

Attenborough Fields and Merry Hill Ian Mackay

This presentation by the founding Chair of the Friends of Attenborough Fields, which has recently celebrated its 20th anniversary, covered developments at Attenborough Fields and Merry Hill. Special mention was made of the success of working with the Woodland Trust, which was founded in 1972 by Kenneth Watkins and now has about 1,000 woods under its wing, and Hertfordshire County Council's Countryside Management Service. Attenborough Fields Owned by Hertfordshire County Council, this 60 acre site between Bushey and Oxhey was named after the Attenborough family, previous owners of Haydon Hill House. In 1994, the adjacent Bushey Golf Club applied for planning permission to extend its course onto Attenborough Fields in the Green Belt, only to find that the local communities of Bushey and Oxhey were vehement in their opposition to this proposal. The application was refused by Hertfordshire County Council, who commented in making the decision that they did not have any money to manage Attenborough Fields and that some other means of funding needed to be found. A public meeting was held and 4,000 signatures were obtained to form the Friends to look after Attenborough Fields. Since then, the Friends have held regular work parties to protect and enhance the environment of the Fields. Now grazed by horses, they were grazed by cattle prior to 1986. The Friends have planted trees to reinforce the old field boundaries. Ancient oaks, one of which had 300 rings, have been pollarded and used for timber over the years. The 1995 drought enabled examination of the swallow hole, where the London Clay is so thin that water seeps through into the Woolwich and Reading Beds and the Chalk beneath. It had formerly been a water source and it has now been restored as such. The Friends are also trying to restore all the field ponds. In one case, a weir that fed the pond has been raised by about 4 feet and the pond itself has been restored. Working parties are regularly undertaking hedge-laying, digging ditches and installing kissing gates as well as installing the first Greenway in Hertfordshire. Nest boxes made of concrete with wood chip in them are used every year and are cleaned before the breeding season.

Merry Hill Merry Hill Farm comprised 180 acres of arable land between the communities of Bushey, Little Oxhey and Carpenders Park south and south-east of Attenborough Fields. In November 1994, it came up for sale at a cost of £310,000. The Woodland Trust was interested and it was in a position to

borrow the bulk of the purchase price in a loan from the Countryside Commission, provided it was matched by funding for the remaining £20,000. This involved a new community in Carpenders Park, where there was great support of the Woodland Trust's proposals. As a result, the Friends of Attenboroughs Fields raised the money required and the land is now owned by the Woodland Trust, which was happy to retain 40% woodland and 60% grassland on what had formerly been arable land. After ploughing, the land was field walked by the St Albans Archaeological Trust, and there were finds dating back as far as Neolithic times. The land was then harrowed to a fine tilth and sown with a pasture mix with no wild flowers. It was felt, and this proved to be the case, that the hedge wild flowers would migrate into the fields. Cattle were grazed on the land for a couple of months. Trees planted were mainly oak but with some hornbeam, ash and a little maple. One of the projects involved installing a bridge (the Jubilee Bridge) across the River Hartsbourne, which required a licence from the Environment Agency, which specified the height above the river to prevent a flood risk arising. The Millennium Wood is a 20-acre roughly circular area which has a central void and radial walks coming out from it. The winner of a design competition suggested the planting of a yew tree at the centre with a circle of stone cairns.

There is currently a single cairn of Hertfordshire Puddingstone, which is often found in the local fields, at the centre. A fruit and nut field has also been planted with apples, pears, cherries, walnuts, hazels, medlars and crab apples. Funding Funding for the work has been obtained by a number of routes, including use of the fields for filming (eg of The shades), as well as attending local fairs, such as Risley Lodge, Bushey Heath and Oxhey village green with stalls and collecting boxes. The Friends also organise and manage a fun run over Attanborough Fields and Merry Hill, which has had increased participation over the years. The Woodland Trust Ancient woodland is defined by the Woodland Trust as being over 400 years old and it can be estimated by the hug test – 3 adults arm-to-arm are needed to hug an ancient tree. We now have