

Marlot Conservation Group (MCG)

Work report to Whixall Parish Council for its meeting on 12 January 2022

Since the last report to Council was prepared, Alan Lomas has joined the MCG and is giving valuable assistance as and when work commitments allow.

Storm Arwen also arrived on Friday 26th November, causing severe damage overnight. Trees and outbuildings were left in a dangerous condition, which necessitated closing the site to the public on the following morning for safety reasons.

The damaged buildings, part of which were hung up in a tree, were the property of Natural England. We were most fortunate that two of their senior staff were able to attend on Tuesday 30th to clear all the debris, assisted by Martin Spenser and Graham Turnbull. Graham took some photographs and video footage during the operation to release the barn from its new home in the tree. Considering that Natural England had many other storm damage incidents to deal with, their ready assistance to us was much appreciated.

We were able to reopen the site to the public on 7th December, after our team felled a large *Alder* and carried out sufficient logging and processing to restore the safety of the area. Having put some details of the events on social media, it took no time at all for "locals" to demand the timber, but we had planned to use most of it for rustic features around the site. However, a substantial amount of timber was handed over.

Prior to the storm, we had carried out some willow coppicing, using the arisings to complete the compost clamps mentioned in our last report.

We have almost finished the process of clearing vegetation from the ponds. The task involves entering the ponds in waders, so as to reach the substantial root systems of the *reedmace*, commonly called bulrushes.

On 10th December, our little wildlife haven officially became a Local Nature Reserve and printed notices were put up on the entrance gates to publicise the fact. During our lunch break on that day, John Piper and Alan spotted a *kingfisher* at the pond area; a flash of blue, then it was gone.

Sometime around that date, the site was visited by an ecologist who is a nationally recognised expert on *caddis flies*. He did not make any contact with members of the team, but he did report back to Natural England staff, having identified rare snails on site and some insect species. He also passed favourable comment about the way that the site was being managed. If anything, this does highlight our dilemma in trying to nurture different species because, for instance, the shallow scrapes favoured by snails are not suitable for breeding newts.

The storm damage was immediately followed by intensive wet weather, which has saturated the site and scuppered the plan to introduce cattle to the meadow areas for the time being. This will be kept under review, but we are

likely to be faced with a lot of clearance work that the cattle might otherwise have achieved.

Our application to Shropshire Council for some saplings to be provided under its Free Trees scheme has been approved. The trees will be planted as a hedgerow, and the ground is being prepared in readiness for planting in March.

Bird nest boxes have been restored and will be re-installed in due course, albeit in a higher position in an attempt to prevent the interference which has occurred in the past.

Since the last report to Council was prepared, John Piper has left the MCG, having recently moved house and needing to concentrate on his own property and garden maintenance. We have completed the process of clearing vegetation from the ponds. Thanks go to Alan Rawlinson for permitting a large amount of waste material to be dropped off at his yard. During the second clearing-up session, a lady arrived in a search for “rare snails”. We have not had any feed-back from that visit.

On 25th January, the team re-installed 15 bird nest boxes. We are hoping that their new, higher location may deter some of the interference suffered by the boxes in previous years. The boxes are occupied mainly by *blue tits* and *great tits* but will be monitored through the nesting season.

On 27th January a *kingfisher* was once again spotted in the pond area. It is uncertain whether this is a resident bird or a regular visitor; either way, we have to hope that it will not wipe out the other aquatic wildlife.

Cattle are due to be brought on to the meadow areas at the time of writing this report. It has been necessary to wait for a window of drier weather to do this, and the cattle will be there for a short period only.

As mentioned previously, a considerable amount of work will be needed, once the cows have done their bit, to clear the re-generated willow growth from the meadows. With some time available on 1st February, the team started this work on a trial section and it is proving to be particularly difficult with hand tools.

Martin Spenser
February 2022

Marlot Conservation Group (MCG) Work report to Whixall Parish Council meeting 9 March 2022

Period 9 February- 7 March 2022

During the first week of February Mr Paul Martin (Cattle Farmer) put 4 cows on the Marlot for the start of the conservation grazing. The MCG continued to dig out re-generated willow growth in the front meadow by hand. Although heavy and laborious work the team has managed to clear a considerable patch in the front meadow adjacent to the creeping willow patches. It is intended to prepare this cleared area and sow the remaining wild flower seeds (750g) later on in March.

On 11 February the MCG met to discuss the annual work activity plan based on the 2013 Marlot Management Plan and previous years experiences. The work plan will be used as a basis for work on volunteer days (every Tuesday) but is, of course, fluid depending on changing circumstances.

The ever changing weather and incoming storms disrupted work in the third week of February with only daily checks on the cattle being conducted and Alan Lomas singularly carrying out additional willow clearance on a non-volunteer day. Once the storms had passed a full assessment of the Marlot was made to ascertain the extent of any damage. One large oak tree on the perimeter between the Marlot and Plantation House field was found to have been uprooted and had fallen along the bank and was now leaning onto another tree inside the Marlot. Luckily this was the extent of the storm damage. The owners at Plantation House were informed of MCG work to clear those oak limbs and branches that had come down into their field. The oak was too large to fully cut down and only those limbs and branches that were safe to cut were processed – however it was fully cleared off Plantation House field and wood stacked for the owners at Plantation House.

In the last week of February, the cattle escaped and pushed through the electric fence into the pond area and over into Plantation House field. Paul Martin was informed and the cows re-located back into the Marlot. It was understood that a loose dog (from Plantation House) spooked the cows.

At the beginning of March, the MCG decided to check and clear the “Jubilee Hedge” area in preparation for the event in late March. This consisted of measuring and checking the hedge planting plan and a full brush-cut and clear of brash and debris from the immediate area, together with an initial health and safety risk assessment for the event. Willow clearance in the front meadow also continued.

On 4th March the cattle once again escaped and this time Paul Martin recovered them and took them to a new location as it would appear there is very little grazing left in the Marlot. Unfortunately, the weather and the cows have conspired against us and excessive poaching by the cows has caused considerable damage to the main path and meadow and pond pathways which will require a lot of work to level out and make safe. The MCG has discussed this with Peter Boyer at Natural England and asked for assistance, in the guise of a tracked vehicle with shovel, to assist in re-levelling and flattening the pathways – this will be dependant of on their availability and workload. The MCG will in the meantime attempt to repair some of the damage on the meadow and pond pathways by hand. The first newt surveys of the year will take place on Friday 11 March and Saturday 12 March with Nicky Hunter again conducting them. Attendance will be restricted to MCG members only, due to the safety concerns of the pathways – later surveys may include Natural England volunteers.

Graham Turnbull, Marlot Conservation Group
7 March 2022

Marlot Activity Report (8 March – 6 April 2022)

Marlot Conservation Group (MCG) Work report to Whixall Parish Council

Much of the work during this period has been repairing the damage to the footpaths around the Marlot caused by a combination of the grazing cows' footfall and bad weather. In the pond area the group decided to prepare and construct a base trellis of wood across the extremely muddy areas and cover these with wood chippings from brash and cut willow from the Marlot. In tandem with this work, the group also filled in the numerous deep cow footprints around the ponds – this was particularly important as there was concern that breeding newts from the ponds would be trapped in these holes and would be unable to get out. Whilst a lot of work has been done around the pond area in repairing the paths there is still work to be done and this will be determined by weather conditions and the drying out of the muddy areas when it can be raked and levelled to ensure safe paths.

Work has also continued in the front meadow area with respect to repairing the pathway. Much of this has been the laborious and time consuming task of filling in individual cow footprint holes and levelling the earth with hand tools. Around the creeping willow and picnic table area the ground is particularly wet and muddy and the group has cut dry grass from other areas of the meadow and laid it over the muddy areas in an attempt to bind with the mud. It is hoped that with good weather that these muddy areas will dry out enough for more levelling and repair to be done more effectively. We have also prepared the area where we have previously cleared willow and will be sowing the last of the wild meadow flower seeds that were purchased last year in an attempt to further encourage wild flower coverage in the front meadow area.

On Sunday 20th March we had the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Hedge planting event for the community of Whixall. The event was extensively advertised on both Whixall Community Facebook pages, as well as Wem and Whitchurch Facebook Groups. An email with associated poster was sent to Whixall Primary School Headteacher asking for the event to be publicised to the school children and their parents (this request was not even acknowledged by the Headteacher). Posters were also put up on all the village noticeboards. Unfortunately, and much to the Group's dismay and disappointment not one local Whixall villager turned up for the event. The only local Whixall people who took part were the James' family and a local friend who was visiting the farm adjacent to the Marlot – and even their participation was only after the MCG specifically asked them to come and help out. All other participants, 6 in total, were passers-by who were out for a walk on the Moss (these from Manchester and Nantwich) who were cajoled into planting a few saplings. The majority of the 60 saplings were planted by the 4 MCG members and Alice Turnbull, who came to help out on the day. Whixall is extremely lucky to have its own Local Nature Reserve on its doorstep, however it would be good if it was recognised and supported by local people who are always saying how close and caring a community they are!

The first newt survey of the season was conducted, under the auspices of Nicky Hunter, on 25/26 March. In total 63 traps were laid on the Friday evening in all the 6 ponds and these were then inspected on the Saturday morning. More newts were caught than last March, however more traps were used and the weather has been milder and it is thought that this has encouraged the newts to breed earlier. In total there was 11 Male Great Crested Newts; 17 Female Great Crested Newts (many heavy with eggs); 3 Male Smooth Newts; 8 Female Smooth Newts and numerous other insects including Greater and Lesser diving beetles, water boatmen and stonefly larvae. A further survey will be conducted by Nicky Hunter in April with the MCG. Natural England, with Shropshire Wildlife Trust, are also considering a public amphibian event at the Marlot at the end of April. This will be dependent on their

own Health and Safety risk assessment and availability of an EPS licensed person to run the event.

The MCG has spent to the limits of its annual working budget, however, should the Parish Council have an underspend on its budget it is requested that consideration be made to provide the MCG with some additional funding. At present we have only one of each of the hand tools that we use, such as rake, pruning saw, spade, fork, leaf rake etc and purchasing a second additional tool will help the MCG to spread work equally and without using our own personal tools. We could also use more health and safety items such as gloves, goggles and hi-vis vests for the team.

Graham Turnbull
Marlot Conservation Group
7 April 2022

Marlot Conservation Group (MCG)

Work report to Whixall Parish Council meeting 11 May 2022

Period 7 April -3 May 2022

During this period the MCG has concentrated on the front and back meadows. Whilst the cow grazing had kept some areas of grass down there was a need to carry out a further grass and hay cut using brush-cutters. Much of the front meadow, and part of the back meadow, was also covered in early growth willow and whilst the MCG has managed to dig out several patches of willow by hand it was decided to cut the remaining patches down to the ground. These areas will re-grow and the intention will be to dig as much out by hand again later in the year or early next year. The cutting and subsequent raking of the grass, willow and hay was carried out over a 5 week period (working each Tuesday – with one work day cancelled due to rain). This work produced a considerable amount of arisings and due to a period of dry and sunny weather it was decided too dangerous to burn on site. With Councillor Alan Rawlinson's permission, we were able to deposit the grass and willow arisings (several trailer loads) in an area of his property where we had previously deposited pond debris. This was a great help and we thank him; it has enabled us to clear the meadows of all debris. Additional work during this period also included repairing the main meadow entrance pathway and levelling of the connecting path between the two meadows from the damage caused by the cow grazing.

From a referral from Councillor Ian Mercer based on discussions he had with Natural England regarding nature trail proposals, the MCG met with Mr Stephen Barlow (NE Volunteer and Naturalist Photographer) at the Marlot to discuss his involvement in assisting with content and photographs for possible future interpretation boards and a Marlot guide. He is already working with Shropshire Wildlife Trust to develop additional trails and information for them in the area and he was keen to incorporate the Marlot in his work. The Marlot, and its paths, will be added to any maps and website content that are produced. He agreed to help in any way he can regarding information leaflets and board content (which will be discussed at the Steering Group meeting)

Shropshire Wildlife Trust (Anna Martin SWT Events Officer), with Natural England assistance, took the opportunity to arrange and conduct a newt survey public event at the Marlot. The event was led by Mr Phil Playforth (SWT and registered newt handler) and was attended by 7 members of the public (3 adults and 4 children). MCG members assisted Mr Playforth in setting the newt traps the day before the event and also attended on the day to observe how the event was conducted and to assist as required. A small, but enjoyable event showing the future possibilities for other organisations to utilise the Marlot for their own arranged events on site, which we need to encourage. Mr Playforth and the MCG also laid several roofing felt sheets around the pond areas as refugia for newts and other

amphibians/wildlife. These will be periodically checked by the MCG and results reported back to Mr Playforth at SWT.

MCG members also attended a meeting with members of Whixall Parish Council to discuss future plans and arrangements for the Marlot's administrative and physical management. A lively meeting which highlighted many different issues and requirements. From this meeting came the establishment of a steering group made up of 2 WPC members and 2 MCG members who are tasked to look at priorities and requirements needed to take the Marlot to the next level of Local Nature Reserve development. The first meeting will be on Monday 16th May (at the Bull and Dog pub!).

Graham Turnbull
Marlot Conservation Group
4 May 2022

Marlot Conservation Group (MCG)

Work report to Whixall Parish Council meeting 13 July 2022

Period 4 May - 6 July 2022

Ground work during this period has been kept to the minimum to ensure the least disruption to the spring and summer growth in the meadow areas and around the ponds. Pathways in both areas have been strimmed regularly to ensure clear walking around these areas. Work has also been carried on in the back meadow with the laborious, but essential task of “bracken bashing”. It is hoped that by bruising the young bracken shoots early on that it will reduce further growth in the following season as it has not had time to establish itself. Many of the wildflowers are now in abundance in the Marlot and insect life around the ponds is prolific with many species of butterflies and damselflies in evidence. There have been no newt surveys during this period due to various changing circumstances (availability/weather etc), however the final newt survey of the year will be conducted in early July.

Administratively it has been a productive period for both the MCG and members of the Parish Council. On Monday 16th May the first meeting of the Marlot Steering Group (MCG/WPC members) convened at the Bull and Dog to discuss the “way ahead” for the Marlot – this included looking at future strategic aims and equipment requirements that are considered necessary to move the Marlot LNR into its next phase. A useful meeting which resulted in several actions for both parties to look at and take forward – particularly in equipment requirements (tables and benches/fingerposts); Public Relations and Communication (Note: |A local Facebook post by the MCG over the Jubilee weekend to encourage visitors to the Marlot was well received) and ways to provide the visitor with on-site information about the Marlot. On Wednesday 18th May the MCG were asked to provide a presentation on the Marlot for the Whixall Parish Meeting. A power point presentation was given and a general discussion/question and answer session followed. It was disappointing that no members of Whixall Parish turned up and the presentation was only given to the Parish Council members.

On Monday 22 May MCG representatives, together with Peter Bowyer of Natural England, met with the new owners of Plantation House (Mr Guy and Mrs Katie McAllan), whose land lies adjacent to NE and Marlot boundary. They had concerns about flooding on their horse grazing fields from adjacent land. Most of the concerns emanated from flood water from NE fields and Peter Bowyer agreed to work with the McAllans to look at solutions to ease/stop future flooding of their land. With respect to the Marlot there is one small area along the boundary between the Marlot and a field where the earth bank has slightly collapsed and caused the ingress of gully rain water from the Marlot onto the adjacent field. The MCG agreed with Mr McAllan that they would build up the collapsed bank high enough so that the gully water does not overflow into the field.

Marlot Conservation Group (MCG)

Work report to Whixall Parish Council meeting 14 September 2022

Period 6 July- 6 September 2022

The summer months are traditionally a quieter period for work down at the Marlot. In mid-July it was too hot to conduct any work at all and two work days had to be cancelled. In the last week in July and early August it was decided to carry out a full pathway clearance in the pond area and both the back and front meadow. This made walking around much easier for visitors and also allowed us to control access to specific areas around the ponds. The MCG also carried out a full weed of the Queen's Jubilee Hedgerow, which was getting rather overgrown, and also spread wood chippings in the area to suppress further weed growth. The creeping willow patch was also getting a bit overgrown with brambles and a full weed and clearing of overgrowth was carried out in both patches. In the hidden pond area, a large willow tree had partially fallen down and although it caused no obstruction to pathways it was decided to remove it. The tree was fully cut down and logged using chainsaws – processed wood going to MCG members. We also took the opportunity to shred the numerous branches (and a few younger willow saplings) and used the chippings along the pond area to maintain the pathways. Once the tree was removed from the hidden pond a full rake of dead leaves and detritus was conducted – this will assist in ensuring a clean pond when it floods up and hopefully encourage more newts.

On 7 August, at the request of the Shropshire Wildlife Trust, I conducted a 2 hour tour of the Marlot for 15 members of the Whitchurch branch. The group thoroughly enjoyed the visit to the Marlot and many noted the change in the environment and acknowledged the hard work of the MCG in making it a more pleasant experience to walk around. Stephen Barlow also attended and provide his experience and knowledge of the flora and fauna which added to the visit. Further visits will be arranged by the Secretary of the branch and myself.

It was good to see that the bid for funding for a bench and picnic table made to Connexus was successful. The Parish Clerk has informed me that she will liaise with Connexus regarding the funding, after which we can look at the logistics of purchase. I have also sent a “wish list” email of infrastructure requirements, as agreed at the PC/MCG Marlot meeting (16 May), to Councillor Alan Rawlinson (amended now to omit the bench and picnic table) and look forward to any update on getting the equipment. I have also produced a draft A5 information leaflet (8 pages) about the Marlot, which was seen and commented on by the MCG. Draft copies were provided to the lead organisers of the Whitchurch Shropshire Wildlife Trust branch during their recent tour and favourable comments were made – all agreeing that it would enhance the visitor experience. I have passed the draft version to Councillor Bob Harris and work is in hand to develop a more professional looking leaflet but using the same content and style, through his Graphic Designer contact. If this A5 leaflet is realised then it will be the main means of communication and information about the Marlot to various environmental, educational and wildlife groups, as well as on-site visitors.

Finally, it has been decided by the MCG that we will not use the cows for conservation grazing this year. After the considerable damage that they did last year and the laborious, time consuming and difficult work to resurface and repair the pathways it was considered counterproductive and unnecessary to have cows on every year. The meadow pastures will be cleared by hand using brush-cutters in the autumn and pre-spring periods. I have informed the Parish Clerk and Paul Martin of this fact. The MCG will assess the requirement this time next year – Paul Martin is happy that he remains our go-to Farmer and any further requirement will be under a new Grazing agreement as and when.

Graham Turnbull
Marlot Conservation Group

5 September2022

Marlot Conservation Group (MCG)

Work report to Whixall Parish Council meeting 12 October 2022

Period 6 September – 9 October 2022

A short report this month due to limitations on the amount of work that can be conducted during this late summer/early autumn period and the availability of MCG members. The meadows still have some wildflowers visible and the MCG has been waiting for these to return to seed before carrying out any preparation and clearing work. The main work has been to keep the pathways in both meadows and pond area clear and walkable. This has meant a couple of full day sessions strimming all paths and clearing the cuttings.

We have also conducted a further site inspection last week to determine the work that is required for the autumn and winter periods. This will mainly be brush-cutting both meadows in lieu of having the cattle on for grazing. It is intended to fully clear the meadows of all growth, burning some arisings and composting the softer growth. The MCG will continue to dig out a patch of goat willow – continuing on from the area previously cleared early this year. This seems to have been successful and limited willow growth has returned. The pond surrounds will also be cleared of all growth to enable access to the ponds for reed mace clearing. This will start in late autumn/early winter, initially by hand, but it is intended to approach Natural England to see if there is a possibility of assistance with diggers (this will be dependant on their work programme and personnel availability).

Work is continuing with the development of the A5 8 page leaflet – it is currently with the MCG for comment, having been worked on by Councillor Harris' graphic designer friend. I have discussed the future procurement of a picnic bench and seating bench with the Parish Clerk and will be passing her details and recommendations of online companies to purchase the items from. It would be useful to have an update from Councillor Rawlinson on any progress of the “wish list” of infrastructure requirements (directional finger posts and notice board backing board) as discussed at the WPC/MCG meeting. The draft Marlot Strategy has been received from Councillor Mercer and is currently under consideration by the WPC/MCG team.

Graham Turnbull
Marlot Conservation Group

9 October 2022

Marlot Conservation Group (MCG)

Work report to Whixall Parish Council meeting 9 November 2022

Period 10 October – 2 November 2022

Winter work is now fully underway at the Marlot. Work has commenced clearing the front meadow and brush-cutting it back to ground level. The challenge is the large sections of yearly growth goat willow. It is important to fully cut this back so that it does not grow into more substantial willow patches. A separate section of goat willow is being dug out by hand right down to the deep root structure, ensuring it does not return next year. Last year's willow digging efforts has been successful and no willow had grown back again. It is a hard and laborious task, which with the amount of willow on the front meadow, will take a considerable time to clear. The extra effort is worth it to ensure a willow clear front meadow.

The MCG has a new volunteer, Steve Manning from Ellesmere. He has been recruited from Graham's Whitchurch Walking Football team after showing some initial interest in what we do. During his first week he completed a Marlot Induction and Health and Safety brief and was put to work straight away in the clearing work. The MCG welcome him and his great efforts and work so far. We are actively putting the word out about the Marlot and the call for volunteers – winter work Facebook posts will be done over the next couple of sessions to show what we are doing and ask for further volunteers.

The MCG received the draft A5 Information leaflet back from Councillor Harris' graphic designer contact. With some good ideas and pointers, the MCG has now taken back the responsibility of leaflet design and content and will work on producing a final version which will be ready for print. The MCG members have also reviewed the draft Marlot Strategy and provided comments back to Councillor Mercer. I have passed details of the composite re-cycled plastic picnic bench and 3 seater bench that the MCG wished to be purchased, using the Connexus grant, to the Parish Clerk. These have now been ordered by the Parish Clerk and delivery is expected Thursday 3 November. These will be constructed and taken down to the Marlot in the next two weeks. The MCG also intends to re-cycle the two old wooden benches that are currently in the Marlot and in a bad state of repair. It is hoped that we can re-construct one bench from using parts from the current two and refurbish it to a state in which it can be used. The MCG would also appreciate any update from Councillor Rawlinson on any progress of the "wish list" of infrastructure requirements (directional finger posts and notice board backing board) as discussed at the WPC/MCG Marlot meeting.