

Richard Woolnough
21st May 1945 – 22nd
October 2019

A suitable tribute.....?! If other people have had a tree - Richard would need a forest! What an inspirational man, a privilege to have known him.



The beginnings ... in his own words

“Dunstable is near the northern edge of the Chiltern Hills.

On Sunday afternoons after Sunday school we walked along the green lanes to Totterhoe – it was always summer, the sun always shone and I picked bunches of scabious and greater knapweed – picking wildflowers remains a strong urge. I vividly remember taking a kingcup to school for the nature table.”



1952 - the gang



“Our gang wandered far and wide within its territory making bows and arrows from stems from the hedgerows cut down with our sheath knives - can you imagine?! - and we collected birds’ eggs (only one from each nest) but I vividly remember a yellowhammers nest we found behind Dunstable Town FC.

And then disaster of disasters I passed the eleven plus and went to a single sex grammar school. First day I was hauled out the front in French and I was whacked “just in case you’re like your brother” and of course corporal punishment was liberally applied by the prefects as well as the masters.

However Mr Mathewman held a bird club in his back room and I caught the bug.”

Early holidays in Suffolk

“Early family holidays were at Old Felixstowe. Then camping just behind the beach at Sizewell until somebody decided to build a nuclear power station there.

Quite a few times I cycled there from Dunstable 120 miles in a day on my own. And I cycled down the sandy tracks behind the dunes and discovered Minsmere and failed to identify the marsh harrier - my Observer’s Book of Birds had no illustration for marsh harrier because they were so rare and you didn’t get pictures of the rare ones.”



Adventures with family and friends



Civil engineering and practical conservation volunteering

From 18 to his early 30s Richard (with increasing reluctance) pursued a career in civil engineering while doing (with increasing enthusiasm) more and more practical volunteering at weekends: voluntary wardening, serving on Conservation Committees for Naturalist Trusts, carrying out and co-authoring the Bedfordshire Badger Survey.

A career in civil engineering...



...a passion for wildlife



First job in conservation – first conservation officer in the job

From 1979 until 1986 Richard was in his first job in conservation as the Conservation Officer for the Suffolk Wildlife Trust, their very first paid employee.

*His name comes up all the time in relation to conservation
of Suffolk's wildlife.*

He gathered a great team of staff and volunteers ...



**... who
shared
work -
and
parties**



Learning on the job

“I was amazingly ignorant. Mervyn Bell was my boss from Walberswick and Edgar Milne Redhead was his second-in-command. I looked as if I knew what I was talking about - a heath, just like chalk but less diverse, flatter – with gorse instead of hawthorn ...



I really didn't know what a reedbed was. I thought that if you stood in it, you would sink ... but I quickly discovered there was always somebody to ask. Although sometimes it was like a lamb to the slaughter; poor little me against the Internal Drainage Board – we watched as the bastards deep drained the marshes.”

But Richard persevered, gathering knowledge from pedigree individuals - “Can you imagine going round Bradfield Woods with Oliver Rackham?”

**..or Thelnetham Fen
with David Bellamy?!**



Saving the Sandlings - a huge early achievement in partnership with other bodies

Richard The Impatient ... The Committed ... The Anarchist ... The Energetic ... The Subversive ... The Persistent ... The Irrepressible ... The Risk-Taker ... The Enthusiast ... The Dynamic

...the drama, risk, courage, commitment and sheer dogged determination to attempt the impossible and triumph



Richard was absolutely committed to opening conservation up to everyone at a time when it was largely restricted to scientists, a few landowners and well-educated naturalists.

I have no doubt that the success of wildlife conservation, particularly in Suffolk, is due to his vision, inspiration and the common touch he brought.

Who can ever forget his talks, always with some reference to red wine in the first sentence or two, or his walks - with memorable tricks like skinning soft rush or using old plant names like cowslops or paigles.

Richard's energy and skills gave the Trust a huge new impetus. He co-ordinated all aspects of reserve management including volunteers and contractors, and open days. He also:

- set up and co-ordinated a **Community Programme Agency** with 180 employees

- co-ordinated **environmental volunteers** all over Suffolk

- set up and serviced the **Conservation Committee**

- set up and co-ordinated the Voluntary Projects Programme offering **work and training opportunities for unemployed volunteers**

- set up **purchase of Community Wood at Reydon** and, later, the **woodcutting syndicate**

After the Suffolk Wildlife Trust ... practical creativity at all levels

Developing projects, partnerships, strategies and education programmes for national and local bodies both statutory and voluntary:

- Royal Society for Nature Conservation - UK 2000 - developing **partnership projects**

Self employment:

- Dover District Council – working with two District Councils, Kent County Council, NCC, Countryside Commission, Kent Trust for Nature Conservation, WorldWide Fund for Nature and Eurotunnel co-ordinating **establishment of White Cliffs Countryside Project.**
- Otley College, Suffolk – development of outreach programme of **conservation vocational qualifications**
- North Norfolk Coast - **Green Tourism Strategy** with National Trust, NCC, Norfolk Naturalists Trust, District Councils and local communities.

Richard had a unique way of communicating, always to the point, he certainly didn't mince his words, but as long as you knew him you realised it was always with the best intentions.



Stirring up action wherever he went...

- 1990-1996 **Director of Conservation** for the combined Beds, Cambs and Northants Trust
- **Project Development Consultant** developing and running env projects for ... Beds County Council, Env Agency, Chilterns AONB
- **Setting up the Greensand Trust**, using all the techniques of community consultation and involvement at which he excelled, to conserve and promote the Greensand Ridge and improve access, understanding and enjoyment

Even though it must be over 10 years since he retired, he is still remembered and missed by a lot of folk in Bedfordshire. He's going to leave a big hole isn't he.

It is such a great pity that the world should lose a wildlife champion at this critical stage when the natural world is in such dire straits.



Richard and the muntjac



Richard was typically forthright in his attitude to introduced species that compromise more fragile local wildlife, for example ...

“Coypu? I remember them, I was very fond of them and good to eat”

... and although we have no evidence of *that*, there is an indisputable record of this long-time vegetarian relishing a muntjac roll on his retirement from the Greensand Trust

Halesworth

The Woolnoughs moved to Halesworth in 1979, back near his beloved Suffolk coast.



Local action

Richard and Judith were immediately active in the community and worked with and mobilised various local groups for:

- **footpath** surveying and improvements
- scrub clearance on local heaths and public open spaces, including setting up the **Wenhaston Commons Group**
- Initiating and leading the creation of a **Town Plan for Halesworth**
- coppicing **ancient woodland at Reydon** (and mobilising SWT's community fund-raising to buy it)



1990 tea break in Reydon Wood



1988 Mill Heath work party with Guides



Halesworth Millennium Green - Richard's most recent memorial

After community consultation in 1998, 40 or so acres of grazing marsh right next to the town were acquired in 2000/01. This created the largest Millennium Green in the country.

Richard had masterminded the idea and the town is indebted to him for his expertise, energy and enthusiasm.

Over the next 20 years Richard continued to initiate and support the gaining of more land (now 50+ acres) and created a Management Plan for the guidance of later volunteers which balances access for all and promotion of wildlife. With Judith, he ran the work-parties, he gave talks, was crucial in getting the All-weather Track, and remained an active and encouraging Trustee until his death.



It was his giving a talk at an AGM (a poster advertising it caught my eye) when we first lived here that got us involved.



Helping in the Millennium Green was for me so beneficial seeing all of these dedicated folk working so hard and Richard always leading from the front – he was the driving force.

I recall his enthusiasm and kind nature. It's a real loss to our community as well as to his friends and family of course.









Richard's spirit is woven into the fabric of our wonderful space.



Hazards of the track

Not long after the Millennium Track opened, I was cycling along from the Park. As I approached the railway bridge, I saw two dog walkers talking with Richard. The problem was a mole trapped below the cattle grid.

Discussion took place as to how the unfortunate animal could be repatriated. My suggestion was that Richard could use his floppy wide-brimmed hat to wrap round the mole and remove it through the rungs of the grid. He went ahead and did as suggested - there was quite a bit of pattering by Richard, as you could imagine. But all left the scene happy including the mole!





Long distance cycling continued ...

- Dunstable to Sizewell in his early teens
- Ness Point to Ardnamurchan (east to west) aged 60
- The Lizard to Dunnet Head (south to north) aged 65

From that early Bedfordshire survey Richard never lost his delight in badgers and gained a new one in otters

*“It was **badgers** that got me to understand about conservation. We had to speak to landowners about protecting setts and it was then that I realised that it wasn’t enough to look at badgers; you had to look after the habitat where they lived.”*

*“**Otters** - we were advised to go to Loch Sunart, drive along the road, stop in every lay-by, scan the lock until you see an otter. And it really was as easy as that. This exposed another flaw in my character, we were supposed to go somewhere different every year but the next year I had to go back, I was hooked. I have been back every year since. I do like going back to the same place – the same has happened with family holidays. Otters have given me so much pleasure.”*





Memories of dark car parks at 5am!!! I can now sit in a hide happily for 3 hours without expecting to see anything, on a frosty morning, my family think I'm nuts!

I do remember going badger watching with him and Kristina – and cubs coming out and practically running across our feet as we were so quiet!



Standing up for mammals



Investigating habitats and habits



**Wildlife (otter-
watching)
holidays with
friends**





Sharing his enthusiasm ...

He was a joy to spend time with and always made me laugh, sometimes just at his wonderful character. A huge loss to the world of mammals.

Otter days



"People who study mammals have to be excited about poo"



Otter field work

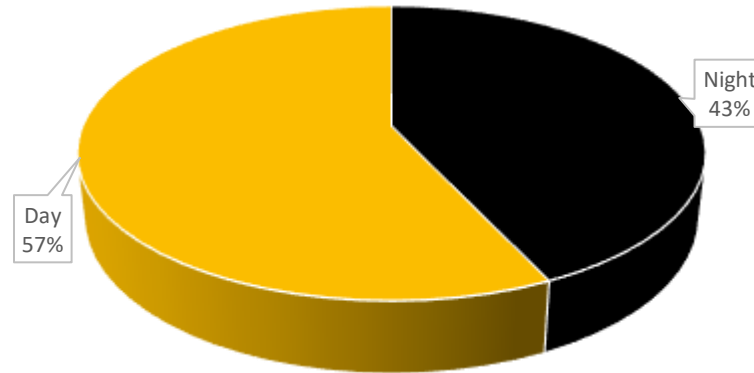


He was always pushing us to think harder, to find out more – and keep learning.
And the point of it all was enjoyment and better conservation.

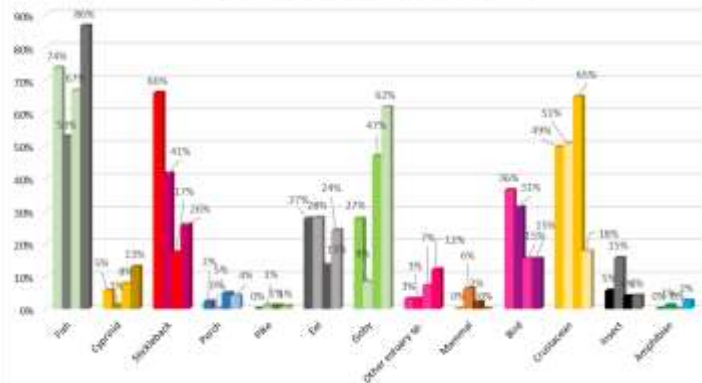


Analysis and reports ...

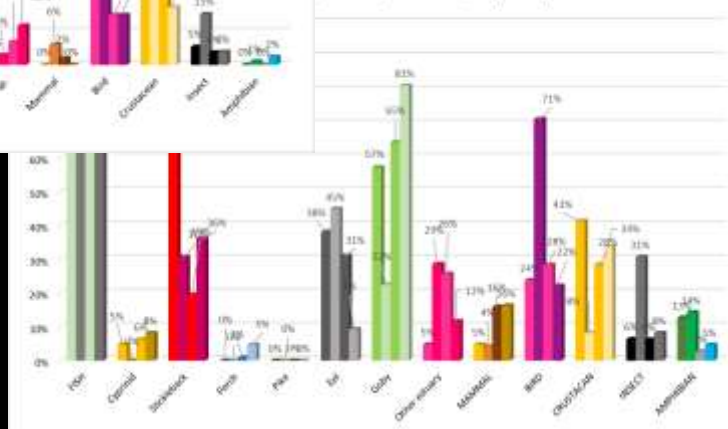
Minsmere Causeway Summer 2019 (n=86)



River Blyth - Hen Reedbeds
Spring /Summer/Autumn/Winter 2016-17 (n=418)



Over Alde, Stanny Farm
Autumn, Winter 2015/16 (n=311)



Otter Activity on the River Blyth Freshwater Sections – 2016/2018



April 2019



**Passing on his
passion**



And throughout it all – Judith and the family



