden did not go according to plan. It was originally envisaged that we would dig a garden that we would then fill with a mixture of annual and perennial plants with some larger shrubs at the back. However, when we started to dig we quickly found that the ground was full of numerous rocks and boulders which needed a pickaxe to remove them. The rocky substrate also meant a) that the amount of good quality soil for planting was often low so we needed to buy extra compost to give the plants more chance of establishing and b) we needed to mulch the garden to stop it from drying out and needing constant watering (water being a precious commodity on the Wrekin in high summer). We also did not realise just how many rabbits we already had (probably as a result of creating a much larger lawned area in 2018) or that fallow deer were such regular visitors to the property. The regular presence of both these grazers meant we had to fence the garden. Initially we just did this with wire netting and road pins but we had to quickly protect both this netting and our visitors with a solid post and rail fence on health and safety grounds. All these factors led to the costs of establishing the garden being much higher than originally envisaged.

Throughout the planning and creation of the garden we have received helpful advice from **Mike Williams (West Midlands Butterfly Conservation WMBC)** who even contacted one of his plant suppliers to see if they had what we wanted in stock. Mike and Jenny jointly produced the wording for **the display board which was funded by WMBC and includes a sentence about the Shropshire Hills AONB.** The display board was completed and up at the Halfway House in time for two pollinating events run in July and August 2019 (see below). One of the Jenny's team at the Halfway house put together the board mounting which is very effective at displaying the board well to make it easy for all to read. The board is now a real focus of interest for our visitors who have made lots of positive comments about it. The post and rail fence inadvertently created a very good leaning spot for viewing

the pollinators using the garden with good numbers of bees and other insects regularly being seen including many Red Admiral and Painted Lady butterflies reported by our visitors.

This project has also benefitted other parts of the Halfway House garden. We have created a wildflower bank (using a combination of seeds and seeing what plants naturally establish) and a willow weave enclosure (which we started planting in 2019). We plan to continue to improve both of these areas with further planting/seeding in 2020.

We successfully ran six events involving 66 people with very different themes. These events were a willow crafting session, a moth morning and butterfly walk, a pollinator session, a leaf art workshop for children, a geology and rock painting day and a garden tidy up volunteer session. We had a story telling session planned which we had to cancel twice and we stopped promoting the March garden tidy up early on as we already had concerns about the developing corona virus situation (which was also the reason for the second cancellation of the story telling session). We advertised all these events on our Halfway House Facebook group and website and Mike Williams (WMBC) sent out a press release for the moth breakfast event. In addition to this we did a short piece about the garden as part of a wider article on 'Places for Pollinators' in WMBC's 2019/2020 winter edition of Comma (105, 13-15).

We have learnt a lot from running these events. As there is no recent history of events and as visitors to the Wrekin often come up with a very defined purpose (e.g. fitness, family walk or picnic) it can be hard to make them drop in. We also struggled to find suitable people to lead themed events for us (e.g. on summer woodland birds or on woodland management) as by the time we knew what we wanted to run people who might have been able to help were committed elsewhere. In the long term we maybe need to find regular users of the Wrekin who have different skills to be our 'resident' experts' to help out with future events particularly those with a specific wildlife theme. On the positive side we have learnt that running a children's activity as part of a themed event (e.g. pollinators and geology) works really well for drawing people in as the adults are more likely to ask questions if their children are busy. Repeating event themes (our willow workshops) is also effective as it builds up a keen clientele who are very happy to bring their family back. We had our first fully booked willow craft session in November 2019 (although not funded by this grant).

We need to improve our publicity and use more local opportunities (especially in schools) but there is no doubt that running this project has increased our visibility on so many levels and that our pollinator garden is already a haven for insects.



