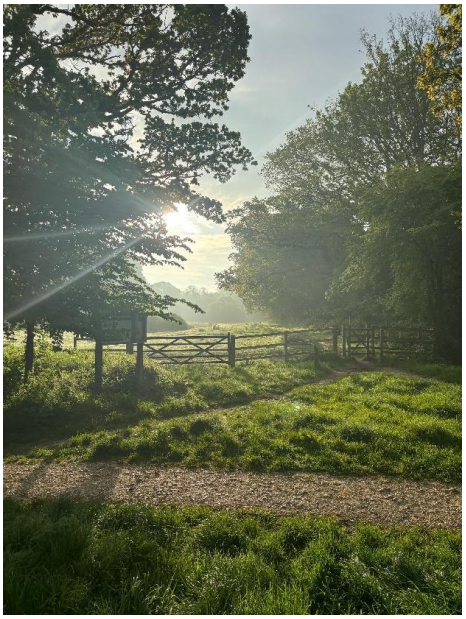
FRIENDS OF BALLARD WATER MEADOW

BALLARD MEADOW AND WOODLAND

ANNUAL REPORT
FOR
APRIL 2025 – MARCH 2026

INTRODUCTION

This is The Friends of Ballard Water Meadow's (FBWM) fifth annual report. As in the past, our work on the site is directed by the five-year Management Plan (2025-2030) where the volunteers follow the Work Programme from which our Annual Work Plan and monthly work schedules are derived.



MANAGEMENT PLANNING

The original five-year Management Plan was written in 2020 and covered the period to December 2024. A revision was drafted in late 2024. Like before, the new plan is running for five years (from 1st January 2025 – 31st March 2030) and will form the framework for future activities. The revised Management Plan 2025-2030 has been adopted by the Amenities Committee of the Town Council and is available on the NMTC website at:
https://www.newmiltontowncouncil.gov.uk/services/ballard-water-meadow/

RECORDING

We continue with our surveys and transects to record a variety of wildlife groups, mainly. Butterfly and Bumblebee Transects. Plants are recorded on an ongoing basis.

We have installed two corrugated sheets within the woodland. These are checked monthly for reptiles and small mammals.

CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT

1. **Meadow**



Unfortunately, this year we were unable to bring Dexter cattle onto the meadow, as the previous grazier was no longer available to us. There had also been issues with site security last year which resulted in the cattle getting out onto Lake Grove Road and Leigh Avenue. So, the lack of any grazing in the year saw much greater encroachment of bramble and Hemlock Water-dropwort than in recent years. This increased significantly the workload of the volunteers, in particularly down the eastern side of the meadow adjacent to the stream where the water-dropwort, in particular, has become very established.

A lot of effort was also concentrated in this area to clear fallen willow back from the stream. This work was made particularly challenging by extensive flooding in this area in December / January, caused by a blockage in the stream. Once this has been cleared working conditions became much easier, but wellies were still required.



Additionally, work was carried out to clear debris blocking a culvert at the north end of the meadow. The opportunity was also taken to widen the stream at its entry point to the culvert to hopefully mitigate the possibility of future blockages.

In two selected compartments Hemlock Water-dropwort was cut and removed to try and reduce the amount of seed-fall. This is a long process and will take many years to see any reduction in dominance. Two meadow compartments are selected for more hands-on management each year. Oak and willow seedlings were also cleared. A hemlock "bashing" day is planned for 2026, bringing in outside groups such as the New Forest National Park volunteers, so hopefully this will help us to make some inroads into keeping the hemlock at bay.

More large bramble patches were cleared early in 2026, in the compartments planned to be cut in the summer. This opens the ground for meadow plant seeds to germinate, thus expanding the area of open grassland and wildflowers.

During the year a new gravel path, running along the southern edge of the meadow, was installed by New Milton Town Council. The path provides easier access to the much-improved

path network to the west of Ballard Lake after its extensive refurbishment by New Forest District Council last year.

2. **Woodland**

The gravel patch was completed up to the kissing gate at the north end of the meadow. Thanks to NMTC for providing materials. The area at the kissing gate and the path leading away to the adjacent Great Woar Copse continues to be a challenge with poor drainage causing very wet underfoot conditions on the winter.

Through the summer, in addition to tackling the water dropwort in the meadow, work continued to clear bramble back from the Greenway path that runs through the middle of the woodland. This is important work as not only is it clearing the long bramble shoots out of the way of walkers, by creating a "ride" affect we will hopefully encourage back important plants such as bluebells and wood anemones. This is ongoing work which requires good teamwork and sharp shears.



In October we began to clear the bramble understorey in our selected coppice compartment. The southern glade was also cut and cleared at this time. Most of the arisings from this clearance work was burnt up on our first bonfire of the season in November. Two oak trees had their crowns removed to allow more light into the compartment. All of the larger timber is stacked onto our wood-walls. Work in the coppice compartment cutting bramble and understorey shrubs continued until February. We purchased and planted 125 hazel saplings in February. These were staked and guarded and, to prevent damage from trampling, a temporary rope-barrier was fixed around the compartment.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING



We had our Annual General Meeting in May at the Guide Hut next to Ballard Lake. This was extremely well attended, with around 60 people coming along to hear a detailed presentation by Bob Lord about the work of FBWM and the history of the Ballard site.

MEADOWS DAY



To celebrate our traditional wildflower meadows across the country, Plantlife (the national wildflower meadows charity) encourages wildflower management groups to come together on National Meadows Day. This is designed to raise awareness of our disappearing wildflower meadows. They are still under threat from mismanagement, building development and upgrading public access by covering with tarmac or gravel.

This year, our Meadows Day celebration was blessed with fine, dry weather and was well attended.

From time-to-time the volunteers get the opportunity to visit other local wildlife sites, by way of a change, to see habitats and their management and to see if we can learn some lessons. In June we visited Mary Redihoff's estate and garden in Crow Hill to look at her woodland management strategy in action. We visited North Baddesley butterfly meadow in July where we saw 16 different species of butterfly in less than 2 hours. We also went to Burton Common in July to observe the Nightjars and enjoyed a tour of Keyhaven Marshes in October.

Throughout the year we send out newsletters to signed-up members. On site we display posters informing visitors about the changing seasons and wildlife present and what to look-out for, as well as small information boards explaining the management work that is taking place.

MEMBERSHIP

At the end of the year (March 2025) the Friends of Ballard Water Meadow membership stood at 134. Currently we don't charge a membership fee but leave it to members to make a donation via our website. We are grateful for all contribution and are particularly grateful to our working members for their constant cheerful dedication and hard work. Without them none of this would be possible and over time the meadow would be gradually reclaimed by the trees.

We are also grateful for the ongoing support and encouragement of the NMTC Amenities Team. They mostly get the thankless tasks to do, like clearing away the arisings but their help is invaluable.

Finally it is always nice to hear the kind comments from members of the public who stop to talk to our work parties. It is always very uplifting to receive praise for the work we are doing so long may it continue!

BOB LORD



We cannot finish this report without mentioning the work of Bob Lord over many years at Ballard. Bob stood down as Chair in January 2026 and would normally have completed this report, (as well as numerous other Ballard-related tasks!). His wealth of knowledge, from a lifetime working in nature conservation, meant that he brought a depth of experience that was absolutely invaluable to ensuring the long-term health of the meadow and woodland.

He developed his first 5-year management plan in 2020, and Version 2 kicked in this year. The plan clearly sets out the tasks and challenges that await the volunteers each month and provides a clear road map to enable us to ensure that Ballard continues to provide a wonderful habitat for wildlife as well as a tranquil and beautiful space for people to visit.

Perhaps his greatest achievement was obtaining official designation of Ballard as a **Local Nature Reserve (LNR)** by Natural England and New Milton Town Council in January 2026. As a result we are now named **The Friends of Ballard Nature Reserve**. This enhanced status offers us greater protections in the coming years and is in recognition of the fine work completed by all volunteers since the Friends group was founded in 2005. However, without doubt it was Bob’s persistent and compelling campaigning over many years which finally gave Ballard the status it richly deserves.

Alasdair McGregor
Chairman
Friends of Ballard Nature Reserve
September 2026

Thanks to members as always for providing photographs.