

RHNR FRIENDS' NEWSLETTER



THE FRIENDS IS 50 THIS YEAR!

RESTRUCTURING AT THE RESERVE



The *Friends* has supported Rye Harbour Nature Reserve for 50 years of remarkable progress, almost forty of those under the guidance of Barry Yates. Today's reserve is the outcome of his vision over this long period, so we expect his retirement at the end of March to herald a new era in which the *Friends* will work with *Sussex Wildlife Trust* to ensure the continuity of our joint achievements while welcoming new staff members with fresh approaches.

Recently, SWT has overseen a restructuring of the *Land Management Team* in order to achieve what they believe to be a more balanced and logical strategy

across the county's 32 very varied nature reserves.

The *Friends*, while always conceding that we do not run this reserve and do not have SWT's county-wide responsibilities, have made strong representations to the Trust, arguing that Rye Harbour is a special case. We maintain that this reserve cannot be compared directly with any of their other reserves on account of its size (24% of all SWT land holdings), its footfall (400,000 people a year) and its exceptional biodiversity (4,523 species recorded). Along with this, the unique economic and volunteering contribution of the *Friends* has led to the extremely successful Discovery Centre (no other reserve has such a centre, nor such an active *Friends* group).

Responding to these arguments SWT has dedicated one of their three new Land Management Teams specifically to this reserve, while the other two will manage the East and West parts of the county. Each team will comprise a Site Manager and two Rangers, answerable to a Head of Nature Reserves and ultimately the Director of Land Management, Dan Ross.

Although this is a reasonable result for this reserve, and in the long term is intended to give more effective land management across the whole county, the short-term effect has been unsettling to a hitherto harmonious and productive team of long-term reserve employees and volunteers.

In the context of Barry's retirement and Chris Bentley's sudden decision to take Voluntary Redundancy, the *Friends* have a role of renewed importance in maintaining continuity at Rye Harbour. We are a major financial contributor towards the

reserve and though we have formerly been *reactive* to funding requests – trusting in Barry's good judgement born of long experience and intimate knowledge of reserve - we expect, in future, to take a more *proactive* role, especially in supporting the many social and educational activities which now flow from the Discovery Centre.

In addition to all this, we are reviewing the future use of Watch Cottage, our primary asset. Options presently on the table are accommodation for personnel, trainees or researchers, or possibly renting it out to provide an income in addition to your subscriptions, which could be directed towards new projects.

Whatever happens, we will continue to work with *Sussex Wildlife Trust*, striving to ensure this amazing nature reserve continues to provide an outstanding wildlife experience for its many thousands of appreciative visitors and supporters.

STOP PRESS: March 20th: Dave King will take on the role of Ranger. The posts of Site Manager and the second Ranger are going to external recruitment.

THE FRIENDS IS 50!

The *Friends* is celebrating fifty years of supporting the reserve in so many different ways.

All of you have made a difference to this amazing place and we hope you will continue to do so...

FIND OUT
MORE
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Photo: kt bruce

GOODBYE TO CHRIS BENTLEY



After 19 years with the reserve we are losing Chris Bentley. Chris has been a calm, quiet and good-natured presence here for nearly two decades and his unparalleled knowledge of a huge range of invertebrates will be sorely missed, both by his friends on the reserve and by the SWT, which has lost an experienced and talented ecologist.



Chris has undertaken monthly surveys on the reserve since he started here and has produced a meticulous data set for Rye Harbour. These surveys have produced lots of 'new for the reserve' records (including a second for Britain, solitary bee *Nomada albagutata*) along with several 'new for Britain' records (including *Lispocephala ungulata*, a house fly). In total Chris has recorded 2328 species here. These records show the importance of the work Chris has done.

Along with recording, he has been incredibly popular with those he took on guided walks. People enjoyed his enthusiasm, expertise and ability to share his knowledge in an accessible way.

Chris has always been fascinated by nature. As a youngster he spent his free time on the lowland heath of the Eston Hills near his home. His imagination was sparked by the record of a rare spider (originally from the USA) which was found in the area but which had not been recorded anywhere else in the UK. "It seemed so implausible," he said, "but it was a mining area and there's just a slight possibility that the spider originally did come in on mining equipment from the states."

Chris did a BSc in Ecology and went on to an MSc, specialising (unsurprisingly) in spiders. He is particularly keen on money spiders because of their incredible variety of form. While at Rye Harbour he discovered *Pellenes tripunctatus*, a fabulous jumping spider, which was a 'first for Sussex'.

Before coming to Rye Harbour, Chris worked as an ecologist all over Britain, from recording Arctic Terns in The Skerries and Black Grouse in Wales, to a land research centre in Aberdeenshire and stints in bog reserves in Ireland.

He volunteered with the SWT for some time before applying for the role here at Rye Harbour.



"It was the wildlife that attracted me," he remembered. "There was such a great variety." Once at Rye Harbour, Chris began specialising in *diptera* (flies). "I'm interested in all species," he said, "but there were just too many and so I chose *diptera*."

Even though he narrowed his choice to one area, Chris still found himself dealing with over 7,000 species of fly. "You have to be methodical," he explained, "because of the sheer volume. I try not to



take many specimens, but on one occasion I had loads. We undertook some research for the Environment Agency into the development of the Salt Marsh. We had to use pitfall traps (used for identification, where insects fall into traps) and that was a lot to deal with!"

Chris has a lot to be proud of during his time with us. His recording on the reserve is unmatched, while his grassland habitat creation and management has begun to show changes in bumblebee numbers. He claims that one of his biggest achievements is getting over his natural shyness and learning to deal with people, to lead groups and to give talks. Above all he says, he is most proud of having "got people interested in nature".

When we asked Chris about his happiest times at the reserve his answer was typical. "All of it," he said, "Jo and I loved living at Lime Kiln Cottage, I love the wildlife here and I've loved working with my colleagues, so all of it."



Top left: Chris identifying species.
Middle left: Moth trapping
Middle: *Lispocephala ungulata*
Top right: Chris counting bees
Bottom right: Chris with James Duncan

A CIRCULAR WILDFLOWER WALK

In spring and early summer there are many wildflowers on the reserve that will reward your effort in seeking them out. Some are obvious and easy to find like the leathery, deep purple folds of Sea Kale: others, like the tiny Danish Scurvygrass are shy and peep from between pebbles.

Because the reserve is a harsh environment with strong, salt-laden wind and little or no shelter, the plants that thrive here tend to be specialists with interesting stories to tell.

These wild flowers can be found on the easy circular walk from the Discovery Centre down to the beach and back between the hides.

1) Glasswort's spikes dot the saltmarsh mud around the centre.

2) Sea Kale starts off with purple-green leaves, blossoming into large cushions of white flowers.

3) In early summer Rottingdean Sea Lavender forms fat green rosettes by the Red Hut (mauve flowers follow).

4) On the shingle by the pillbox, Sea Heath's tiny pink flowers hide.

5) Sniff out the strong-smelling Rock Samphire on the shingle.

6) Yellow Horned-poppy flowers are everywhere in early summer, just look for the gold.

7/8) A walk out to the tideline leads you to pink Sea Pea and the much more subtle Babington's Orache with its seedheads like little frogs' heads.

9) Bittersweet is also found here with its nodding purple and gold flowers.

10) Ivy-leaved Toadflax forms

gleaming purple mats around the path in towards the Parkes and Denny hides.

11) Biting Stonecrop is found along the gravel paths in plump, acid-yellow cushions.

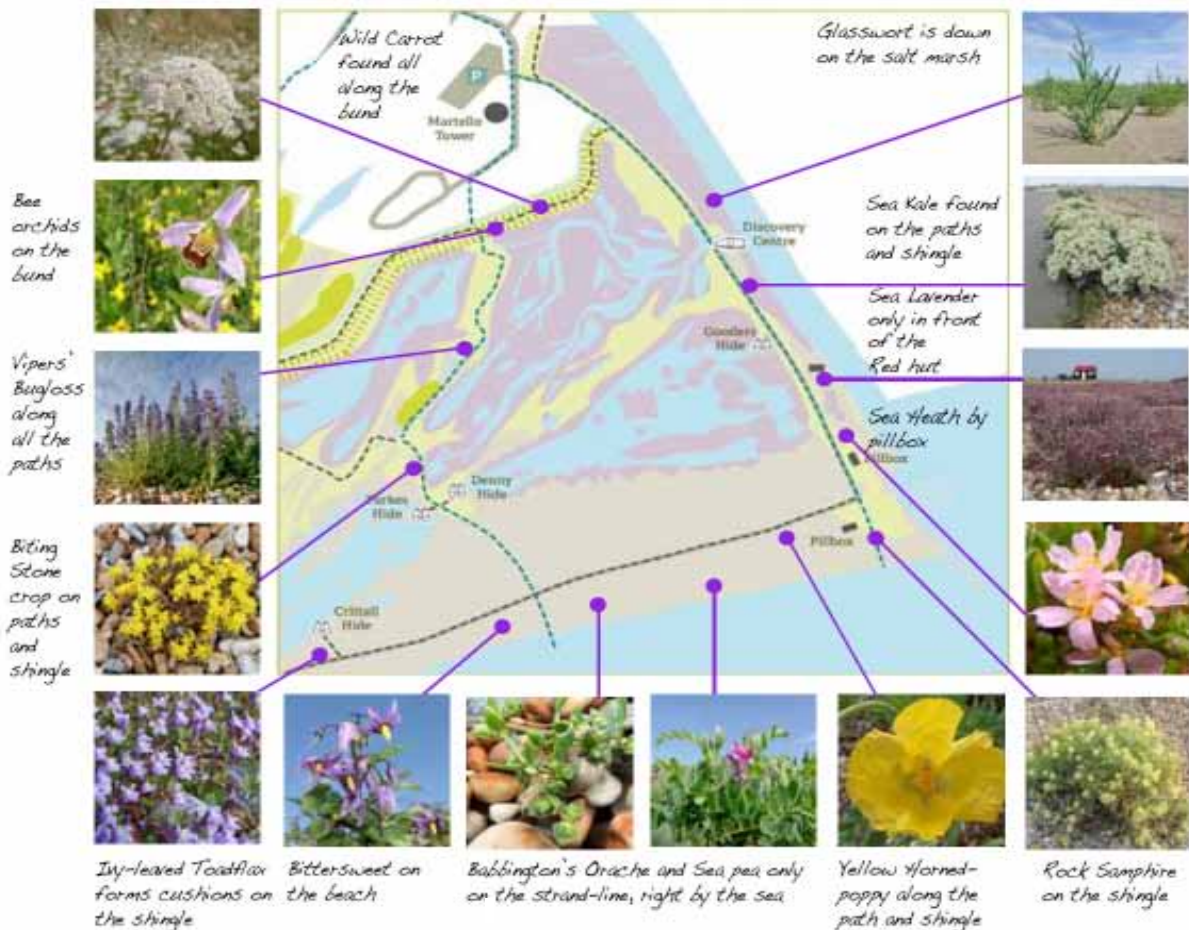
12) Also found along all the paths, Vipers' Bugloss has stately purple/blue spires.

13) On the bund returning to the centre you can find beautiful Bee orchids in shades of pink and cream.

14) Finally all along the bund are the starry white clusters of wild carrot.

For information on when the plants are in flower and more about their amazing life cycles, *Seaside Flowers of Rye Harbour Nature Reserve* is £15 at the centre shop.

Late Spring and Summer Flowers around the Beach Walk



THE FRIENDS IS 50 THIS YEAR

It's hard to believe that the *Friends* was established 50 years ago... but for half a century, you and others like you have been donating, volunteering, litter-picking, tern-watching, 'Guide-in-a-Hiding', walk-leading, talk-giving course-teaching and offering expertise and information to visitors to improve the reserve and the extraordinary wildlife found here. Thank you all so much!

Back in 1973 *The Friends of Rye Harbour Nature Reserve* was set up to support the reserve, to offer information on what could be seen here and, in the early years, to help protect the colony of Little Terns that nested on the beach. The *Friends'* emblem is a Little Tern flying above a blue triangle, representing the triangular footprint of the reserve.

The very earliest newsletters, produced by then Chair Guy Crittall, were hand typed and later mimeographed for distribution. One edition offers members a bird list for 35p (postage 9p) and a plant list for 25p (postage 51/2p). Like the newsletters of today they catalogue the amazing work that the *Friends* were involved in, from work parties to fund-raising.

In 1976 the newsletter notes the *Friends* bought a cottage in Rye Harbour to accommodate warden Richard Knight and all of the furnishings, kitchen equipment, fridge, bedding and cutlery were either donated or bought with funds raised by the *Friends*. In 1977 the *Friends* were involved in complicated arrangements with the council necessary to open an information centre in the car park (sound familiar?). The original information centre is still there: it is the little black hexagonal shed near the car park entrance, now used for storage.

Like today, the success or failure of our breeding birds was often dictated by the weather. Richard Knight wrote of 'unusually wet weather' in the 70's which caused high water levels in Ternery Pool. *Friends'* volunteers stepped up and work parties got underway to ferry bags of shingle out to the islands to raise them enough for the birds to breed.

And that is how it has gone on: the warden has asked for help, either financial or physical and the *Friends* have been there. When Dr Barry Yates took over in 1984 the relationship between the *Friends* and the reserve continued to strengthen and develop to the point where we now work together on many of the projects that need to be done to maintain the reserve.

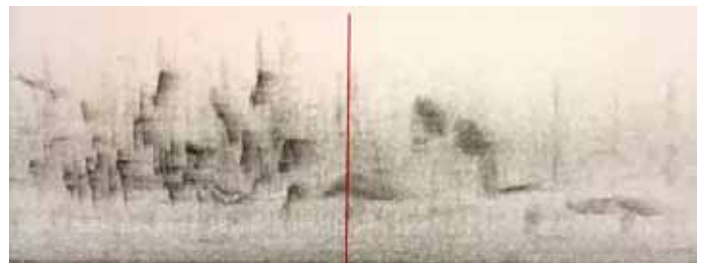
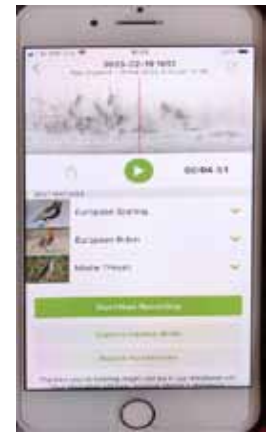
The culmination of this long and harmonious working process was demonstrated by the way the *Friends* facilitated and supported the design and build of our amazing Discovery Centre.

The future will hold lots more challenges, one of the biggest being climate change, but the *Friends* will be there, ready to help, ready to raise funds, ready to get their hands dirty and ready to work to make things better.

Once again thank you for everything you do!

MERLIN WIZARDRY

You point your phone at the birdsong, a spectrograph starts to track across the screen, a blue dot appears as the sound is registered, responding in squiggles like something between a musical score and a bar-code, then suddenly a name is flagged up below, highlighted in yellow. As more birds are recognised, their names too appear in a column, jockeying for position at the top as their calls take prominence. Each vocalisation has its own graphic signature, which the software seeks to recognise.



Above: spectrograph of bird song

It's called *Merlin*, developed by Cornell, and it's free to download to your phone. If you don't know the bird sounds, or if your hearing is impaired, it will tell you what's around and you can start looking. If you suspect an identity and want confirmation, it will tell you (but exercise caution!). If you know the sounds, you can study the spectrograph to visualise their intricacies and refine your listening to distinguish these. Its mechanical ear searches impartially, detecting sounds we might ignore, for instance by their frequency rather than volume or by a characteristic structure.

Wherever you are in the world, you can download a regional pack to reveal the local species. You can track down a bird through inputting a description or scanning a photo and there's an exhaustive library of songs and calls for each species.

Merlin is not infallible: sometimes it doesn't hear a background sound, or it makes wild guesses from a

fragment, or gives up and pretends it can't hear a bird even though it is right in the foreground. But, although *Merlin* is just a machine, it's learning and it's magic!



WANDERING WILDLIFE WITH PHIL JONES

THE SPOONBILL



One of the largest increases has been in the Netherlands and it is from these Dutch colonies that most of our visitors arrive. An overwintering Spoonbill on the reserve in 1990 had been ringed as an immature bird at a Dutch colony.

This was a common species during medieval times but the last breeding pair was recorded in Suffolk in 1668. A few single pairs nested in scattered localities around the UK in the twentieth century until a small colony of six pairs nested at Holkham in north Norfolk in 2010. This colony has continued to grow and now numbers about thirty pairs. Further pairs have subsequently bred in a range of counties including Yorkshire and Lancashire. Our hope is that they will breed here in future.

Much of the European population winters in Africa. The Dutch population tends to follow the coast southwards to winter in the Senegal and Gambia area. As the climate has become warmer more are staying in coastal France and Spain with a few like our bird staying in the south east of England. The Norfolk birds are believed to pass their winter in Dorset.



One of the common bird questions from visitors is 'Where can I see the Spoonbill?'. The reserve has been very lucky over the past few years with at least one bird over wintering. Most records are of single birds with a peak of seven in June 2016 and October 2017. The most recent bird is a first winter and divides most of its time between Salt Pool and the new saltmarsh. It is however occasionally present on Flat Beach.

The species is recorded across Europe and as far as India and Sri Lanka. It is experiencing a rapid expansion over most of its European range. The increase is believed to be due to warmer winters, increased protection and more available protected habitats.



The Rye Harbour birds are usually juveniles which often show black wing tips. The sexes are similar although the males are a little larger. The adults develop a partial crest during the breeding season. They stand about three feet tall and have a wingspan of four feet.

Pairs will often nest on the ground generally in dense reed beds. They will also nest up to five meters above the ground usually in willows. Both sexes will help with the building. Most clutches hold three or four eggs and the young will be in the nest for approximately seven weeks.

The wintering birds are very obvious here when they are feeding. Not only are they large and white but they feed by characteristically sweeping the tip of their bill from side to side. It is the same feeding action as the Avocet. Their main food includes the larvae of many insects, especially water beetles and dragonflies. They also eat small fish, frogs, shrimps, tadpoles, worms, leeches and some plant material.

NEWS AND PROJECTS

EXPERT RECORDERS NEEDED URGENTLY

Since the reserve is to lose experienced warden Chris Bentley it is now of the utmost importance that we try to continue and preserve the essential work of recording and identification that Chris has performed almost single-handedly on the reserve for so many years.

If you have expert knowledge of bumblebees, solitary bees, wasps, flies, butterflies, dragon and damselflies, spiders, other invertebrates, birds and plants, please do consider volunteering to help record throughout the year.

Chris currently records monthly (but invertebrates only need records when the weather is warm, say March to October) and he walks a set transect for each species.

Over the years his careful studies have resulted in several records which were the first for the reserve and some which were the first for Sussex.

If you think you might be able to help the reserve in this way please don't hesitate, get in touch so we can begin to preserve recording at Rye Harbour.

LONGER LASTING BENCHES

Our memorial benches, spaced around the beach reserve have, for years, been made in-house to robust specifications, allowing thousands of you repose of body and soul. Sadly, wood-eating fungus never sleeps, so routine inspections take place to ensure that no bench reaches a state of decrepitude likely to endanger those who entrust it with their weight; defective ones are repaired or replaced.



For benches beyond repair we have six replacements made of recycled plastic, a material in use on many nature reserves. They should last for very much longer than the wooden versions and the fungi will have to restrict their attentions to other organic materials.

The original memorial benches were installed thanks to the generosity of friends and family in remembrance of those who once enjoyed the reserve, but their new recycled versions have been funded by the *Friends* as an expression of our enduring gratitude to those who support us.

Since there is a limit to the number of benches the landscape can accommodate we offer instead stainless steel Lapwing plaques, engraved with the name of the person commemorated: these are then attached to the wood in the Discovery Centre wildlife garden and picnic area.



NEW COMMUNITY ARTS PROJECT

As part of the *Discover Rye Harbour* project, *Sussex Wildlife Trust* is offering a year-long programme of free community arts events subsidised by the *Heritage Lottery Fund* and facilitated by our newsletter editor S Morgan.

The *Lost Words for Rye Harbour* includes nature writing workshops, walks, two exhibitions, schools activity days, a family treasure hunt, a creative writing trail and performances of work created during the project.

These events are inspired by Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris' book, *The Lost Words*; a series of poems and paintings designed to re-engage people with nature and to stop the loss of nature vocabulary.

"I am thrilled to be heading this amazing programme of activities," Morgan told us. "It's wonderful to have opportunities to share the natural world with such varying groups of visitors and to enable them to find a 'voice for nature'. We hope these activities will be a fun and inclusive chance to do just that."

The first two writing workshops have already taken place. They were well attended and saw lots of interesting ideas and exchanges, as well as plenty of nature-writing, ranging from memoir to nature poetry.

To read more about the workshops you can visit: <https://rye.sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/blog/an-exciting-start-to-the-lost-words-for-rye-harbour-project>

Updates on future events will be posted here: <https://rye.sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/discovery-centre/events>



RETIRING BUT NOT GONE...

Retiring from Rye Harbour Nature Reserve was so very challenging, but made easier by kind words and generous donations for our new laptop fund (plus garden furniture for our new home not far away).

A thank-you from us does not seem sufficient to express our appreciation for the support of *The Friends* as an organisation and support of so many individuals. Without you all we could not have achieved most of what we have done together. Working and living at this special place has been a great privilege and our children and grandchildren will miss it too. There is unfinished work in the reserve and the surrounding countryside, so we are not leaving the area and will continue as volunteers to make the Rye Bay countryside an even better place for wildlife.

So expect to see us around and on Instagram as

RX.nature

Thank-you from Barry, Anne and family

GUIDE ON A RIDE!

When the Kent and East Sussex Railway contacted SWT to ask for help with bird guiding on their vintage steam locomotive during Half Term, it wasn't hard to find some *Guide in a Hide* volunteers.

And so it was that Paul, Karen, Stuart, Stephen and Sally took binoculars and railway 'spotting guides' on five journeys between Tenterden and Bodiam to share their knowledge with passengers. As the train flashed past fields and wetlands, they were able to point out over 30 different species, such as Great White Egret, Buzzard, Kestrel, Grey Heron and Wigeon. On the floodlands at Newenden, they were treated to views of hundreds of Lapwing: who knew that the group name of Lapwing is a *Deceit*? Our guides did!

The guides said how much they enjoyed themselves, and commented on how interested the passengers were. "People were also impressed with the inclusion," Paul said, "especially those with additional mobility needs". Railway staff were delighted and have invited us back again. A very fine example of how working together can bring nature and enjoyment to others.



WHAT YOU THINK

"Thoroughly enjoyed our walk to the shore through the reserve. ... saw a seal poking its head out of the waves to have a good look at us. Surprising variety of birdlife and a great visitor's centre..."

Titch-the-Witch

FRIENDS NEED A NEW TREASURER

After six years in the job, our current treasurer Mike Russell is stepping down. His expertise and knowledge have been very much appreciated by the *Friends*, but we now find ourselves in the position of needing a replacement. If you have the relevant experience and would like to become a member of the *Friends'* committee please get in touch

The committee is a very friendly group; all of us are dedicated to improving the reserve habitats, protecting its wildlife and helping *Friends'* members and visitors to enjoy their time here to the maximum. The committee meets four times a year (with occasional *ad hoc* extra meetings) and the treasurer is responsible for the yearly accounts and for managing the *Friends'* bank accounts.

Many thanks again to Mike Russell for all the work he has put in over the years.

OPEN DAYS AND TALKS

Friends' Open Days in the Discovery Centre will be on Saturdays April 8, May 13, June 10, July 8 and August 12, each preceded by a two-hour guided walk from Rye Harbour car park at 8.30. It's hoped to have a craft stall offering (and making) craft goods, knitwear, etc. and a second-hand 'birds and wildlife' book stall, with all profits to the *Friends*. The monthly Lottery Draw will be held at 11 am, you can browse the Art Wall and all the sales goods, and of course there's coffee and cakes! On Open Days from 2.00 to 3.30 pm you're invited to the following illustrated talks at the Discovery Centre:

May 13: *The Bees of Sussex: putting our county on the map* by James Power

June 10: *A walk to dinosaur bay: from Rye Harbour to Fairlight* by Colin Page

July 8: *Winchelsea Wildlife* by Michael Howard

Entry is free to all but donations are appreciated, To avoid disappointment you are strongly urged to book in advance. Booking is not yet available, but details of how to book online will follow by email nearer the time. Please ensure the membership secretary, Patrick Bonham (email: bonhams422@btinternet.com) has your current email address, even if you get a printed newsletter. Members without email may book by phone with Christine, the Events Secretary, on 07786 077280.

ABOUT THE FRIENDS

The Friends work in partnership with Sussex Wildlife Trust, other local organisations and landowners through a management committee to agree the way forward for Rye Harbour Nature Reserve.

The Friends now have more than 2,000 members who make a big difference to the reserve by providing funds, but many also give their time as volunteers to support the work of the reserve staff. Friends are kept informed about the reserve with three of these newsletters per year and staff organise exclusive guided walks for members.

The Friends are involved in a huge range of activities on the reserve. They help fund staff and equipment, they help with outdoor workparties, with educational activities, they staff the information desk at the Discovery Centre, they produce and post out the newsletter, manage membership and organise great talks and events. The Friends have also funded five hides on the reserve, all of which are accessible.

The Friends funded the original purchase of Lime Kiln Cottage, the installation of the temporary information centre and, most importantly, the initial contribution of £1.5M towards the Discovery Centre Project. Friends' donations helped to buy Castle Water and to transform it from a gravel dredging site to the amazing reedbed that it is today.

They also pay for vehicles and machinery to maintain the reserve. Friends contribute annually to providing staff on the reserve so that we have a wide variety of fun activities for adults and children alike.

Friends volunteers have helped offer information to visitors for many years. Staff regularly lead volunteer work parties to litter-pick, create and maintain habitat such as the wader pools and reedbeds and to help out with the various jobs that need to be done on the reserve.

The Friends are an amazing group... thanks for being one of us.

FRIENDS' WALKS

April 16th 9.00 am

LOOKING FOR MIGRANTS

An easy and convivial stroll around the Flat Beach circuit
Distance 3.5. km. Meet 9 am in the car park
Suitable for adults and accompanied children.

May 25th 9.00 am

CASTLE WATER BIRDS

Looking at the water fowl at Castle Water
Distance 8 km. Meet in the car park at 9.00a.m
Suitable for adults and accompanied children.

June 18th 9.00 am

FATHERS' DAY FEATHERS

A stroll around the Flat Beach circuit Distance 3.5. km.
Meet in the car park at 9.00a.m
Suitable for adults and accompanied children.

July 16th 9.00 am

SUMMER BIRDS

A longer walk out to the Barn pools and around Flat Beach, Meet in the car park at 9.00a.m
Suitable for adults and accompanied children.

August 20th 9.00 am

FLAT BEACH BIRDS

Looking at breeding birds on the Flat Beach circuit
Distance 3.5. km. Meet 9 am in the car park
Suitable for adults and accompanied children.

SWT/Friends event

Saturday April 22nd

Saturday May 20th

Sunday June 4th

Saturday July 22nd

Sunday Sept 17th

Sunday Oct 29th

Saturday Nov 18th

Sunday Dec 17th

GUIDE IN THE HIDE

10am until 4pm

10am until 4pm

10am until 4pm

10am until 4pm

10am until 4pm

10am until 4pm

10am until 3pm

10am until 3pm

FRIENDS ADDRESS:

Friends of Rye Harbour Nature Reserve
c/o Rye Harbour Discovery Centre,
Rye Harbour Road, Rye Harbour,
Rye TN31 7FW

Contact SWT staff at :
rhnroffice@sussexwt.org.uk

FRIENDS' COMMITTEE

Chair Cliff Dean
Vice Chair Phil Jones
Secretary John Baker
Treasurer (temp) Alan Martin

Committee:

Linda Wren, Catherine Emmitt,
James Tomlinson, Claire Bayntun,
Stephen Masters, Christine George

Membership Secretary
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WEBSITES:

THE FRIENDS

www.rhnrfriends.co.uk

ABOUT THE RESERVE

www.sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/ryeharbour

THE NEWSLETTER

Newsletter Editor: S Morgan
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