



## **The First Fifty Years of the Sussex Ornithological Society**



## Looking Back at the First Fifty Years

Leafing through great volumes of files and papers, which by the way were mainly produced on typewriters, it occurred to me that I was holding a very special history in my hands.

Perhaps not earth-shattering in terms of wider conservation efforts but nonetheless something that would dramatically change the knowledge, enjoyment and conservation of avifauna in Sussex. It is testament to the founding fathers and to all members past and present. A cliché it may be but, from small acorns, great oaks grow. This is the story so far.

### In the beginning

Tony Marr and Tony Sheldon first had the seed of an idea that the formation of a County Ornithological Society would be in the interests of both the understanding and the preservation of birds in Sussex (now termed conservation).

By December 1961, their idea had gained such momentum that as a consequence of a small informal meeting, a provisional council took place at 20:00 hrs on Monday 18<sup>th</sup> December 1961; those present being Mr Goddard, Mr Marr, Mr Port, Mr Sandison and Mr Sheldon. It was quickly agreed that there was a need for a County Ornithological Society and that the necessary steps to form the Society should be taken with all haste. Their first step, following this meeting, was to approach Mr Denzil Dean Harber, the then Editor of the Sussex Bird Report who immediately endorsed the project.

An inaugural meeting was planned at Brighton Pavilion for 17<sup>th</sup> February 1962. Clearly the belief in the formation of the Society was such that over 250 people braved that cold February night. At this first meeting, amongst many matters discussed were membership rates of 15 shillings for adults and 10 shillings for junior members. The main event at this meeting was a speech by Tony Marr outlining the need for the Society and what its aspirations should be. The Society was born.

The objectives of the Society laid down at its inception were set as:

- To record and study wild birds in the county of Sussex
- To assist in the preservation of wild birds in the UK.
- To encourage the use of films, books, meetings, outings and other means for;
  - (a) the study of birds in the field and ornithological science generally
  - (b) the education of its members and the general public in ornithological science and the need for protection of wild birds and their habitats.

Clearly protection was one of the founding principles of the Society.

## Conservation Matters

In 1964, just two years after the Society's formation, the Secretary Tony Marr was asked to produce a report outlining the ornithological importance of Pagham Harbour. That report was instrumental in persuading the West Sussex County Council to declare Pagham Harbour the first Local Nature Reserve in the county. Since Pagham Harbour was declared a Local Nature Reserve the Society has granted a total of £21,335 for the construction of a hide, the purchase of additional land at Sidlesham Ferry and other projects.

The next great success story of the Society's conservation efforts was the Rye Harbour LNR. Several organisations recognised the need for the area to be protected and a committee was set up and headed by the Society's President, Guy Mountford. That committee's report resulted in the creation of Rye Harbour LNR in 1970. The Society has, since 1972, granted a total of £13,760 for a variety of projects which have enhanced the reserve.

In the early years much of the Society's input to conservation efforts was in the form of working parties rather than financial support. To mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Society's founding, the Society published a booklet entitled *Birds in Sussex 1962 to 1987*. This contained a number of articles including a fascinating review of the Society's conservation work during that period. In more recent years the need for working parties has diminished and the Society now concentrates more on financial support to conservation efforts.

The SOS has, throughout its fifty years, been a strong supporter and benefactor of the RSPB. The society works closely with the RSPB to save forever some of the most critically important habitats in the UK. The outstanding success of Pulborough Brooks and Bracklesham Bay are lasting testimony to this relationship.

Since inception, the SOS has gifted in excess of £202,000 (as at the financial year end 2011) to a huge variety of projects. These are far too numerous to mention them all but here are some of the notable successes:

### The RSPB

- Bracklesham Bay
- Lewes Brooks
- Rackham & Wiggonholt and sundry surveys
- Farmland birds survey
- West Africa Initiative for migrants
- Woodland bird survival
- Brent Goose study

### SWT (previously SNT and STNC):

- Amberley Wild Brooks
- Pevensey Levels & Bewl Bridge
- Castle Water
- Ferry field & land behind Ferry Pool, Sidlesham
- Ebernoe Common
- Graffham Common

Other initiatives:

- Rye Harbour
- Pagham Harbour & Church Norton (hides and seats)
- Chichester Harbour (Stakes Island etc.)
- BTO Bird Atlas 2007-2011
- Hides at Ardingly & Arlington (SE Water) & Weir Wood
- Woodland Trust - Brede High Woods
- Pett Pools Project
- Chichester Gravel Pits (New Lake)
- Ashdown Forest Centre
- Charleston Reedbed

At the 2010 AGM, the Society's aims were amended "to assist in the conservation of the wild birds of Great Britain" rather than just Sussex. With that amendment in mind the Society's contributions have become increasingly global over the past few years, with the Society supporting the RSPB's West Africa Initiative. This crucial research into our summer breeding species aims to significantly advance ornithology's current understanding of where, when and how birds are using their West African wintering grounds.

### **The Society Builds on its Beginnings**

The strength of the Society comes from the dedication and commitment and the generosity of its members. On becoming a registered charity, the SOS started to build on its humble beginnings and went from strength to strength. You can see below a snapshot of the society's growth:

<b>Year</b>	<b>Income</b>	<b>Surplus</b>	<b>Members</b>	<b>Net assets</b>
2011	£53,435	£33,485	1695	£113,655
2004	£29,997	£13,487	1612	£68,287
1994	£28,535	£2,837	1297	£52,033
1984	£8,682	£4,385	1608	£8,317
1974	£3,081	£911	1100	£370
1964	£395	£12	377	£346

The figures above were at the Society's financial year end. In late 2011 the roll of the Society passed 1695. The Society has moved with the times. The Society has embraced electronic communications and has moved with the times with its website [www.sos.org.uk](http://www.sos.org.uk) and member usage is increasing. The Society's website is a vital resource of information and members are able to post sightings keep up to date with news and events. In fact just some of the statistics for website usage in May 2012 alone are: total visitors 1,026,306 1644 visitors per Hour with an average 39,473 visitors per day.

The increase in member numbers has resulted in a corresponding increase in the number of records received which now exceed 170,000 per year. This in turn led to the size of the Annual Bird Report (SxBR) increasing from 20 pages for the 1961 report to 126 pages for the 1993

report by which time it contained not only the classified records but also scientific papers, the results of surveys and a ringing report. Up until then all the Reports had been printed entirely in black and white but that changed with SxBR 1994 which contained coloured photographs for the first time. The Sussex Bird Report, which ran to 282 pages in 2010, is recognised as being one of the finest in the country and in 2004 was placed equal 1<sup>st</sup> in the BTO Best Annual Bird Report competition (the last year that this was run).

Amongst the increasing number of records received were some concerning rare and scarce species with the result that the list of species recorded in Sussex has risen from 322 in 1962 to 392 at the end of 2010. At the time of writing the British Birds Rarities Committee is considering a number of Sussex records for 2011 including seven which, if approved, would be further additions to the county list.

The Society's quarterly newsletter has this year published its 200<sup>th</sup> edition. As with SxBR, the Newsletter was entirely in black and white until Issue No 184 which had a new format, a cover in full colour and included monochrome photographs.

Another success has been the Society's Annual Conference which was held for the 32<sup>nd</sup> time in January 2012. Almost every year the demand for tickets is close to the permitted capacity of 250 of the venue.

### **The More Things Change the More They Stay the Same?**

At the 1971 AGM it was agreed that new members were vetted against known egg collectors. In the early days of the Society egg collecting was a real threat however fortunately, this predatory and destructive practice is much reduced now but, regrettably, not entirely eliminated. What the Society has seen in its 50 years existence is much improved legislation, with a view to protecting the wildlife of the lands and the seas.

The Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 and Marine & Coastal Access Act 2009 are just two of the vital statutes that have been passed to protect wildlife on both seas and land.

The twin threats to birds of habitat loss and site disturbance remain at the heart of the Society's gifting activities.

Education and enjoyment of avifauna are central to the Society's role. In its fifty years, the SOS will have conducted in excess one thousand walks/outings for members.

One of the key scientific aims of the Society is the recording of birds and the publication of The Sussex Bird Report. Published annually, this report is central to the Society's activities and is essential reading.

A volume called The Birds of Sussex was published by SOS member Michael Shrubbs in 1979 and in 1996, the Society went one step further and published the 592 page "Birds of Sussex" edited by Paul James to which many members contributed by writing species accounts. Central to these publications is the Society's meticulous recording of what its members have seen and reported.

The recording of the county's birds has always been at the heart of the Society. Members are encouraged to send in their records of all species seen, including:

- Red and Amber listed birds (the Sussex Bird Report shows which species are Red or Amber listed as species of High or Medium conservation concern)
- Exceptionally early or late migration and winter visitor dates (first, last and 10-year average migrant and winter visitor dates are listed at the back of the Sussex Bird Report).
- Species that are rare, scarce, or unusual in Sussex including all Schedule 1 species, which are considered by the Society's Records Committee (SOSRC).
- Species that are rare or scarce nationally considered by the British Birds Rarities Committee (BBRC).
- Unusually high numbers of a species of any bird, or of unusual behaviour, or of number of breeding territories.
- Species seen in a local area, especially one which is not a well-known birding "hot spot".

The efforts of a few hundred people have submitted hundreds of thousands of such records to the Society. This gives the SOS one of the most detailed and comprehensive databases in the UK. This vast database is often called upon to supply information for national surveys and in respect of planning applications, particularly in sensitive sites.

These monumental efforts are not just focussed on the county. The Society's members contribute to ornithological records on a nationwide basis. Listed below are just a few of these critically important projects where members have contributed their fieldwork results:

- BTO Atlases
- Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS)
- Breeding Bird Survey (BBS)
- Heronries Census
- Thames Basin & Wealden Heaths Breeding Bird Survey

## **Looking to the Past and the Future**

Any history of the Society would not be complete without the mention of all the members past and present, whose efforts have helped the SOS in its aims. From conservation work, field and scientific work, to the administration of the Society, submission of records to the Society for consideration, or participating in one of the Society's outings its members have had a lasting effect on the conservation and enjoyment of birds in the county of Sussex.

We, the current and the future members of the Society, follow in the footsteps of giants. D D Harber, the founder and editor of 'The Sussex Bird Report' was held in such high regard that in 1959 he was invited to join the British Birds Rarities Committee, the official adjudicator of rare bird records in Britain and in 1963, became its Honorary Secretary. Also E. C. Arnold, the then Headmaster of Eastbourne College, personally purchased Charleston Reedbed as a reserve as long ago as 1928. As he wrote in the Introduction to his seminal work, 'Bird Reserves' published in (1940), 'bird protection is nowadays far more a matter of preserving bird haunts than of making laws to protect birds'. Prophetic words indeed.

The Sussex Ornithological Society has indeed fulfilled the ideals of the founders. Much has been achieved but there is still much to do. Small things can make a big difference. The work of the Society marches on; here's to the next fifty years of the SOS. In the context of the present climate of economic uncertainty there are reduced funds available from both central and local government to support nature reserves and conservation projects. In addition there is a continued demand for land for development resulting in habitat destruction. It is for these reasons that the Society has, over the past few years, built up the financial reserves available for conservation projects. Where it is considered appropriate the Society will continue to use those financial reserves to support land purchase or other projects beneficial to the avifauna of Sussex.

## Officers of the Society – Past and Present

It is important that those who founded the Society and those that have carried on the Society's work be recognised.

PRESIDENT		VICE-PRESIDENT	
Dr J Stafford	1962 -1966	Mr M Hollings	1962 -1974
Mr G Mountfort, OBE	1966 -1978	Mr M E Shrubbs	1974 -1977
Mr G des Forges	1979 -1989	Mr B A E Marr	1977 -1982
Mr B A E Marr	1990 -1997	Dr A B Watson	1982 -1987
Dr J K Irons	1997 -2002	Mr S W M Hughes	1987 -1992
Dr A B Watson	2002 -2012	Dr J A Newnham	1992 -1997*
Mr A Perry	2012- current		

\*from this date Vice-Presidents were appointed by Special Resolution as follows:

1997: Mr B A E Marr  
 Mr G des Forges  
 2001: Mrs I M Simpson  
 2002: Dr J K Irons  
 2012 Dr A B Watson

SECRETARY		TREASURER	
Mr B A E Marr	1962 -1971	Mr R E Goddard	1962 -1972
Mr D G Chelmick	1971 -1976	Mr A J Cooke	1972 -1979
Mr P Martin	1976 -1978	Mr J W Houghton	1979 -1984
Mrs I M Simpson	1978 -1983	Mr J Mankelow	1984 -1989
Mrs S Allwood	1983 -1988	Mr D Heryett	1990 -1995
Mrs V P Bentley	1988 -1993	Mr K L D Hickman	1995 -1997
Mr D J Golds	1993 -1998	Mr M J Mason	1997 -2002
Mrs V P Bentley	1998 -2003	Mr G Wenden	2002 -2007
Mr R Cowser	2003 -2008	Mr P N Paul	2007-2008
Mr N Bowie	2008 -2010	Mr G Wenden	2008 - present
Mrs V P Bentley	2010 - present		

RECORDER		EDITOR OF BIRD REPORT	
Mr D D Harber	1962 -1966	Mr A B Sheldon	1962 -1971
Mr M E Shrubbb	1966 -1973	Mr S Bayliss-Smith	1971 -1977
Mr C M James	1973 -1977	Mr R J B Jackson	1977 -1982
Mr J Cooper	1977 -1978	Mr M E Shrubbb	1982 -1986
Mr M J Rogers	1978 -1983	Mr P F Bonham	1986 -1991
Mr A J Prater	1983 -1987	Mr G C M Roberts	1991 -1995
Mr P James	1987 -1992	Mrs S J Patton	1995 -1997
Mr T W Parmenter	1990 & 1992/3	Mr L G Holloway	1997-1999
Mr O Mitchell	1993 -1995	Mr P James	1999 -2004
Mr R T Pepper	1995 -2000	Mr P N Paul	2004 -2009
Mr J A Hobson	2000 -2005	Prof. R Self	2009 -2010
Mr C W Melgar	2005 -2010	Mr M Bullen	2010 -2011
Mr P N Paul	2010 - 2012	Mrs J Chattaway	2011 - present
Mr D Howey	2012 - Current		

**Transcript of the Speech made by Mr B A E Marr (Secretary) to the Sussex Ornithological Society's inaugural meeting, 19:00 hrs Saturday the 17<sup>th</sup> of February 1962.**

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I am very glad to see that so many have been able to come this evening and would like to thank you all for doing so and braving the cold February night air.

Firstly, I should like to fill in the background to this inaugural meeting of the Sussex Ornithological Society. As we said in our circulars which most of you here tonight will have received, a number of people for some time have felt that there is a distinct need for a County Society to cater for the needs of those interested in birds in Sussex. There has been no organisation which could coordinate both the ideas and work in ornithology in the county; no place where people could meet and discuss birds; nobody to draw together the people in Sussex that are interested in birds, birdwatchers and ornithologists alike and please note there are two distinct types there; birdwatchers and ornithologists and give them an opportunity to find out what other people in the county are doing and what they themselves might be able to do.

Just before Christmas, Tony Sheldon and I decided the time might be ripe for attempting to form such a Society and consequently we discussed the matter with a few friends and found a sympathetic attitude prevailed. We then approached Mr D D Harber of Eastbourne, Editor of the 'Sussex Bird Report,' up until now the form of ornithological coordination existing on a county basis, and secured his cooperation. A small provisional Council was established and at a meeting on January 18<sup>th</sup>, we approved the draft of a circular giving some details of the proposed Society which was to be circulated to as many people inside and outside the county as we knew to be interested in its birds, inviting them to this very meeting. Over 550 circulars were issued and 25 local newspapers informed of the proposed society and this meeting.



I have to say that considerable interest has been shown in this project. Several local newspapers in the county have printed details; I have received over 120 letters of support mostly from people unable to attend tonight but most of whom would like to join the Society if formed. I should like to thank all present tonight who wrote pledging support. Lastly the BBC in Southampton rang me up yesterday and from the details I gave them, prepared a short item which was broadcast last night in their programme "What's On" in their VHF transmission.

So much for what has happened so far. If I may, I should like to amplify somewhat the objects of the proposed Society which were briefly outlined in our circular and give some idea of the future plans and programme envisaged.

Sussex is, without doubt, one of the finest counties for birds. Having a very impressive list of birds recorded and some very fine spots for seeing birds; Pagham Harbour, Chichester Harbour, Beachy Head cliffs, the South Downs, to name but a few.

But we are rapidly losing a lot of our best bird haunts to the encroachment of suburbia and the incursion of the motor car into areas which, only a few years ago, were scarcely visited. Now this is the time for us to produce some scientific work on the breeding birds from our county, to interest as many people as possible in the birds of Sussex. To educate people in fact and prevent the despoliation of this lovely county offers and its bird life; a Society of keen birdwatchers and ornithologists organised on a county basis is essential to do this effectively. The Sussex Naturalists' Trust, now a year old, has already done much valuable work but would like the cooperation of a Society such as ours. Having amongst its members, we hope the keenest and best ornithologists in the county as a most valuable asset, to bring to its notice matters of importance in bird protection and preservation in the county.

Those are the more general aspects of the formation of this Society. More particularly, it is hoped to form a body which will be able to coordinate ornithological work and research in the County a thing never possible before on any scale and to bring together people with a common interest to stimulate cooperation in research and generally cater for the interests of birdwatchers. The Shoreham Ornithological Society has shown, with its membership of over 160 mostly from the Brighton area, that there are a large number of people in Sussex interested in birds and their welfare.

How is this to be effected? By means of lectures; we hope to provide the meeting place for our members. These will be held in the months October to April; we envisage most (say four) here in Brighton as it is central and a handy terminus but cater for our members in the remote parts of the county, perhaps one meeting a year in Hastings in the east of the county and one at Chichester in the west, say six meetings in all. At these, we hope to provide illustrated lectures on birds of interest to members of all types, although principally a scientific society. We appreciate that many of our members will not be as interested in the scientific aspects of ornithology as in the more general ones and they will naturally be catered for.

It is hoped to organise a few outings each year to places of interest both inside and outside the county by public transport, car or coach, to widen the knowledge of members in respect of bird identification and where to find birds. I do hope the experienced ornithologists amongst

us here tonight will be willing to help on some of the outings and remember that we intend to cater for the interests of all who have an interest in birds, not just the “old hands”.

It is envisaged that “regional representatives” could be elected to deal with the interests of people in the remoter parts of the county and organise functions in those more outlying areas.

Cooperation with existing organisations is one of our foremost aims. Firstly, I should like to deal with the Sussex Naturalists’ Trust. One correspondent suggested that this proposed Society would have been better formed as part of the Trust. My answer to that is that it would have been much too difficult to form such an organisation both administratively and financially.

If it were merely a section of an existing body and anyway, the functions of the Sussex Ornithological Society differ enormously from those of the Trust. This is a Society which works for its members whereas the Trust is the converse, the members work for the Trust.

I can foresee no clash of aims or duplication of effort here, on the contrary the two bodies will be able to work in complete harmony and the one should complement the other. If I may use the words of Mr Garth Christian, the well known Sussex naturalist in a recent letter “the Sussex Ornithological Society may well be the ‘eye and ears’ of the Sussex Naturalists Trust”. In bringing to its notice matters concerning bird protection and preservation of areas of ornithological importance and our members we hope will be able to produce scientific evidence if required by the Trust to substantiate its enquiries.

As for the Shoreham Ornithological Society, there is contrary to some opinions no proposal afoot for a “take over”. The function of the two societies as I see it are quite distinct, They are purely local in its outlook and appeal is not intentionally scientific and does not attempt anything on more than a local scale. The other, the Sussex Ornithological Society will be more scientific concerned with the ornithology of the County as a whole but will appeal none the less we hope to anyone in Sussex interested in birds and is intended to cater for all classes of interest. Other natural history societies in Sussex will we hope be willing to cooperate with us in the programme envisaged and we will do our best to help them wherever possible.

Regarding the national bodies, affiliation to the RSPB and the BTO will entitle us to hold meetings in conjunction with them, to have lectures by some of the top ornithologists in the Country and it is hoped to be able to help them in their frequent researches and investigations into various aspects of ornithology.

Which brings me on to another important object of the proposed Society, the promotion of scientific studies throughout the County, “I say “throughout” the County as it has been realised for a long time that although the Sussex coastline has been well ‘watched (for many years (for obvious reasons- more ornithologists live near the sea, birds are more numerous and there are rarer birds to find) there still remains a great deal of work to be done inland in the County.

Look at the breeding species whose distribution is simply unknown or only very vaguely; Buzzard, Stone Curlew, Long Eared Owl, Nightjar, Woodlark, Stonechat, Whinchat, Wood Warbler, Grey Wagtail, Red Backed Shrike, Hawfinch, Siskin, Redpoll, Cirl Bunting. Those are just some of the names that spring to mind when one considers breeding species. How common or uncommon are they? Only a County Society with a fairly large and active

membership can get the complete answers to that question. Migration has been studied fairly fully at the coast but what work has been done on it inland?

It is through a Society that we hope to be able to find out what people are doing in the County and to encourage others to help them, or commence investigations on their own. The lecture which is to follow will, I hope, show you something of the type of work which can be attempted in Sussex.

Finally we intend to produce an Annual Bird Report which will include we hope a slightly amplified form of the existing Sussex Bird Report, which Mr Harber has so completely produced for some years. This report will also contain ringing results, special enquiries and research and other matters appertaining to the work of the Society.

Mr Harber has asked me to make it clear that the 1961 Sussex Bird Report will be produced by him as usual at the price of Five Shillings at the end of March.

Membership of the Society will entitle one to a copy of the 1962 Bird Report which will appear in early 1963. Mr Harber incidentally is joining the Society as Honorary Recorder and records of birds in Sussex will be sent direct to him in the usual manner. Many of you will know that he has written a book on the Birds of Sussex which will be published soon.

That concludes my outline of the work of the proposed Society.