

Bexhill Town Council Wild Domesday Project

Dear Town Clerk, Communications Officer and Town Councillors

BEXHILL-ON-SEA WILD DOMESDAY PROJECT

SECOND THREE-MONTHLY REPORT

In accordance with my contract, here is the second report on the Bexhill Wild Domesday Project covering the period from 1st October to 31st December 2023.

Introduction

This project began on 1st June 2023 and has now been extended for a further year and so is due to end on 31st May 2025 unless continuance is agreed. The overall project is designed for three years of landscape and wildlife evaluation, conservation and enhancement in the nine wards of the town. A meeting was requested with the Town Clerk and Communications Officer on 20th December, to be arranged during January 2024 to make progress with the Project.

Data Collection

Part of the Project target list of 30 sets of scientific evaluation, is the collection of wildlife data. I have continued to gather scientific information from many national, county and local organisations about the target aspects affecting wildlife and landscape in Bexhill-on-Sea agreed before the start of the project. Because I am also the editor of the Hastings & East Sussex Natural History Society Journal, I have access to all their data. I am therefore able to develop a comprehensive picture of what is happening in the area. See more details below.

Community Interest Company

I have registered an independent legal community interest company (CIC) with Companies House to obtain grant funds for projects. The CIC has four directors, and a bank account application is being processed by HSBC.

Sewage Pollution of the Sea

The Bexhill sea environment continues to be affected by pollution and is assessed as being only marginally satisfactory for the fourth year in a row. This means that no effective measures have been taken by the responsible water company to improve sea water quality. It is hoped that Bexhill Town Council will be able to liaise directly with Rother DC to emphasise the urgent need for sea water quality improvement as this is directly affecting the public view of Bexhill as a resort for holidays by the sea and is also deeply offensive to swimmers.

In a recent report, the organisation Swimmers/Surfers against Sewage stated that the Environment Agency technique for assessing sea water quality was useless and that a better, more scientific method that can be implemented more frequently be adopted. Therefore, I request that the Climate Committee consider this as being important. I would like to address the next meeting of this committee about this matter. An extract from the Guardian article of 2021 is at Annex B. The latest Bexhill seas water quality results show that there has been an almost total failure by water companies to take effective measures in our area.

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Involvement of the Town Council in the activities of the Combe Valley Countryside Park CIC (CVCP CIC)

The CVCP CIC has recently faced a request to remove Friends of Combe Valley (FoCV), a registered charity organisation that I founded. A private company known to Hastings Borough Council (HBC) applied to HBC and the CVCP CIC to remove all the buildings and assets of FOCV including the Discovery Centre, workshops, apprenticeship training area and children's nature trails, in order to build a private golf driving range and astroturf football stadium on Bulverhythe Recreation Ground inside the CVCP. The application was refused.

A large part of the CVCP is inside Bexhill's wards, yet the Town Council does not have any representation on the CIC to voice concerns and protect the CVCP from private development. I therefore strongly recommend that the Town Council applies to the CVCP CIC for agreement to send a representative to their regular meetings to protect the interests of the people of Bexhill regarding wildlife and landscape conservation.

Liaison with Rother DC

This continues to be good with positive and supportive dealings with RDC Leader and his staff and advisors. The matter of shingle being thrown onto the sea front during storms and increasingly higher tides has now been resolved to a large extent by using the World War II technique of shingle ditches.

Wildlife Survey

An example of the richness of the Bexhill environment is sent to you in a separate PDF showing hundreds of recent examples of the great variety of wildlife and plant life of the Bexhill area. The full database also reveals the richness of people's private gardens in attracting wildlife. More details about this below.

Key Achievements in the three months – October to December 2023

Surveying wildlife status and making a database system that will dovetail all the Sussex iRecord Bexhill and Combe Valley Countryside Park findings with those of the Hastings and East Sussex Natural History Society. All nine wards of Bexhill continue to be very valuable wildlife and nature assets containing large percentages of fen and marsh landscapes and beach conservation areas, especially Galley Hill. Natural England have failed to respond to my application to have the Combe Haven SSSI extended to cover Galley Hill. Since they are required to reply within 40 days and have not done so, I would like to ask the Climate Committee if I have their agreement to apply to the Secretary of State for the Environment for an investigation into Natural England's non-compliance.

Liaising with Sussex Wildlife Trust on action for Gillham Wood. Relevant Bexhill Town Councillors are asked to liaise with me so that we can meet with the SWT officer responsible for the Wood to make a plan for this important Bexhill wildlife asset.

Wetland Trust Involvement. I have been liaising with Dr Barry Yates of the Wetland Trust on conservation matters. Dr Yates was previously manager of Rye Harbour Nature Reserve, so he has deep knowledge of wildlife and landscape conservation. There is a movement from the south and the north, probably due to climate change in which new species come from the south and existing species move their habitats as the environment and temperatures change.

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The Bexhill area and Combe Valley (which has a large part of its surface inside the wards of Bexhill), is rich in wildlife and the needs to be professionally assessed over a twelve-month period. Part of this is being done by Sussex Ornithological Society for avian species but more need to be done. So, a discussion needs to be held with a range of authorities to assess non-avian species.

The overall state of Rye Harbour is: 4,523 species, 736 species conservation status, 100's of rare invertebrates, 511 flowering plants, 101 breeding bird species including (types): 3 terns, 6 gulls, 8 waders, 8 ducks, 10 warblers.

We need to be able to quantify our assets in the same way as Rye Harbour do, and that is why I am working on a database as detailed above. I hope to have it ready by 31st May 2024 so that we have spring covered and then I will update it as we go on with the Domesday Project. My own database is at Annex A and its variety shows once more how lucky we are in this area.

Bexhill Area Bat & Bird Conservation Project: I am liaising with the Wetland Trust to see if our new CIC can raise funds for specialist bat identification equipment to cover important aspect of bat and bird conservation. Specifically for bats: tracking the Bechstein's and Nathusius' bats using Motus – bird and bat radio detecting – Nathusius' Bat Logging – BTO Acoustic Portal. Equipment also to be obtained will be Bioscan – DNA barcoding of flying insects, and Nocturnal Bird Migration. This will encourage specialists and students to visit and promote Bexhill as a research centre (TV and newspapers).

Other aspects discussed are tracking Grassland Feeding Waders – day and night, discovering Soil Invertebrates using soil acoustics. We are also moving towards a campaign to ask builders to include nesting boxes in new housing plans and to ensure that the Woodland Trust register of Veteran Trees is checked so that ancient trees continue to be preserved. We also need a survey of Bexhill's current hedgerows as vital habitats, and this can be carried out by the volunteer wardens to be appointed this year (2024).

Public Meeting and Climate Committee Meeting

The Project now proposes to hold a meeting with the public to explain the project and its results so far and to ask for volunteers to come forward. Before this can be done, we need to resolve the issue of insurance for the 14 volunteer wardens and their training. So, I propose that I give a 15-minute presentation on all this to the Climate Committee at its next formal meeting on 14th February.

Setting up the CIC

This has been a labour-intensive and bureaucratic process which has taken a long time, but it will pay dividends for the Project in future.

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Conclusion

The Domesday Project is well-positioned to fulfil all its aims provided we can move to the next phase, holding a public meeting, identifying and training volunteers and obtaining grants to enable the various project to go ahead. Now that we have our own CIC, we will be able to make rapid progress. I would be happy to meet with councillors and to answer any questions.

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Date: 8th January 2024

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Annex A

David EP Dennis – individual record of scientifically approved sightings in the Bexhill and Combe Valley area since February 2013.

A separate PDF of hundreds of records made across Bexhill has been sent to the Town Council by email attachment.

Group	No. of records	No. of species
acarine (Acari)	4	2
amphibian	5	1
bird	347	73
bony fish (Actinopterygii)	4	3
coelenterate (=cnidarian)	1	1
conifer	2	1
crustacean	2	2
flowering plant	77	56
fungus	7	5
harvestman (Opiliones)	6	2
insect - alderfly (Megaloptera)	1	1
insect - beetle (Coleoptera)	112	32
insect - butterfly	162	27
insect - dragonfly (Odonata)	182	22
insect - hymenopteran	100	42
insect - lacewing (Neuroptera)	1	0
insect - moth	37	23
insect - orthopteran	56	8
insect - scorpion fly (Mecoptera)	9	2
insect - true bug (Hemiptera)	29	15
insect - true fly (Diptera)	114	31
lichen	4	3
millipede	1	1
mollusc	3	3
reptile	8	4
spider (Araneae)	34	11
terrestrial mammal	12	8

Annex B

Sea Water Pollution

This article from 2021 shows that despite a massive fine for a water company, we are no nearer to getting good sea water quality for swimmers at Bexhill.

Guardian Newspaper 14th November 2021

‘A ruling by Mr Justice Johnson this July, in what was the most damning indictment of sewage management in this country since the Great Stink of 1858. The judge’s report effectively documented a surreptitious great stink that Southern Water had perpetrated over a six-year period from January 2010 to December 2015. The water company, whose major shareholders were a consortium of American and Australian banks, pleaded guilty to 51 counts of discharging untreated sewage into controlled coastal waters at 17 separate sites (including most frequently from the overflow pipes immediately offshore at Swalecliffe). “The total period during which untreated sewage was discharged was 61,704 hours, or just over seven years,” the judge noted. “It has been estimated that the total volume of untreated sewage across all of the sites was of 16-21bn litres or the equivalent of 7,400 Olympic-size swimming pools.”

In fining Southern Water, a record sum of £90m for its systematic breaches, the judgment noted that “history shows that fines of hundreds of thousands or low millions of pounds have not had any effect on the defendant’s offending behaviour”. That criminality was emblematic of a nationwide scandal that means only 16% of English waterways are classified in good ecological health, and which places Britain 25th out of 30 EU countries for coastal water quality, with 200,000 outflows of raw sewage into bathing waters from Whitby to Penzance in May to September of this year alone.

The landmark ruling against Southern Water had several consequences. On a national level it focused attention on the ongoing scandal of so-called combined sewer overflows (CSOs) polluting rivers and seas. On a local level it prompted a wave of protest that has proved an object lesson in the capacity of community activism to shape the political agenda.’