

Three Owls Newsletter

Report by Nigel Fowler

Summer 2018



My, the years do seem to fly by these days; it's amazing to think that in the time I've been putting this newsletter together, I'll have passed the milestone for having been helping at Three Owls for 40 years...

Well, we have just completed another very busy year from Three Owls. All six of the reserves have continued to benefit wildlife on an ongoing basis, and several have undergone works to further enhance the benefit to those dwelling within.

We have been able to make grants to other wildlife rescue organisations who, like ourselves, tirelessly work for the benefit of wild birds in distress. The giving of grants helps ensure that the work of helping wild birds covers as large an area as possible. We also continue to work hand-in-hand with these organisations so that the grant is not a one-off patch, but part of a larger support network, and we are grateful that these sums are frequently returned in kind, with practical assistance given back to Three Owls further down the line.

John Thorpe undertook his now-famous Manchester to Blackpool Sponsored Bike Ride in aid of Three Owls once more; he has not only equalled last year's record-total, but now passed the £1000 mark!... Are you able to make a donation in recognition of his efforts for THIS year? The total amount raised will then be announced on the Website and in the next Newsletter.

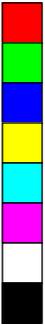
Rooftop rescues of wild juvenile Peregrine Falcons in trouble had me 'out of puff' on two occasions this year ... read on for full details.

We have an ongoing appeal running for any unwanted rooted Christmas Trees (Spruce) that we can plant out on the Home Reserve at Rochdale; these evergreen trees support a myriad of wildlife, provide shelter for a number of birds no matter what the weather, and help support and encourage our resident colony of grey herons who nest in the treetops every year. Although this newsletter edition will 'miss' your tree for 2017/18, please do consider us in the future and perhaps mention it to your local garden centre/tree supplier??

The website continues to be a well-used (and very much appreciated) resource. Many other websites refer to it, and several other sanctuaries and wildlife rescues (that I know of) both utilise the knowledge contained therein, and direct people to it when faced with a query they cannot answer themselves. To date, over **4.3 million** visits have been recorded on our website alone.

Whilst a lot of our work is with birds, their welfare and their environment, our work also extends to the whole environment and other wildlife as a whole. I thought I would point this out following some recent questions regarding why we have pictures of moths on the website!

When creating and nurturing a nature reserve, it is important to keep everything you introduce 'in balance'. Nature does a great job, but she can get upset if you don't work hand-in-hand with her and the animals she provides. The moth photos are from some studies David has undertaken – we haven't put them there; they have moved in to take advantage of the facilities we have on offer. They also provide a good food source for many of the birds who also reside within the reserves.





The reserves are very important release site too for rehabilitated birds from other sanctuaries; Knoxwood Wildlife Rescue regularly use both our Watermeadow and Field Reserves to return birds to the wild, likewise our Meadow Reserve and Three Owls Wood regularly play host to rehabilitated hedgehogs from Rochdale Hedgehog Rescue. Our Home Reserve and Three Owls Wood have also played an important part during 2017 in returning rehabilitated birds back to the wild from Meltham Wildlife Rescue, with whom I have been spending a good deal of time as you will read later...

On 7th **January** 2017 I was surprised to receive my first call for a tawny owllet in need of assistance – this was obviously on its first flight, and had ended up on a couples windowsill, and upon their approach had dropped to the floor and hidden in a corner. Usually they are fine if left alone, and will climb back into a tree the following evening (using beak and strong talons – like a little 3-wheeler) with the encouragement of the parent birds, where they will be rewarded with a meal – and probably a telling off for straying!

That same week the herons on the Home Reserve were observed reaffirming their bonds for each other; this heralds the start of the heron breeding season which meant I had around a fortnight to complete the winter maintenance programme in that part of the reserve.

David reported from Three Owls Wood at Tarleton to say that it was now time to remove the stakes and tree guards from the trees as they were all grown up. The baby trees were only 18 inches high when planted 4 years ago and with the excellent soil many are now over 15 feet tall. The biggest are the white willows – easily 20 feet tall, and so it is a significant point in the life of the wood that we can take away all the tree guards.

Another development on this reserve was the arrival of resident jays – the mark of a true woodland!



Towards the end of the month, the sound of the rat-attat-tat from the woodpeckers could clearly be heard on the Home Reserve – clearly Mother Nature was sure that Spring was just around the corner...

John Thorpe wrote in to express his proud humbleness in the amount of support his Sponsored Bike Ride had created. He had just received a surprise certificate from the Sanctuary in recognition that his efforts had raised a huge £957 towards our much-needed work. The previous newsletter had brought forth a most welcome wave of support, increasing John's total from an already not insignificant amount to just short of a four-figure sum. Fingers crossed for this year's contributions!



It was February when David reported from the Meadow Reserve at Banks regarding the poor Field Voles which resided therein. Attacked by the night shift of Barn Owls and cats, and then by the day shift of kestrels and crows. Now he had observed a regular further addition to the day-shift; Grey Herons sneaking in to feast on the abundance therein.

He was further surprised to have seen a pair of herons hunting in the middle of the night on this reserve – the scene caught in his car headlights when passing.

Towards the end of that month we took a flurry of calls from people worried about the much publicised Storm Doris, and how both their own resident garden birds and those on the nature reserves would cope. In reality, nature copes far better than we humans do!

Alas, we did suffer some mature-tree damage, and these were noted to require felling later in the year, as they were either unstable or damaged to excess and at risk of becoming diseased.

However, nothing is wasted from this, and some trees felled are left where they fall. Others are logged up to provide bug stations or winter warmth, and the brash (thin branches and twigs) are stacked up in large piles to provide shelters for birds and wildlife alike. As these gradually rot and decay, they too provide food and insect homes, and the long-suffering worms (most wildlife seems to eat them!) make wonderful rich soil which in turn feeds the reserve – one big cycle of life.

On Sunday **March** 5th I took a slow walk through the Home Reserve at Rochdale. This brought back many memories, as it was 22 years to the day since the Sanctuary's founder Mrs Eileen Watkinson MBE passed away following a long illness. Right through to the end she battled away to ensure the survival of Three Owls and all the birds in its care.

My walk brought back many happy memories from years gone by; having been helping the charity hands-on since Easter 1978 I have seen many changes over the years. From the struggling charity existing on a literal shoe-string, to the hugely successful wild bird hospital it became by the Millenium, treating 1500-2000 birds annually and returning hundreds back to the wild every month. Ten years on from that, the Sanctuary diversified and spread its wings further, and was able to set up a network of nature reserves throughout the northwest of England, whilst continuing to support the day-to-day care of wild birds in distress.

Although Mrs Watkinson is no-longer with us in person, she continues to be an inspiration in all that we do; and we often refer back to her tried and trusted methods when answering calls for help which now come in from all around the world. I count myself lucky and privileged to have worked with her on a one-to-one basis from the day I started to when she passed away. And through all that knowledge shared over the years, we have been able to keep the Sanctuary running these 22 years on, and looking well into the future.

Our thoughts are with her always, and especially today.



David reported from the Meadow Reserve that on 12th March he had sighted the first moth of the year; a Common Quaker on a daffodil, after a mild damp night.

He also noted further signs of Spring being the frogspawn in the pond at Three Owls Wood, pairs of Mallards everywhere, and best of all the Skylarks and Goldfinches were singing like crazy.

April got off to a good start when on the 1st (no April Fool) we were able to report not one, two, three but FOUR baby herons hatched out on the Home Reserve at Rochdale. These were early – we don't usually welcome them until Easter Sunday! There were two babies each in two of the nests, the egg shells having been quickly discarded to the floor below by the doting parents.

The following day, I was thrilled to find a chick had hatched from the 3rd nest, making five nestlings in total so far this season; we could start five-a-side team I this rate, I mused. Also, Jennifer came over from her own sanctuary today and we both had a walk around the reserve, and she took some of the discarded shells to help educate others in regard to the wonderful work that we do – all thanks to your continued support.



It was a week later that I next had chance to have a walk around the reserve again; the initial two nests were full of raucous voices, and a top-up of the discarded shells told me that nest one now had four chicks, and nest two had three chicks. Sadly when going over to the third nest there was a deathly silence, and I was dismayed to find a dead 3-day old chick on the floor. Both parents were still at the nest site, but it is possible that they are not a well-matched pair, or that they are not yet mature enough to know what they should be doing. This is the 2nd year that this pair have failed to raise a single chick.

On a happier note, the woodland floor is now a sea of wild garlic, and the tits, wagtails, finches, robins, and sparrows are all in abundance gathering up their nesting materials.

April swiftly moved along, and with it another of our regular evening calls from other sanctuaries – whom we welcome to share our decades of knowledge and experience with. This call was from Kathy at Meltham Wildlife Rescue in Yorkshire; and although I speak with Kathy regularly regarding general advice, this was a specific call regarding a casualty just admitted.

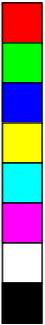
A pheasant had been brought in with wing and tail feathers severely clipped back rendering him flightless. Sadly I have seen this severe mutilation all too often before, and am told that the birds are sometimes ‘sacrificed’ at a family celebration. Thankfully, this time – especially being a ‘wild bird’, he had been discovered, rescued, and would not suffer this fate...

I tried (without success) to get him into one of the rescue centres nearer to Meltham – with the feathers so badly cut, it will be 4-5 months before he could fly well again.

This left a few options; if he was bodily feathered and could fly, he would be safe to live at the Home Reserve in Rochdale. If poorly feathered and no flight at all, then he would have been best up at our Watermeadow Reserve where Knoxwood staff could keep an eye on him. However as he had good body coverage but no flight, then our Three Owls Wood at Tarleton was just the place for him – we already have a covey of pheasants residing there, so we hope he will settle in and with the excellent diet the Wood provides, will soon regrow those feathers and be whizzing around the skies again.

My thanks to John Thorpe and Jennifer Frew for their company on the journey; and credit to John for his well-placed photography on the day. Whilst in the area, we also visited the Meadow Reserve and Old Beech Wood and were able to enjoy the wonderful facilities that these Three Owls Reserves now offer to the wildlife around us.

At the end of the month we were able to make a fully-loaded van trip up to Knoxwood, thanks to some wonderful gifts of fundraising gifts and sacks of food.





You will recall that Knoxwood manage our two most northerly reserves for us at Wigton near Carlisle and continue to look after many of our resident birds for us. It is also where we have amalgamated our hospitals into their own facilities meaning the excellent work of both sanctuaries is both enhanced and continued. Further donations of food for use at Three Owls Reserves, or unwanted gifts for our fundraising are always welcomed and can be dropped off at our Home Reserve – please let us know in advance when you are able to come, so we can ensure someone is around to receive it.

May was as usual a busy month, being the start of the main breeding season, and it wasn't long before another trip to Knoxwood was required with a sibling pair of tawny owlets (in this case it was correct for them to have been admitted), but all-too-often they are 'rescued' when really they should have been left alone – if unsure, contact us for advice before moving them. In addition we had a pair of long-term rehabilitated pigeons, and a young gosling which had been found wandering around on its own.

Whilst at the sanctuary, George proudly took us on a tour of our Watermeadow Reserve to show us the latest works; now a true Watermeadow complete with water in part of the reserve, and a huge bonus to see a flock of sandmartins feeding, drinking, and collecting mud from the pond edges from which to build their nests. We will watch for further developments with great interest.

Huge thanks to Knoxwood for helping us out with these final stages of rehabilitation.



Also in May we received a report from Colin Bridgwood about Breeding Hygienic Queen Bees who had organised the successful installation of some honeybee hives on the Three Owls Wood Reserve;

Bees are our most important pollinator, there are over 20,000 species of bees and they pollinated over a third of our crops and in doing so use the pollen as their protein and the nectar as their carbohydrate source, they are something we just can't afford to lose but this is happening. There are no wild bees left in England

*There are four main things causing the losses, **Pesticides, Lack of Flower Landscape, Monoculture, Disease and Parasites***

The main cause for the loss of British Honey Bee colonies is a parasite called Varroa. This parasite is the equivalent of humans having a parasite living on us the size of our fist, and through it bees are getting various viruses the main one being Deformed Wing Virus..It is very hard to treat and eradicate an insect living on an insect without causing damage to the host, and Varroa is evolving a resistance to the drugs used, plus any chemicals used in treating bees can leave a residue in honey and wax.

Over the last eleven years Professor Ratneiks at the Laboratory of Apiculture and Social Insects (LASI) at Sussex University has developed a strain of honey bee with hygienic behaviour that is a natural form of disease resistance. Hygienic worker bees uncap sealed cells and remove the diseased contents, hygienic behaviour whilst not eliminating the Varroa parasite does reduce the numbers very significantly by over 60%

An apiary has been set up at the Three Owls Reserve in Banks with LASI Bees. The Three Owls reserve couldn't be in a better position for Queen Breeding as being on the edge of the sea and the Ribble nature reserve this forms a 180 degree barrier against unwanted Drone bees (the males), giving this reserve an excellent chance of pure mating.

No chemicals will be used on these bees to kill the Varroa mites, and it is hoped by breeding new queens from the best surviving stocks that bees once again will be able to care for their own colony health.



Still in May, we were reporting how helping us, helps others, and in turn we all help the wild birds around us...

The work of Three Owls is quite varied, and people often seem amazed at the lengths our trustees go to in order to ensure that wild birds have the best possible chances of survival.

With the hospitals relocated from Rochdale to Carlisle (now over 8 years ago – how time flies), this gives us the opportunity to work more closely with other wildlife charities and using our 55+ years of knowledge we are sometimes called in to both help and re-organise and generally make more efficient, a very busy organisation where staff simply have their hands full with casualties and are unable to look at things from a distance to re-plan such as aviary layouts.

One such organisation we have worked with recently is Meltham Wildlife Rescue at Holmfirth in West Yorkshire. The organisation has been doing their not-for-profit rescue and sanctuary work now for around 20 years now, and its founder Kathy regularly picks my brains for information as to how best to treat a casualty if she gets something out of the ordinary brought in. (This is not uncommon, and I find many of the sanctuaries and carers I speak to have a 'little black book' of knowledge gleaned from me – I really must get my own book written sometime soon!)

Anyhow, on a recent visit, when we were sorting out some of the birds for release, and she was telling me how their perimeter fence was on its last legs, but that all their funds raised were having to go directly on looking after the welfare and feeding of the wildlife and birds. Quotes were obtained, and at the next meeting of the trustees a grant to cover the cost of a new fence was given; this will enhance the security of the sanctuary and its residents, and help ensure that ongoing work can focus directly on welfare, rather than having to worry about escapees or intruders.

Finally for May we were pleased to be the nominated charity for Knitting Nanas. These ladies produce many quality knitted items through the year and then sell them off to raise funds for charity.

This year the work of Three Owls was lucky enough to win on this occasion, and we were awarded a wonderful cheque of £100; which we can put to very good use indeed. So, a huge Thank You to Ann, Sue, Ann, Karen, Nellie, and Caroline for their wonderful work, and we look forward to seeing them again in the future.



Ann Sue

Ann Karen Nellie Caroline

We Are..... "Knitting Nanas"

To be found at

Rochdale Leisure Centre
Entwisle Road
Rochdale
Greater Manchester
OL16 2HZ

on Thursday's 10am - 12noon

"We are Knitting for you"

Donation £100-00

For TREE owls Bird Sanctuary -

Into **June** and David reported happily to state that where on the Three Owls Wood Reserve last year there had been a solitary Marsh Orchid, this year there were eight! Research he had undertaken in the meantime had shown that the initial mow needed to be after mid-July. Lessons learned!

In the Home Reserve early one morning, I found a young flightless jackdaw. The rest of the family were in the trees squawking loudly to warn the youngster of my presence. One of its siblings had limited flight, but I could see that the one on the floor was simply a late starter. Knowing when to interfere and when to help in cases like this is the key, and seeing it was not in immediate danger, I simply lifted it onto an elevated log so its parents could see it, and left it until after work when I popped down there again. It was now off the floor and in the low branches, but unable to gain much height. Its sibling was now flying well. Again, it needed no further assistance other than observation as mum & dad were looking after all its other needs.

The following morning, it was up in the treetops with all the others.



This time of year we are busy each evening/weekend with calls / texts / emails for assistance with what to do with fledgling birds. In reality, often NOTHING needs to be done, as a huge percentage of UK birds don't simply leave the nest and fly away – but will often have limited flight and spend between 24 hours and 5 days hopping around on the floor until they are capable of sustained flight.

Alas this does mean that they come into conflict with cats and dogs – and to a larger degree 'humans'! However, in the majority of cases, simply leave them alone or pop them into the nearest bush or behind a tree.

Many of the callers report that they are 'abandoned and alone,' however the parent birds will only return to feed them every 3-4 hours, and not the minute-by-minute feeds they received whilst in the nest. This gets them hungry and helps them onto the next stage of feeding for themselves. For birds such as robins/wrens/blackbirds/thrushes, the parents will split the brood up on leaving the nest, so if a predator found one, it would not find the whole brood. Again, these sometimes appear abandoned, but in reality the parents are nearby and are simply waiting for you to go away. These four species in particular WILL spend 4-5 days on the floor before taking to the skies – PLEASE do not be tempted to put them onto a shed or garage roof 'away from cats' – if they do not fall off and (often) break a leg or wing in doing so, there is no shelter there and they make easy pickings for a passing magpie or sparrowhawk.

Rooftop Rescue

It is rare these days that we have the ability to attempt a hands-on rescue of a wild bird in distress; time constraints and person availability (even more-so than cost) tends to be prohibitive. We do however offer circumstance-specific guidance and advice which enables the finder to take direct action themselves and help those in trouble. However earlier tonight we received a phone call for which the timing was perfect, and a tragic situation averted.

Having just finished work for the day, I was on my way home (looking forward to tea!) when the phone rang with the first of the evening's calls, and I listened to a very concerned lady from the RSPB who had a dilemma; she had tried all day without success she informed me, to get a response from either the RSPCA or numerous bird rescue sanctuaries, as there was a juvenile peregrine falcon trapped behind some glass atop a high-rise building in Manchester City Centre.

Now I had only discussed the night before with another local wildlife sanctuary, a very similar situation where a young peregrine fledgling had crash-landed on a balcony belonging to The Co-Operative Society in Manchester, and I wondered if it was the same bird – it certainly seemed a coincidence. Sure enough, it transpired that this WAS the same bird, though it had dropped down from where it had originally landed, onto an outdoor seating area which was surrounded by glass and proving impossible for the young bird to fly out of.

Knowing that the Birding Group that were monitoring the nest and its occupants were only observing the bird from afar, I was concerned that (as with any injured bird), there is only a small window of opportunity to mend a broken wing if this should be the case (the Peregrine had been on the balcony for a number of days and seemed unable to get off again), and though the parents had dropped it a pigeon carcass for it to eat – if for any reason it wasn't feeding, the situation could become dire quite quickly – especially with the recent hot weather.

Thus, after a quick tea I was Manchester-bound, armed with a secure carrier and a couple of thick towels. Forty minutes later we met Stephen, the manager on duty that night and he (thankfully) took us up in the lift to the floor where the bird was trapped. The staff had been locked out of this seating area in order to protect the bird and hopefully encourage it to leave with its parents – but time was going on, and nothing seemed to be happening. Stephen was very concerned that if a storm hit as was forecast this week, that the bird may perish due to lack of protection from the weather.

The balcony was far larger than I had expected, and probably some 200-300m in length, containing many seating areas – obviously a popular area for the staff to sit out. However, whilst the 4-5m high glass around the edge of the building allowed a beautiful landscape view of the city, I could see how it was preventing this youngster from leaving the area, as the bird was simply bouncing off the glass.

I rarely wear gloves to catch/handle birds of prey; if done properly you can safely handle them without losing fingers, and I find you can quickly build up that bond of trust with a bird, if you are able to hold it securely and safely without risking either crushing it or letting it loose again through poor grip with thick leather gloves. My 40 years experience clearly stood me in good stead, as I was able to pick the bird up quickly without fuss and give it a good check over;

It was in good health, plenty of 'meat' on it, and just a few dislodged feathers from hitting the glass, but nothing too severe that should prevent it flying free again. I had already explained to Stephen that I would only remove the bird if it was injured or in imminent danger, as its parents were atop the older CIS building opposite, and clearly had been keeping an eye

on it from afar. However, I could see that in this case, it was likely to either injure itself further if left on this balcony, or may simply give up if it felt that 'escape' was impossible. Hence, Stephen kindly granted us access to another balcony which was even higher up the building where there were no high glass sides for the bird to crash into.

Removing 'him' from the carrier, he glared at me for quite some time. However, with some soothing he soon settled down and took more of an interest in his surroundings than of me. Unlike the last peregrine fledgling I released in the city centre (from Manchester Town Hall clock balcony), there was no perimeter wall for him to fly from, so gently I lifted him onto my arm and waited...(and waited...) until he felt the time was right to take to the skies again.

He flew almost the full length of the balcony before veering off to the right and off over the city centre – startling a passing gull who clearly hadn't expected this to appear! A couple of circuits of some of the city centre cranes, and he flew back towards us, passing by very close indeed (a fly-past??) before off over the city again. It was wonderful to see such a majestic bird back in the skies once more. He finally settled on an adjacent building not far from the nest he came from, and where another Peregrine had been watching his antics (mum or dad perhaps?) Let us hope that this time he manages to stay out of trouble. [NB 'he' could have been a 'she' – but 'it' wasn't for letting me know this evening and I wanted as little disruptive handling as possible.]

Our very grateful thanks to Stephen and the Co-Operative for his assistance, to the RSPB for giving us the opportunity to assist, and to Erica for her company. A true evening of 'Co-operation'!

Towards the end of the month we were again called to assist with a downed juvenile Peregrine Falcon; this time returning it to the nest on top of the clock tower of Rochdale Town Hall.

This young lady has had a struggle with life so far – she fell (or was she pushed?) from the nest at an early age and had us all on tenterhooks, but mum fed her separately so she has grown up ok. Many people have been following her progress on the Town Hall's webcam

Alas, today's heavy rain brought her down to the ground, and she was rescued by the RSPCA and brought into care. Not content with the food she was offered, she patiently waited until tea-time when a combination of better weather, quieter town centre, and me finishing work, enabled her to be returned to the nest – up above the clock tower. Thankfully she is of a good weight with plenty of 'meat' on her, and I am sure mum and dad will ensure she has a good tea tonight.

My thanks to everyone involved, especially Sue for looking after her during the day, and the Town Hall staff for making me so welcome and accompanying me up all those steps to the very top of the building. I was nearly caught out by arriving at the top at two minutes to six; making a rapid descent to the floor below, so as not



to be deafened by the bells chiming at 6 o'clock! Let us hope that she has learned from her experience and takes better care in the future – for any young bird leaving the nest, life is a very steep learning curve.

In **July** we were 'really buzzing'. This was due to three of the reserves playing host to bee hives, namely the Home Reserve, the Watermeadow Reserve, and Three Owls Wood.

This report was regarding the Home Reserve, where we played host to a hive of bees from just over the border in Yorkshire. Their hive was sited on our Rochdale reserve for a week to help with pollination.

Bees need pollen and nectar for food and honey-making; flowers need their own pollen transferred to other flowers, and then another flowers' pollen brought back to it in order to reproduce and make their seeds. By merely travelling from flower to flower, bees effortlessly accomplish the needs of both parties.

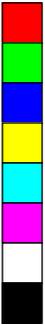
Our grateful thanks to Andrew for bringing his hive over to us, and we hope his bees have enjoyed their 'holiday'.

28TH MANCHESTER TO BLACKPOOL BIKE RIDE REPORT. BY JOHN THORPE

Once again, dear readers and supporters, it is my pleasure to lay before you the stirring tale of how I overcame huge odds and dangers to complete my 28th consecutive Manchester to Blackpool Bike Ride. Listen it's my story and I'll exaggerate if I want to! This being the 28th time I've done this one could, if one was being generous, call me dedicated and courageous, or as I suspect most people would feel, that I was off my rocker! For those of you new to Three Owls and to my cycling saga on the charity's behalf, I should perhaps take a few moments to briefly explain how I came to be doing it in the first place. Twenty eight years ago I suddenly, without warning, found that one of my knees was swollen and extremely painful- the phrase frying an egg on its surface springs to mind! I consulted my doctor, also a keen cyclist, who prescribed anti-inflammatories. These didn't have much effect unfortunately, and I sorted the condition out with some capsules containing green lipped Mussel extract from New Zealand. At the same time, by sheer coincidence, I saw some information about the annual bike ride, then in it's, I think, third year, and for some insane reason decided that I should use the knee more or lose the mobility in it. Upon announcing my intention to cycle over sixty miles, with a still slightly dodgy knee, my doctor felt, quite reasonably, that I was off my trolley!

I assured him that I would take all reasonable precautions, and if I would drop out if I couldn't complete the distance without doing damage to myself. Of course I hoped he was wrong but only time would tell. The first ride was a real eye opener, with a mass start of several hundred riders from the Town Hall square in Manchester, and the first twenty minutes were considerably more dangerous than the rest of the trip! I survived and finished the ride, with my knee in good condition, and, as they say the rest is history.

The ride seemed to come round very quickly this year, and as in most other years, my pre-ride preparations were almost nil. I didn't spend hours building up my stamina or honing my body to a state of perfection (that would take a lot longer than the available time!), and while I know there will be many who will say this is a totally wrong way to prepare and a terrible example to others, I can only say that I agree with you, but it seems to work for me! I tend to spend much more time on my trusty steed's preparation,



since, without it I'm dead in the water, and I do at least want to have taken every precaution against mechanical failure. Stripped down, thoroughly greased and oiled, I then turned my attention to the bike-just kidding. The sight of me stripped down, greased and oiled would be too much for most people to stomach, including me! My bike is a Peugeot Prologue, which was purchased a long time ago and has been a very good servant over the years. The tyres were in pretty good condition, not having had a lot of wear in the intervening twelve months, but I thought I would change the back one for a new one, which I got from Halfords in Bury. It was a perfectly good tyre, but I also saw a Gatorskin brand one which was more expensive and supposedly very puncture resistant. I splashed out on this one and changed the tyre yet again. I've had a pretty good record for punctures in previous years, and reasoned that if I took every precaution I could get away with it again this time. Getting an early night on the Saturday before the ride (much to the disgust of my two rescue rabbits, who had to go to bed earlier than usual!), I got everything prepped for the next morning and got up at 3.30am, allowing enough time to eat and feed the animals before I left.

I left the house at 4.30, in the early morning light and set off for the start in Manchester at the Imperial War Museum on Salford Quays. This isn't the easiest place to find if you don't live in Manchester, and adds both time and distance to the ride. Oh for the days of starting from Albert Square! With almost no traffic and a fine morning, the ride was very pleasant, and as I always do, I treated the eleven miles as a warm-up to ease any muscles into the routine again after the time out of the saddle. A few minutes out of the city centre, I felt the awful rumbling sensation from the back wheel which told me I had a puncture! This has never happened before the start in all the time I've been doing the ride, and as you can imagine I was not best pleased! I got the wheel and tyre off and quickly put a new inner tube in place (Top tip-always carry at least one on a ride). I carried on and arrived at the start in time to get a photo with my yellow suited friend 'The Voice of the Ride'. We've been doing this every year since I can remember, and he gave me a mention regarding it being my 28th.

After last minute checks to the brakes, tyres (especially the back one!), etc, I was poised for the off, and to the rousing cheers of at least three bystanders we surged over the start line at 6.30 am and started on the road to adventure and Salford! I should have known it was going too well, and five

minutes into the ride, still in Salford, the back tyre deflated again! I could barely believe it and with a very heavy heart upended the bike and removed the wheel, tyre and inner tube-again. Those riders amongst you will know all about mending punctures, and doing it at home is relatively simple, because with the aid of a bucket or a sink full of water, it's easy to find the leak by the stream of bubbles issuing from it. Unfortunately one doesn't have a bucket of water by the roadside, and it's necessary to either find the hole visually, listen for the leak or pass the tube over the tongue to detect the stream of air issuing from the tyre. The problem arises when the air is coming out faster than you are pumping it in, because the tube doesn't stay up long enough to detect anything! At this point I had a sinking feeling in the stomach, very low morale, and a fear that if I couldn't find the leak, my ride would be over before it had even started. While I was searching for the hole, a rider drew up and asked if everything was OK. I appreciated the thought, but was somewhat distracted by the fact that he was wearing a bright pink feather boa around his neck!

This Mancunian extrovert chatted for a few minutes and left me with the parting advice 'Don't forget to pump it up!' What I felt like replying is not fit to be printed here and would be an affront to the delicate ears of our readership-suffice it to say it would have been along the lines of 'I'm glad you told me that..I would never have worked it out for myself!'

I did locate the puncture site and was applying a patch when a middle aged rider pulled up and asked if he could help. He actually left me with a spare inner tube which he'd put a patch on previously, and I would not only like to take the opportunity to thank here but would be delighted to get him a new tube to replace this one if he reads this and gets in touch. It's so important to stop and offer help on occasions like this, as the rider may be inexperienced or may not even have a puncture repair kit or a spare tube. We all need a bit of help sometimes, and you never know when your turn will occur.

I put the tube back on the wheel, reinstated the all singing and dancing resistant tyre (which I had frankly lost a lot of faith in at this point), and got ready to hit the road again, with a certain amount of trepidation. As I followed my two concerned fellow riders down the road, I noticed a trail of bright pink feathers blowing in the breeze, and concluded that either the owner was moulting or leaving a trail for me to follow!

Before too long the short hill leading up to the entrance to Haigh Hall came in sight, and I dismounted halfway up the hill to save my energy(well I am officially a pensioner now you know!),pushing the bike over the infamous cobbles at the entrance itself. From bitter experience I can tell you that even the best padded saddle, underwear and shorts are no match for rock hard Lancashire cobbles, and I didn't want to be sporting a surgical support for the rest of the ride!

The downhill road which winds through Haigh Hall is a great opportunity to relax and stop pedalling for a few minutes, but can be treacherous in wet weather, when the bends catch out the unwary speed merchants who find that centrifugal force and a tree trunk are not a good combination for a cyclist and his bike! We reached the rest and refuelling point at the central building complex, and I took the opportunity to make use of one of the row of portaloos before carrying on. Without going into too much detail and putting anyone off their sandwiches, I left Haigh Hall considerably lighter than when I arrived! One of the loos bore a striking resemblance to Dr.Who's 'Tardis', being blue and rather phone box-like, and my sad imagination could see a rider going in, only to find when they emerged that due to inter galactic teleportation, that it was actually next year's ride! As far as I know this didn't happen. It was good to have a break and stretch the legs for a while, as well as take some food and drink on board for the next stage, but I only ever have about half an hour's rest since it not only eats into your ride time, but to be truthful it makes it very hard to get back on the bike if you rest for too long!

Checking the tyres before setting off, I started out of the park and stopped for a few minutes to talk to Darran from Pilkingtons Cycles, who was manning a maintenance and repair station by the road side. I hadn't seen him for a while, and he was pleased to see me still riding the Peugeot Prologue cycle he sold

me quite a number of years ago. I bought a spare inner tube just to be on the safe side, in view of the previous events, but in the end didn't need it for the rest of the trip. It's always sensible to have at least one spare tube on a long ride, plus of course a puncture repair kit and the tools to take the tyre off if you need to.

The next stage of the journey lay towards Standish, Chorley, Leyland and Preston, the next rest stop for me at least, and by now it was a really lovely day. I was riding better than I expected, and was trying to make up time after previous delays. I arrived at Haigh Hall at 9.20 and left at 9.55, a bit later than last year when I arrived at 9.00am, but was still happy with progress so far. Thankfully the bike was running well, and I even passed a few other riders! It's amazing what you hear when passing or being passed by other riders, and of course the snatches of conversation are often disjointed and don't make sense, but are sometimes very funny. As an example I quote the following .I passed a group of riders standing by the side of the road, and one of their number, in a rather high pitched and pained voice, exclaimed ' It's burning!'

Now after many miles in the saddle, there are any things which could be burning, but I leave that up to the imagination of my readers, since I wouldn't dream of lowering the tone of this report! Another group of riders who were behind me for a while were exchanging witty repartee while pedalling, and one of their number suddenly let out a loud and prolonged theatrical braying laugh which seemed to last forever. It was like being followed by a large 'Laughing Bag' on wheels and I wasn't sorry when they overtook me.

After a series of roundabouts, we embarked on the very long straight section of carriageway which leads, eventually, into Preston Docks area, and knowing how energy sapping this section is from previous rides; I just put my head down and pedalled steadily, without thinking too much about the distance. If you do it seems to take even longer believe me! Thankfully it was a lovely day with a light breeze and not the wind and horizontal rain of some years, when the legs seem to lock up, and every rotation of the wheels is hard work.

Eventually we reached the end of the stretch and pulled onto the road by the side of Preston Docks. At 11.40 I stopped and took a needed break and a sit down, leaving at 12.05 for the final leg to Blackpool. This wends its way through some lovely lanes with high hedges and fields on either side, and little villages and small groups of houses. The sun was warm, the sky was blue and I was thinking how lucky I was to be able to do this when so many people would love to but couldn't because of ill health or infirmity. We do take our health for granted all too often, and it's only when it stops us in our tracks that we realise what a precious gift it is.

The route runs through Kirkham and Wharton and joins the coastal road leading into Lytham St. Annes and Blackpool, and at this point I take a deep breath, grit my teeth (yes I actually have most of my own teeth!) and hope that the onshore wind isn't too strong. In some previous years it has actually been so strong that I've made better progress walking than riding, especially along the long 'Green' section where the famous white windmill is situated. Thankfully this time was one of the better years, and we only had a light breeze to contend with, which was actually quite cooling. This is another 'head down and press on' section which seems to take forever, especially when one is tired, but this time wasn't so bad, and we were soon onto the sand dune section just prior to turning off to the finish line. Amazingly, I'd kept out of trouble all the way in terms of cars and other riders, but on this section a woman motorist who clearly couldn't drive, pulled in front of myself and another rider to park by the side of the road. She came in at the wrong angle and stopped dead ahead of us with the back end of the vehicle

forming a roadblock! Thankfully I braked in time, since I had a bad feeling about the car, but it could easily have been more serious. I believe I said 'Deary me you appear to need further instruction in parking madam!', or possibly words to that effect!

Along this section I was riding, for a time, behind a family of two children and three adults. The children, a boy and girl of around twelve or thirteen I would guess, were a real credit to their parents, and the young lad turned at one point and said 'Well done!' Perhaps I looked as if I needed encouragement or he thought I was about to collapse, but it was nice of him anyway and I returned to compliment.

It's rather sad that the children who have manners and a decent attitude tend to stand out now, rather than being the norm, but credit where it's due.

I turned onto the section of Promenade closed to traffic, and tried to put on a belated sprint over the finish line as the cheering crowds loomed up ahead. I could see The Voice of The Ride in his commentary box to the left of the line and managed to catch his eye this year, unlike last year when he was looking the wrong way! He spotted me and shouted "There's my friend who's doing this for the 28th time, he's probably the oldest rider in the event."

I was about to take issue with his when he corrected himself and said 'well perhaps not the oldest but the one who's ridden it the most times!' I didn't mind that one, because it's probably true, but since Bike Events records don't go back to the earliest rides, I can't prove it beyond doubt.

Grabbing my certificate, bottle of water and Soreen bar (in the good old days before the recession it used to be a whole loaf!), I took a quick breather and rode off to meet a friend at the Pleasure Beach. He'd offered to come through for the day and give me a lift home in his vehicle. Probably the first time in 28 years I haven't gone back in the coach with the bike in a lorry following behind.

After a relaxing break ,a walk and something to eat, we set off for home, after what had been a great day in the sun, and since I finished at 2.04 pm, only seven minutes after my 2016 time, I was well pleased with the performance. I later found that some 4,500 riders had taken part, give or take a few. I had covered, according to my cycle clock, some 78.9 miles, taking everything into account.

I hope you have found this account interesting and perhaps amusing, and would like to thank everyone who supported me so generously last year. Three Owls continues to provide help and advice to the public as well as to develop the Reserves for the benefit of the wildlife we all love, and any help you can give this year will be much appreciated. With luck I'll be back to do it all over again next year, and until then goodbye and thanks for reading this.



It was mid-**July** when we undertook the first of this years' hedgehog releases on our reserves; The first release was on the Meadow Reserve at Banks followed by a second lot at Three Owls Wood at Tarleton.

Any sort of release of wild bird or animal back to the wild is an interesting and rewarding event. The releases tonight were all the 'lady hogs' direct from the care of Sue Lewis at Rochdale Hedgehog Rescue, and we will leave them to settle in before 'bring the boys over' in a few weeks time, to ruin their peace!



Each of the reserves continue to be well-used by other organisations for wildlife release; sadly, with the amount of house-building alongside many wildlife rescue organisations, their own previous release sites either become overcrowded or unusable altogether.

It was mid-**August** when Sue and I were next over at the Southport reserves with the next load of hedgehogs where we met up with David for this evenings' double release.

Amid much sniffing, snuffling, and snorting, fifteen fat young (male) hogs were released on the Tarleton and Banks reserves – whether this was to the delight or dismay of the lady hogs released the month before only they could say!

David also reported on finding a small toad near the new pond at Three Owls Wood; he has always believed that toads are greatly superior to their nervous jumpy cousins the frogs!

In **September** we reported that John Thorpe's Bike Ride total had topped a four-figure sum, and had reached an amazing £1025; we kept the fund running to the end of the year to see if anything further came in, but that was to be the 'final score'. A HUGE thank you to you all for such a magnificent effort, and I hope John can count on your support again this coming July, when he will undertake his 29th consecutive annual ride.

Towards the end of September I reported that we had noticed a lot of late-hatching baby birds around this season; obviously mum & dad had decided there was time for another brood. The little house martin pictured below, was left behind when its mum and dad decided to migrate, and he had to spend a week with us on hourly feeds until he was big enough and strong enough to fly all the way to North Africa; where they over-winter.

Even since he 'flew the nest', we have continued to see small flocks of migrating swallows and house martins passing through the reserve – always a risk for them to stay so late in the season, as they can only eat flies and as the cooler weather arrives these can drop off in availability literally overnight, which is a worry for any stragglers.



It was during **October** that we filled up the reserves feeding stations ready for the winter months once more. Already large flocks of birds are arriving on the reserves, and I was thrilled to see a huge flock of long-tailed-tits this week; I estimated about 120 strong in number. These fairly decimated some of the feeders' supplies and it was good to know that they would have regained a good deal of strength and know they can return any time when the need arises.

Our own home-grown supplies of seeds have been a rather poor affair this year, and I wondered if the sunflowers would ever bear seed before the frosts arrived. We had been very lucky in previous years with some lovely donations of wild bird seed, fat balls, sunflower seeds/hearts, and TK Conditioner seed; I mentioned this in an online appeal, and two bin-liners of seeds were very gratefully received from well-wishers.

Later that same month we enquired (without success) if anyone was a whizz with a quiet drone? My idea was to fly one around the reserve to check on the heron nests and get the birds used to it to enable some decent photos of the baby herons as they grew up. However, it wasn't to be and we didn't want to go to the expense of buying one if we hadn't tested the viability of one with the birds first. One day perhaps.....

It was at the start of **November** that we undertook a day of driving, collecting rescued birds from Meltham Wildlife Rescue and Rochdale Hedgehog Rescue, and goods donated via our own Home Reserve at Rochdale onwards to Knoxwood Wildlife Rescue in Cumbria. Meltham in particular had a young raven which they had nursed back to health, but didn't have the required aviary space for the final stages of release. It was a long drive, but in glorious autumnal weather we travelled up to Wigton, calling in to admire our amazing Watermeadow Reserve along the way.

I was warmly welcomed by George, Emma and Glen (along with a host of different residents!), and the birds swiftly admitted to their care. A welcome cuppa and chat, and unloading of all the donated item, then it was time to return home – but not before having a brief chat with Silver our Hooded Crow...I really must look up his exact age sometime; I reckon he must be 26 years at least!

It is through the different rescue sanctuaries working together that we can help even more wild birds in distress than we each do on an individual basis.



David reported from Three Owls Wood mid-November to say just how much he loved the place; some of the trees there are over 20 feet high now.

He was delighted to find some jays – true woodland birds had moved in, also in addition to the barn owls, a tawny owl now adds its voice at night! He was so pleased also to be able to report that the barn owl pair had successfully raised all three chicks this year, and that each evening the mallards would fly into the pond just as it was getting dark.

At the end of November, we had to get Mark (our trusted Arboriculturist) in to carry out some work at the Home Reserve. Due to the number of storms endured in 2017, several trees had been damaged and required felling for safety reasons. He was ably assisted by Bobby and Dexta with regard to moving and stacking the logs...it was a long day!

Fear not, as removing these damaged trees will allow new growth on this reserve, and much of the brash and logs have been stacked up to provide both shelter and warmth, hibernation, feeding and nesting areas to a myriad of our rescued creatures. The trees on the other reserves have fared much better with no such works required.

I appealed at this time for anyone getting a live Christmas Tree to consider donating it to Three Owls, so we could plant it on our reserve; two trees have been pledged, and we will supplement a further 50 which we will purchase in 2018, and plant out to provide food, shelter, and nesting areas for our resident birds in years to come.

Finally, **December** was upon us, and we reminded everyone who was shopping online to try and do so via the Easyfundraising.org.uk website, as purchases made through that site can generate good donations towards our work. Already over £760 has been raised this way, and none of it has cost a penny extra; just simply done with a few extra 'clicks'.

Gifts and Presents

We are grateful to John Thorpe for amassing a huge collection of owl-related goods to help with our fundraising; and we now have quite a varied supply. In addition to this, he has come across a local trader who produces a wonderful wooden Owl Sculptures from left over materials – each one being unique in its own right.

As our raffles have been so popular in the past, we are asking YOU our loyal supporters if you would like to see a return to these in each newsletter? If the answer is 'Yes', we will put up a selection of these owl-orientated gifts up as the prizes – they really are quite varied and delightful.

Stuck for a new gift idea? Don't forget we still have a selection of Three Owls goods for sale. Postage is included in the prices, so the figure you see is the price you pay. We will endeavour to despatch the next day following receipt of your payment. If time is short before the event for those unexpected / forgotten presents, you can always order via our website where payment can be made instantly online – hence less delay.





PVC Apron £8.00 PVC



PVC Tote Bag £8.00 100%



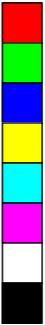
Cotton Tea Towel £5.00



Three Owls Ballpoint Pen (Retractable supporters pen) £2.00 each

A very popular item with all ages; these pens are lovely writers and sit easily in the hand. There are five different colours available; white / black / blue / burgundy / green. Please state what colour(s) you require (they all write with black ink), otherwise they will be sent out randomly.

If you are ordering anything online please don't forget to use the **easyfundraising.org.uk** website; which will generate a donation to Three Owls from a huge number of suppliers. As I write, over £770 has been raised this way; it costs you NOTHING extra, but a few minutes to initially register on the site and select **Three Owls Bird Sanctuary** as your chosen charity.



Three Owls Bird Sanctuary and Reserve

(Affiliated to the Jean Sainsbury Animal Welfare Trust)

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ALL I NEED IS A BIT OF
UNDERSTANDING.

Trustees:

Dr David J Unwin FRCGP MbChB (1974 to present day)

Nigel S Fowler (1978 to present day)

Stewart M F Jennings BA, Vet MB, MRCVS (1979 to present day)

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