

Three Owls Newsletter

Report by Nigel Fowler

Summer 2019



Well, a huge number of people complimented me on the last edition of Three Owls News, stating that it was the 'best ever'; which was lovely to receive but somewhat puts the pressure on for this one! Let's hope that it doesn't disappoint!

It'll be ten years later this year that Rochdale Council first approached us with regards to Zoo Licensing and our work at Three Owls; who would have thought it would have seen so much injustice and upheaval for the charity. However, with solid support from so many quarters we battled on through; relocating the resident birds from the Rochdale site to a number of other sanctuaries throughout the UK. Following the remediation and sale of the buildings and top parcel of land at that site, the hospitals were also relocated from Rochdale to Wigton and enabled our colleagues at Knoxwood Wildlife Rescue to set up a 2nd hospital room within their existing building, providing them with far more advanced facilities than their had dared to aspire to; the staff there also manage our two Wigton nature reserves for us on a daily basis.

The funds from that sale at Rochdale enabled us to firstly set up Three Owls Wood Reserve at Tarleton, and from then on, further reserves have been set up at Banks (Meadow Reserve), Wigton (Field Reserve), Wigton (Watermeadow Reserve), Mere Brow (Old Beech Wood Reserve). We do also still have the Home Reserve at Rochdale, plus rent out our barn conversion cottage we built at Rochdale in 2000 which helps provide Three Owls with a more secure future, despite whatever economic climate we find the country in.

John Thorpe will be undertaking his 30th consecutive bike ride from Manchester to Blackpool this July; the vast majority of which have been done in aid of Three Owls. Last year he raised a staggering **£1156.78**; please do

lend him your support again this year, all the funds raised go directly to further our work with the wild birds. We will read more of John's exploits further inside this edition...

Often people are surprised when meeting me for the first time, that I am not much older. You can see them trying to compute the 41+ years I have been at Three Owls, and reckoning that I must be retired by now. Alas, I have many working years to go, though with all my animal welfare work that I do each and every day, I doubt I'd ever fully retire - when you love what you do, why would you ever stop? We must also remember that David our Head Trustee has been with Three Owls since 1974, and Stewart since 1979; so we all have long-service records with the charity.

I'm currently sat in the garden writing this; it's Easter Sunday and I'm surrounded by generations of birds all around, singing away (the birds not me!) as they build their nests and (for the early birds) feed their young. Another very busy baby bird season is well underway!

The heron babies were the first to arrive this year on 23rd March. In quick daily succession two further chicks hatched out and, I think, a fourth some three days later. There are currently numerous other heron chicks in the other nests; but without wings of my own, I can't see this year due to the new growth on the trees this year. Perhaps I'll have to look at that drone idea again later on in the year.



Well, let's have a look at what's been happening over the past 12 months....

In **January** we 'welcomed' in the New Year by sitting up with all our rescued animals who were afraid by all the explosions of the New Year fireworks going off in the locality. One day I do hope these violent fireworks will be outlawed – surely a colourful display without all these 'bombs' going off is sufficient? As it was, we left all the main lights on overlooking the Home Reserve to offer what shelter we could to those residing within.

The first call of the year was for a Tawny Owl in Oldham which was traumatised by the fireworks. Thanks to our colleagues at Meltham Wildlife Rescue for admitting this bird to their care.

That same day, David reported from our Meadow Reserve at Banks that a flock of Whooper Swans about twenty-strong had been flying-in each morning for the past three weeks at dawn to feed. As well as the swans, he observed a Marsh Harrier hunting, using the same technique as the barn owl; "flap-flap-glide" near to the ground while hunting for prey.

We were gratefully receiving and thanking kind supporters for their donations of bird seed, used postage stamps (as well as new ones), and owl-orientated gifts for our fundraising efforts.

We also had a huge donation of cat & dog food; perfect timing for our next trip to our Cumbrian reserves, where Knoxwood would put it to very good use in feeding the gulls we have in care up there.

Donations are welcome at any time, but especially when times are hard and budgets stretched to their limits.

In **February** we had Mark back to attend to some of the damaged trees on the Home Reserve where we have a programme of works for this site over the next ten years to thin out the trees where they are too close together; which will create a better quality woodland area, with improved habitat and nesting sites for those birds and wildlife living within.

Just a week after this visit (typical!), a tree fell over the top of one of the ponds; something I have seen twice before over the past four decades – in exactly the same place! It will be trimmed back and left for the wildlife to use; the herons will no doubt appreciate a new perch upon which to await their next snack coming along.

The problems with plastic waste are very much in the news at present. Here at Three Owls, we too have been affected and early one morning I was alarmed to see what looked from a distance to be a dead heron dangling from one of the Spruce trees.

Upon closer inspection however, it was in fact the remnants of a helium balloon – whether it had got there of its own accord or the herons were trying to use it for nesting material I really don't know?



In **March** we had a "Danger to Life" alert issued, with gales and heavy snow. Alas it proved too much for "Alfred's Tree"; a mature spruce tree in which Alfred the wood pigeon slept, along with a host of other birds who both roosted and nested in it. It was heartbreaking to see it down, and that it had damaged two other trees when it fell.

We have a planned a tree planting session this Spring, so these lost habitats can be replaced – though it will take a good few years to become fully established.

I noted that the herons were sat very tightly on their nests, and hoped that the incubated eggs were still tucked up safely. The eldest herons HAD nested lower down than usual....how could they possibly have known...?

It was 23 years last Sunday (5th March) that Mrs Eileen Watkinson MBE - the sanctuary's founder - passed away. I have thought about her a great deal of late; sometimes thinking of the interesting and fun times, the joyful times when a rehabilitated bird is returned to the wild, and of the sad instances where such badly injured birds were admitted and couldn't be saved. The knowledge I gained from working with her since 1978 has stood me in good stead, and continues to help others far and wide, indeed on occasion from other countries around the world. Whilst it is unusual for me to be up at 4.30am typing this, I recall that this was the time Mrs Watkinson always rose to start her day, and would often enjoy the dawn chorus whilst listening to the World Service on the wireless.

Alas we were still deep in snow on Sunday, and I was dealing with the aftermath of the storm, so it is only now in the small hours that I have chance to put 'pen to paper'. I did have a walk around the reserve that day, and spent some time at the graveside; we will get some new wild flowers for the memorial woodland this year - no point just now I thought at the time, as it's all under a white blanket.

I recall back in the early 1980's, three of 'us volunteers' (Sharon, Darius and myself) had written into TV-AM to nominate Mrs Watkinson for an award for her work. Amazingly and against all the odds for a TV competition, we were one of the lucky winning few, and so Wincey Willis and her crew came up one December morning to present Mrs Watkinson with not one but two hampers; one for her, and of course one for the birds.

Having been lucky to be granted the morning off school, I remember nearly freezing my toes off on the park round the corner as we ran through 'our lines' with the film crew. Then, it was round to the Sanctuary for the great surprise; and being greeted by Wincey dressed as a Christmas Fairy - complete with wellies - was enough to surprise anyone!

I recall Guilly; our resident guillemot at the time, walking around and inspecting the hampers contents, much to the film crews' delight. I do still have the clip of the event on VHS somewhere in the archives, though it is rather battered now through years of repeated playing. My first introduction to 'being on the TV with Three Owls!'

I know she would be thrilled that her woodland dream has finally become a reality, that the work of Three Owls now reaches far further than it ever could before, and that we have a network of SIX reserves now supporting our ongoing work with wild birds. I do miss the hands-on work with the birds, but through working closely with other sanctuaries, rescue centres and vets, as well as the general public enquiries; such knowledge gained over the years is constantly recalled and we put it to good use in saving lives day-in-day-out.



In **April** I reported that; Today I have been on a 'flying visit' to three of our reserves; starting off in Rochdale at the Home Reserve, onto Banks to the Meadow Reserve, and finally onto the Three Owls Wood at Tarleton for a trustees meeting, where we were given the 'guided tour' by David to see first-hand all the recent progress on that site.

First the Home Reserve; recovering well from the recent deep snowy weather, the floor of the woodland there is greening-up nicely, and I noticed already two pairs of blackbirds are already well-on with their nesting. Two of the robins followed me round hoping for a titbit, so I overturned one of the rotting logs which enabled them to fill up on the grubs then exposed. A further check on the heron nests revealed two discarded egg shells, but alas a deathly silence from the treetops above. As the babies would normally be quite vocal, I fear they may have perished in the recent very cold and stormy weather (and been recycled by mum & dad)...but I would be happy to be proved wrong if they were simply tucked under a parent keeping warm, and will keep an eye on this over the next few days.

Onward to the Meadow Reserve at Banks; a very different reserve here, with lots of tussocky grass vital for the vole habitat. These provide an essential part of the diet for not only the barn owls, but a host of other birds and animals as David regularly reports. The songbirds were here aplenty, but no sign of the barn owls on this visit - obviously they were tucked up in bed!

Finally, over to Three Owls Wood and meeting up with David it is amazing to see how this woodland has developed from the horse field it was back in 2011. As we walked around the 6 1/2 acre site, we saw a number of songbirds, a pair of buzzards wheeling lazily overhead, and a couple of mallards in the large pond. There were also pheasants a-plenty, and on the way out we saw one of the huge hares racing around - they really are massive! The photo shows David and just some of the tree guards piling up now removed - having nursed the trees through their early years, and now ready to move onto their next home. It has been wonderful to see a true woodland growing up from 18" 'twigs', into the huge trees towering above us today.



Also in April, David reported having seen a pair of kestrels; *“One of the Barn Owls was hunting on The Meadow Reserve in Banks again and I was hoping to get you all a photo when he flew off - frightened by some crows who also flushed out a pair of grey partridge. Then I noticed this pair on the corner of the Flavourfresh greenhouse - Mr and Mrs Kestrel. I have hardly ever seen a pair together like this - one or other is here every day but here they are definitely a pair! Mr has a slate grey head and is on the right.”*

Before I go - the first swallow arrived today but only one so that doesn't make a summer!”



At the end of April, John Thorpe helped me in the planting of fifty spruce trees on the Home Reserve at Rochdale; these will enlarge the existing copse of such trees which are readily used by a number of birds for both roosting and nesting, and will replace those fallen in the winter storms.

It was mid-**May** when an excited David gave us an update regarding the residents at the Meadow Reserve in Banks; *"Great news!! Hissing from the barn owl nest box and frantic hunting activity at the Banks Meadow reserve can mean only one thing - CHICKS!! Hurrah!*

I was watching tonight to see a parent catch a vole in the evening sun about 8 pm I feel so proud that our efforts to help these beautiful birds have been rewarded.

The new hedges are about ten feet tall in places now, and home to many nesting birds including a pair of Linnets - what lovely song"

We also played host to Sue Lewis and 16 of her rehabilitated hedgehogs from Rochdale Hedgehog Rescue during their release at Three Owls Wood in that month. I noted at the time that the woodland at Tarleton is now well-established and offers perfect habitat for a huge number of species of both animals and birds. I am sure the hogs will quickly settle in and make themselves at home.

Back at the Home Reserve in Rochdale, the woodland floor was currently a huge sea of wild garlic - and playing havoc with my hay fever!

I have been pleased that it has (with a little gardening help), spread in order to reduce the amount of Himalayan Balsam which was choking off part of the reserve. The garlic is one of the earlier plants to flower thus helping the insects early on in the season (providing essential food for the birds), then dies back to allow other plants to grow later on in the season, so it's a win-win for all the residents on the reserve.



The end of the month swiftly arrived, and I was thrilled to find in the post when getting home after work, a lovely letter and most wonderful cheque of £50 from our generous friends at Knitting Nanas.

This is the 2nd year they have managed to raise funds for us; and this years' superb efforts will be put to very good use to cover the bill for the new trees we have recently planted on the Home Reserve at Rochdale.

So, a HUGE THANK YOU to Ann, Sue, Ann, Karen, Nellie, and Caroline.

June swiftly arrived, and with it and the fine weather a huge influx of birds – so large in fact that on Saturday 9th June I had to put out an appeal on the website for people to stop unnecessarily picking up birds;

I am getting alarmingly high numbers of reports of wildlife rescue centres having to close due to being 'full', during what is the busiest month of the year for wild bird rescues.

This is not due to an increase in the number of accident victims, but due to the unusually dry weather, people are spending more time outside, and coming across young birds who are out getting some sunshine rather than sat under a bush as it's usually raining - hence the conflict between people/fledglings.

The danger is threefold;

1. Birds are being removed unnecessarily from their parents, reducing their chances of survival. Even though each hospital prides itself on its standard of care; mum and dad bird generally do a much better job.
2. Hospital space is at a premium at this time for most sanctuaries; very few operate as Three Owls did where we can always get any casualty in, and if necessary open a temporary extra hospital room to cope with demand. If a sanctuary has to close to new admittances, then there is a huge knock-on effect to surrounding sanctuaries whom then also are at risk of becoming swamped and having to close to new admittances also.
3. Funding for any sanctuary is always tight, but the cost of specialist food, bedding and medicines stretches many sanctuaries to breaking point. Please NEVER leave a casualty at a rescue without leaving 'something' to help them out. It need not always be money - often they have a website or social media page where they have appeals running for what they specifically need at that time.

The danger is that if the smaller sanctuaries become overwhelmed, then the national animal welfare organisations will simply euthanize even more of our wildlife, simply to stem the tide of those being diverted their way. This is not said in a nasty way; it is simply what I have observed over the past 40+ years while working with Three Owls.

To give you an idea of figures; I've been manning the Helpline today. Of the 53 calls so far for assistance, only 3 needed hospital help, the others were simply

fledglings which were hopping around and learning about life outside of the nest. Please remember that some songbirds take a full 5 days after leaving the nest before they can fly properly, and so during this intervening period you will often find them in the gardens/yards, verges, fields and woods hopping/sitting around whilst they await mum/dad's next feed (usually every 3-4 hours).

IF you DON'T think 'your' bird fits this criteria, or it clearly has a injury such as a trailing wing, dragging leg, or clear open wound; THEN telephone your nearest wildlife rescue centre BEFORE moving it, so that it is confined for the least time possible. Too many birds have perished because the box/bird was left in the greenhouse/conservatory while people have only later in the day been seeking help.

Of course, there is always the exception to the rule where the bird is in the road or a cats mouth and needs immediate intervention! Obviously you don't then follow national advice of 'put it back where you found it', but again ring your rescue centre who will advise you dependent upon the birds' condition, before transporting it away from the area you found it in.

Sorry for the length of this report, but the list of 'closed' centres is growing by the hour, and things need to be put into perspective.



At the end of June, John Thorpe put together a pre-ride write-up to encourage us all to support his efforts the following month;

"Hello everyone and firstly my apologies for the delay in writing this - time seems to go nowhere these days. The Bike Ride this year is on Sunday the 8th of July and appears to be following the same route as last year, with a distance of approx. 60 miles - doesn't sound a lot when you say it quickly does it?!"

This will be my 29th consecutive ride, and the magic 30th for 2019 is dangling like an imaginary carrot ahead of me. I'm taking one thing at a time though and concentrating on this one first. Experience has taught me that one can never take anything for granted, and always treat the ride with respect or it will bite you when you least expect it. I've had a bit of a chest infection of late but will be nursing it along and taking things easy - the main thing is to finish, the time is less important - there speaks an aging rider for you! I've been thinking a lot about the work that Three Owls has done over the years, much of it never seen by the public and probably not truly appreciated as a result. Each individual story of rescue and recovery would take the volumes of a library to recount, and I still live in hopes that Nigel will find the time to put the Three Owls story in print some day, to show just how much time and sacrifice went into making it what it was, and in a different way, still is today. I am available for line drawings by the way!

Nigel will probably kill me for saying so, but very few people really know how much time he dedicates to answering phone calls and giving advice to the public and to other rescues, as well as spending time physically travelling to assess birds and give practical help to other rescue organisations. We are both Car Boot addicts I'm afraid, and most Sundays through the Summer meet up while scouring the stalls for elusive must have items, or junk to uninitiated! I often come back to Three Owls for a coffee, a chat and to show him my little treasures - stop it, there are people making up their own jokes!

The number of calls he deals with while I'm there is often amazing, and multiply this over the entire day and you have some idea of the work involved. I know this to be also continued throughout each evening and weekend throughout the year. My point is that Three Owls continues, in different ways, to make a significant contribution to the welfare of wild birds, and other animals along the way, since we frequently find new organisations which may need help or may in fact be able to help us in the future. The rescue community is a living, breathing

thing which constantly evolves and hopefully improves in terms of its ability to use the most up to date information in the service of wildlife. Anyone who watched the recent series of Springwatch programmes couldn't fail to be horrified by the figures showing the decline in so many species of wild birds and other animals in our countryside, including rabbits, a species close to my heart. Human beings have inflicted so much damage with so little thought over the past hundred years, and future generations will hold us to account one day.

While none of us are entirely blameless, some of us can honestly say that we tried our best to make a difference where we could. If you can be a part of that in any way you can look yourself in the eye in the mirror and at least know you were part of the solution, not the problem.

Every bit of support you can give my humble efforts will make a real difference to the quantity and quality of help we can offer to other organisations, and ultimately to the birds who are so vulnerable in a world we dominate. Every life is worth saving, and I do believe that in so doing we help to save ourselves, both spiritually and in reality.

I hope to be able to write my usual post ride report in due course, and thank you in advance for your continued support for both my ride and the work of Three Owls- we have risen above the trauma of recent years, and with your help we will continue to carry the torch which Mrs. Watkinson lit over fifty years ago.

Thank you all.

John Thorpe"



Early in June, David sent through a fresh report on the Barn Owl nestbox at Tarleton with some wonderful news; Kestrel chicks!!

"So excited to find these chicks exploring the barn. In fact there are four; one is just out of shot. Perhaps I need to put up another box on the other side of the barn.

I was mowing the rides today when all the little birds started alarming- then the reason came flapping by - a fine buzzard!!"



Just the following day, David also reported from Three Owls Wood that he had come across a baby hedgehog in the middle of the wood. It seemed a bit thin, probably too dry for the worms and slugs he likes to eat.

Later on the same day, he reported that he was so pleased to find six tiny mallard ducklings on the pond that evening.

REPORT ON THE 2018 MANCHESTER TO BLACKPOOL BIKE RIDE ON BEHALF OF THREE OWLS

BY JOHN THORPE.

Well, amazingly it's once again time to put pen to paper and report on my hair-raising adventures on the open road while risking life and limb for Three Owls. Those of you familiar with my annual foray into sensational journalism will no doubt be panting with breathless expectation at the prospect, and I'll try not to disappoint my readership. This was, as some of you will know (because I made such a big deal of it in the pre-ride write-up!), my 29th time in the saddle from Manchester to Blackpool, and as the days went by with glorious weather; I wondered whether we would be lucky on the day. Thankfully the sun didn't let us down, and I was really looking forward to riding in the heat. This may seem strange to most people, including just about everyone I know, since the assumption is that one can't do this sort of energy sapping activity in heat without risking dehydration and death!

Perhaps because I'm a contrary sort or perhaps because my natural body chemistry allows me to do it, I absolutely thrive in heat and really feel alive - I was definitely born in the wrong country! After a day or so of preparation of my trusty bike, which included changing a front tyre, cleaning and lubricating the chain, and generally checking all its nuts and bolts, I was happy that I'd done all I reasonably could to get it ready - of course I was another matter altogether!

As I've said many times in the past, I don't prepare for the event by riding gruelling miles and going to the gym, and while this certainly isn't the prescribed way to prepare, it seems to work for me, although I wouldn't recommend it to anyone else as the correct method. I usually prepare by a lot of walking and trying to eat as well as I can for a week or so beforehand, and I'm very conscious of how much an event like this can take out of the body, even when you feel pretty fit. This was brought home to me a couple of years ago, when, by chance, my Blood Donors appointment was very close to the day of the ride, something which didn't normally occur.

For the first time I can ever remember, my sample failed the iron test and I couldn't make a donation. It was pointed out that I obviously hadn't had time to make up the lost iron from the ride, and this called for desperate measures, including medically prescribed doses of Guinness! Purely for the iron content you understand!

Thankfully the chest infection which had been a damned nuisance shortly before the ride had left me, and much to my rabbits' disgust I had a ridiculously early night on Saturday. Of course going to bed early is all well and good in theory, but when it's still light and sunny outside the drawn curtains, you can't get to sleep and end up listening to Classic FM in the hope of dropping off! The alarm was set for 3.30 am and I sprang out of bed like an Olympic sprinter when it went off. Actually I rolled over, and reluctantly crawled out after reminding myself that I still had the animals to feed and last minute things to sort out before leaving for Manchester. The rabbits looked a bit bemused at being woken up at this ungodly hour, and I apologised to them for the fact that they wouldn't be able to come out until I came home. Oh the cruelty!

I grabbed breakfast, checked the bike in case a tyre had gone down(thankfully not), and just as it was getting light, set off, only to come back a minute later, having realised that I'd left my water bottle in the fridge!

Not a good start but then again I am old and senile!

As always, there was very little traffic on the roads at this time, and most of the traffic lights were on green on the run into Manchester.

It's a nice time of day, before there are too many people out and about, but of course there's always the thought at the back of your mind that a puncture could spoil things, as indeed it did last year. Thankfully I didn't have any problems, either on the run to the start or during the ride, something I was very thankful for I can tell you. No one actually likes changing a tube by the roadside unless they have a warped sense of humour that is, and I'm no exception.

My previous reconnoitre of the Media City area paid off, and I was able to reach the start in The Piazza area in almost exactly an hour. Preparations were under way for the start, an hour away, and I always find it relaxing to be somewhere well ahead of time, just in case something does go wrong. I found my yellow suited mate The Voice of The Ride, and had a Couple of photos taken by an obliging coffee stall assistant with my home made '29th Consecutive Bike Ride' poster. I also gave him a copy of the Three Owls magazine to read, and he was very interested, surprisingly, since he was a keen RSPB member himself. We may get another supporter in due course-who knows? The smell of rubbing alcohol, muscle rubs and Kendal Mint cake filled the air as riders honed themselves to perfection around the Piazza. I had girded my loins sometime previously so didn't see the need to distress anyone further on the day! It's always funny to see the mixture of riders who take part in the event, and I'm sure it must be

the same for the other events around the country. There are of the course the athletically challenged like myself, the somewhat corpulent, and the super fit club riders who use the sixty miles as a mild training run! It's easy to poke fun at the less athletically built entrants, but at the end of the day they are taking part, and the majority finish in one piece, having earned some money for their chosen charity. If everyone made the same effort, both for the sake of their health and for charity, the world would be a lot better place.

The time for the off drew nigh, and we lined up behind the tape, snorting with eager anticipation like thoroughbreds at the start of the Derby. Listen if I want exaggerate I will do-it's my story! One large and apparently insurmountable problem stood in our way however, a large road block which needed to sink into its cavern in the ground before we could pass. A couple of minutes of hectic activity resulted in the sinking of the obstruction and the dropping of the tape, over which we surged, only to be slowed down by a man clothed in luminous yellow who slowed us down and told us to keep to the left!

The sun was coming up and the temperature rising, and I set off full of enthusiasm and energy bars, determined to keep up a good, steady pace without overdoing it. I have learned over the years, that pacing is vital, or one is inclined to burn out well before the finish. The sun was warm and we wound our way towards Leigh, through Salford and Astley Green, with a welcome breeze cooling our straining muscles (I was trying to find my straining muscles personally!). Through Atherton and on towards Coppull and Charnock Richard the string of riders pressed on and I had time to notice some of the other riders and their garb. One, shall we say, a wee bit on the corpulent side, chap I rode behind for a while, had a shirt on which had the log 'This guy needs beer!' I couldn't help thinking a low calorie soft drink might do him more good, but it probably wouldn't have made such a catchy logo!

There's a wonderful downward slope on the road to Haigh Hall, where a rider can either coast down the steep gradient and rest the legs, or as I like to do, pedal like the clappers and see how fast I can go!

I managed 29.5 miles an hour this time, and was impressed by the way the brakes actually stopped me at the bottom - very fortunate I felt, especially since I'd tightened them up the day before! The steep hill leading up to the entrance to Haigh Hall (pronounced Hay) loomed up and I did what any true Englishman with red blood in

his veins would do in the face of such a challenge.....I got off and pushed! Save your energy for the important bits is my motto nowadays. I also pushed over the infamous Haigh Hall cobbles, which have claimed many a victim over the years and rendered many a cyclist with a high pitched voice for the rest of the ride!

We reached the country park at 8.35, and stopped at 8.40 for a well earned break until 9.15. They say, food tastes better outside in the open air, and I felt much better after a rest. I asked a passing Paramedic if he'd had any customers yet, and he told me a tale from last year's event which highlighted how dangerous cycling can be if things go wrong. A lady cyclist swerved to avoid a water bottle which had fallen from the cycle in front of her, lost control and ended up in a deep ditch with several fractures in one forearm. She needed morphine and anti clotting treatment, and was airlifted to Blackpool for urgent care. It all happened in seconds, and obviously spoiled her day. Sobering thoughts when one has a long way to go.

The road led north through Standish, Coppull and Charnock Richard, Chorley and Leyland, and even built up areas looked beautiful in the Summer sun. Periodically, we passed people who'd come out to cheer us on, and it's really nice to see them. There were even one or two houses where the owners had left water out for cyclists and chairs to have a rest-very tempting but not a good idea because if you get off you don't want to get back on again! Soon we faced the long road into Preston and although it was gloriously sunny and the trees and grass were brilliant green, I put my head down and pedalled steadily, trying to keep up a rhythm. A couple of riders wearing pink ballet tutus flashed past (well everyone was flashing past!), and I couldn't help but admire their nerve- well not everyone suits pink do they?!

At one of the roundabouts, we passed a full sized military tank stationed by the roadside with a sign saying 'Made in Leyland' Perhaps I'm a little cynical but I wondered how on earth it had avoided being spirited away and weighed in for scrap! I'm sure it's well secured to terra firma and was certainly still there the other day when I passed it in a friend's car.

Eventually the long, long road came to an end, and we swept downhill and wound our way to Preston docks at 11.00 am. I pulled over and propped the faithful bike up by the railings, ready for a break and a stretch of the legs. In case that sounds a little strange in view of the fact that my legs had been stretched for quite a few miles already, it's worth bearing in mind that the riding position on a bike can lead to a touch of cramp

occasionally and it's nice to pose and extend the limbs as if you've been watching a Jane Fonda workout video!

A group of middle aged riders (hark who's using the phrase 'middle aged!') Asked me if I'd oblige them by taking a picture on a phone to commemorate the event, and I did the best I could in view of the fact that the strong sunlight made it difficult to see the image on the screen. One of the group, a well built rider with a generous stomach allowance was wearing a riding shirt with the logo 'Not Bad for a Fat Lad!' I do like people with a sense of humour!

The water was sparkling in the sunshine, and gulls and cormorants were sitting on the pontoons in the docks, keeping an eye open for the chance of a meal. A nearby notice informs passers-by that there is a tern colony in the docks, quite something for an inland town. Just goes to show that Nature will find a way, given a bit of encouragement, and it made me think about the work that Three Owls has done at the reserves to encourage wildlife. I visited Three Owls Wood with Nigel the other day to photograph the release of a young curlew and pheasant, and was amazed at how it has matured since I last saw it. The trees have grown and the undergrowth shelters so much life, that the transformation is astonishing.

Mrs. Watkinson would have been so proud of what we have all achieved, and the list of species seen on the reserve grows every year.

With so much pressure on the natural world every bit of help we who care, can give, is precious. It keeps me going when the legs get tired and the hills seem steeper than last year - and several did I can tell you!

Like any red blooded Englishman faced with a steep hill, I remember my proud heritage, grit my teeth andget off and walk up! There's no point in wasting precious energy at my time of life!

Twenty five minutes seemed to fly by, but with some food and drink in the tank I felt much better and set off again at 11.30 for the final section into Blackpool through the villages and countryside of the Fylde. The route goes past a park, and the sharp left turn reveals a steep rise, not what you need immediately after a break! Still a short walk never did anyone any harm! The sun was wonderfully warm, and I actually did pass a field of grain waving in the breeze this year. Village pubs

beckoned, but I pressed on with steely determination - to tell the truth the temptation to stop for a drink was very real, but the legs start to seize up if you don't keep up a steady pace, and I wanted to see if I could get in a little earlier than last year - well we all have our delusions.

*The riders pressed on through the pretty village of Treales and on to Kirkham, Freckleton and Warton. At some point on this road, I noticed a farm on the left which had a kiosk advertising Raw Farm Milk. Call me a sucker for temptation but I couldn't resist the lure of ice cold milk on a hot day. It's a long time since I tasted raw milk, but I polished off the whole lot before carrying on, and it tasted amazing.
The simple pleasures are the best!*

We soon found ourselves on the coastal road which winds into Lytham, and the road surface immediately lets the rider know that they're nearly in Blackpool. It's a sort of open pored, reddish tarmac which manages to transmit every bump and ridge through the tyre and up the frame to the rider's tender regions-- which after sixty miles can get pretty tender I can assure you! I can only guess that some point in the past, the local Council must have been offered a job lot of red tarmac and thought it would look nice! The other problem is that it gives the impression that the tyre is gradually deflating, and that can be disconcerting to say the least.

This section of the ride, as readers may recall from previous reports, can, on a bad day, be very taxing, since the onshore wind blowing over the extensive green section can almost stop a rider in their tracks. Thankfully this year the day was wonderful and the wind was a gentle breeze which gave some welcome relief from the heat. I was actually feeling quite good at this point, and kept up a steady speed, hoping that it would eat up the last few miles, which always seem to take the longest.

We passed the famous windmill and I noticed the quite extensive area of burned grass which a friend had told me about previously. Apparently someone had been careless with a barbecue kit and caused an extensive burn which the fire brigade had to deal with. The stupidity of some people is astonishing, given the publicity regarding fire danger at the time.

The way people perceive cyclists is obviously influenced by their experience of them, and on the way in to Blackpool I witnessed one of the most arrogant and stupid

pieces of riding I have seen in a long time. As we got closer to Blackpool, the number of people increased, as did the traffic, and noticed, up ahead, a family crossing the road. They crossed onto the central island and set off for the other side. There were several riders ahead of me, including a young man of about eighteen, who was riding very erratically and quickly, and while everyone else slowed down when they saw the family crossing, he deliberately speeded up and headed straight for them. At the last second he swerved and missed them by inches. If I could have seen his number I would have reported him for dangerous riding, but unfortunately I couldn't. In the very unlikely event that he reads this, or someone does who knows him, I'd like him to know that he represents everything I detest, both in cyclists and human beings in general.

We reached the point where the road joins the promenade, and turned onto the closed section which leads to the finish line, and I gathered all the energy I could muster to look heroic as I crossed the line. There was a good crowd gathered to welcome us home, and I raised an arm in celebration as I finished. I did consider raising both arms but since the front end of the bike is lightly balanced, I could imagine the wheel twitching and sending me nose first across the line! I chose dignity and safety over spectacle on this occasion!

I crossed the line to rapturous applause at 1.37pm, an improvement on last year's time, and unfortunately couldn't catch the eye of my mate 'The Voice of the Ride', since he wasn't in the commentary box. A personal greeting would have been nice! I grabbed my completion certificate, water and Soreen bar and headed for the Pleasure Beach, where my friend Les was waiting for me. Some relaxation, a drink and something to eat, followed by a leisurely stroll in the sun, was a great way to wind down, and he kindly gave myself and the trusty bike a lift home.

The final mileage, was 77.8 (including the ride from Bury to the start in Manchester, the average speed of 10.5 mph and the maximum speed of 29.5 mph (well it was wind assisted, down a very steep hill with someone pushing me!)

I checked with Bike Events office during the following week, and found that there were approximately 3,700 riders in the event his year, and that, as far as they knew, this was the 32nd event. Next year will be my 30th consecutive ride, and with luck I will once again be representing Three Owls and asking for your support (unless I can save up for one of my own that is!)

The ride is, I suppose my chance every year to do something worthwhile and prove that I can still physically accomplish it, but more importantly, it proves that together we can make a real difference and leave something for future generations to appreciate. Remarkably, there are photos of me on the ride, which can be seen by going to the Bike Events website, finding the Manchester to Blackpool Ride and tapping the box to look at rider photos. Type in my rider number 3355 and you will be treated to exciting action shots showing every straining sinew and bead of perspiration in glorious colour! If anyone would be interested in the idea of signed photos through the Three Owls website, we would appreciate feedback to gauge whether it would be feasible.

I hope you've enjoyed this report on my exploits, and thank you so much for your continued support for the work of Three Owls. Nigel tells me that donations so far have exceeded those from last year at the same time, and let's hope that this bodes well for this year's total. I may be the one who makes the physical effort but the supporters make the real difference.

John Thorpe



*The total for John's 2018 sponsored bike ride was a wonderful sum of **£1156.78***

WELL DONE to Everyone!

*John's 30th Sponsored Bike Ride in 2019 will be on **Sunday 7th July***

PLEASE support him if you can.

Sad news from our colleagues at Knoxwood

We were deeply saddened to hear from Emma at Knoxwood in July, that our Hooded Crow "Silver" had finally passed away of old age.

Many supporters of Three Owls will remember him living in the aviary alongside the barn; he was rescued in the late 1980's by a lady from the North-East who found him as a baby, reared and released him back to the wild. As she was his 'foster mum' they could often be found together in the gardens enjoying each others' company. Sadly after 3-4 years, the lady reached the stage in her life where she needed to move from her house and go into a care home. She tried 'all over the UK' she informed us, but no-one wanted a tame crow and she was becoming increasingly concerned that either he wouldn't find enough food, or that he would go to the 'wrong type of person'.

Thankfully, she came across Three Owls, and we gladly offered him a home for the rest of his life.

With the upheaval caused by Rochdale Council in 2009/10 where we had to move all the resident birds and aviaries and set up again elsewhere (they were insisting we were a zoo!), he was taken on by Knoxwood Wildlife Rescue and thoroughly enjoyed another very full life up there, for a further eight years.

I therefore estimate that he was around 29-30 years old; quite some feat for a bird whose usual wild life expectancy would be 8-11 years.



In **August**, we were celebrating coming to the end of an exceptionally busy breeding season; The Heronry had done exceptionally well with the hot weather, and we had seen not two but THREE broods in two of the nests, with all the youngsters finally taking to the skies. The one nest which had previously failed each year, finally produced three healthy chicks, and two of these successfully fledged and took to the skies (sadly one did die in the nest).

The small birds have also done well; in fact ALL of the nestboxes have been occupied at least once, and many have reared two broods this year. Thankfully the springs which feed the reserve ponds clearly run very deep, and even in the dry weather this year they have continued to flow - bringing the life-blood through the whole of the reserve, to keep everything in flux.

The photo in this report shows one of the bird boxes which wasn't protected with a metal hole-plate; clearly one of the squirrels hibernated in it last winter, and this year two of our robins have successfully made use of it twice this year to product broods of four and five healthy chicks - now flying freely round the reserve.

When faced with a problem such as no water for ongoing works at Old Beech Wood reserve, our handyman Stuart was struggling to carry enough water in his little van to complete the daily maintenance works on that site. Thankfully, with generous support from donors including the Walker 597 Trust, we were able to purchase an ex-Water Board clean water high-speed bowser, and transport it full of water from the Home Reserve to our 5-acre reserve at Mere Brow, and then using the Land Rover take it right into the depths of the Wood to where its contents can be best used.

Thank you so much to all our donors who made this purchase possible - this has allowed all our onsite works to continue throughout what has been the driest summer in many years.



It was in **September**, that I commented online how a number of times this year (and again this morning - hence this report) I have been asked for a list of event/visiting times for various reserves across the Three Owls network of sites. I must stress that the only two sites with public access alongside are those managed by Knoxwood Wildlife Rescue at Wigton near Carlisle, and access to them is purely through arrangement by that charity. This site houses our aviary birds relocated from Rochdale in 2010, along with our hospital facilities amalgamated with Knoxwood's own intensive care facilities.

The reserves at Rochdale, Tarleton, Banks, and Mere Brow are used specifically for rehabilitation of rescued wild birds and animals, and environmental conservation - hence access is very limited for the welfare of those dwelling within. Indeed, it is usually only for maintenance or to effect a release that many of the sites are entered at all - it is important that the residents (some rare and highly protected) are safe and undisturbed; after all that is the purpose of a 'sanctuary'. It is through the website and our annual newsletter that we are able to give you further insight into the continued vital work we undertake on these four 'protected' reserves.

Many thanks to you all for your ongoing support - it is through your generous donations that we are able to continue our work in supporting the wild birds around us; saving, protecting and enhancing their lives not just for the here and now but for far into the future.

We are always grateful to receive gifts of any kind; some come in the form of plants/trees/materials for the reserves. Some come in the form of volunteers and/or fundraising events. Some come in the form of money donations and legacies, and some come in the form of foods with which we can support the birds directly on the reserves.

I was thrilled therefore earlier this month to be invited over to Mirfield (West Yorkshire), to collect a huge box of foods specifically to support the birds on one of the reserves this winter. A HUGE thank you then to Tara for her thoughtfulness and now our birds both resident and visitors can tuck in and enjoy the sunflower kernels / mealworms / peanuts.



We are still looking for donations of wild bird seed and fatballs to compliment these kind gifts, so that we can help as many different species of bird through what could be a very hard winter (if the forecasts are to be believed!).



It was in mid-**October**, as the Autumn was well-underway, that the leaves were starting to fall in earnest on the Home Reserve.

As well as the usual fungi we have reported on previously, we have quite a variety of toadstools this year; three of which I have pictured with this report.

Of course the different media love to report dire weather forecasts, and with suggested four months of snow being bandied about for the end of November, we have prepared in advance for whatever the weather DOES decide to throw at us. However, we rarely get the true seasons that were commonplace 50 years ago; no wonder Mother Nature sometimes gets confused and we need to be there to support our wildlife in case they find themselves caught out by an extreme.

In the meanwhile, we shall enjoy the displays she puts on for us just now - I have been watching an adult Jay this week stuffing acorns into hanging baskets and planters. Looking at the collection of young oak trees that were growing earlier *this* year, he hasn't got a very good memory!



In **November**, due to the exceptionally good weather this autumn, we were able to undertake our final release of the year (much later than normal). Indeed, as a consequence of the mild autumn, many of our colleagues at wildlife rescues throughout the UK were still able to be releasing adult birds back to the wild, rather than having to keep them over-winter in aviaries due to the hard frosts we would usually be encountering at this time of year.

We were over at Three Owls Wood in Tarleton today, releasing a male pheasant who had recovered from a particularly nasty wing injury (and was too quick for my camera!), along with the red-legged partridge in the accompanying photograph; perhaps our Christmas *Three Owls* "Partridge in a Fir-tree" (I don't think we have any pear-trees on that Reserve!)

However, the mild weather IS causing problems for those sanctuaries treating hedgehogs, as they simply aren't hibernating and consequently are getting themselves into trouble due to lack of natural food availability. If you do find one wandering around during the day, then please do contact your nearest wildlife rescue centre for advice as to how best to help it. Local to Rochdale would either be Meltham Wildlife Rescue or Lower Moss Wood Wildlife Rescue. If supplementing their diet yourself, remember **NO bread or milk**, but meat-based cat food i.e. NOT fish-flavoured. Thanks.



December was finally upon us, and David sent us a lovely report regarding one of the Spruce Trees at Three Owls Wood;

"It was such a great pleasure to be able to give a free Christmas tree to The Banks Methodist School this year - particularly as we grew it ourselves from an eighteen inch high seedling!

We now have to thin the trees out so it's a guilt free tree!!

Amazingly as we went to cut it down a Tawny Owl flew out of it - I have witnesses to prove it!!!"



Just after Christmas we wished a very Happy New Year to all our supporters, and hoped they had all enjoyed a peaceful Christmas.

I was very pleased last week to receive the first rooted Christmas tree to start off our appeal for more spruce trees. These will be planted out on the Reserve to compliment those already onsite, as they provide excellent nesting and roosting opportunities for a myriad of wild birds.

Rather than have a mass planting session, we will get them in the ground as they come in, to avoid any problems with frost if/when it finally arrives.





Three Owls Bird Sanctuary and Reserve

(Affiliated to the Jean Sainsbury Animal Welfare Trust)

Wolstenholme Fold, Norden, Rochdale, Lancs. OL11 5UD

Tel: 07973 819389 (Advice Helpline)

Website: www.threeowls.co.uk

Email: info@threeowls.co.uk

Registered Charity No: 298352



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)