

Hallsands legacy

Who would have thought that a catastrophic event in the 19th century could benefit our nature reserve today? It's true... the terrible destruction of Devon fishing village South Hallsands in 1917 has now led to an over £40,000 grant to Slapton Ley!

It all started when around 650,000 tons of offshore shingle was removed to build an extension to Devonport dockyard. It was the probable cause of the erosion of the low cliffs that supported the village – and the village was destroyed.

Coastal Villages under threat

This coastline has always been under attack from the sea. In 1978 a storm threatened to engulf Torcross, just 4 miles (6km) north of here. Storm waves and shingle battered the line of houses and over the following few days, the sea wall was breached, the sea road undermined and many homes damaged.

Although now a strong sea wall nearby Beesands, the village is still vulnerable to strong east winds and loose deposits which are common in the area.

We shall never know whether the destruction of Hallsands or

'The whole area was a moving carpet of shingle – sucked relentlessly seaward by the undertow.'
Lawrie Emberson describing the 1978 Torcross storm.



Back to the present time – the Centre recently made an application to the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund (ALSF) for improvements to access on the NNR. The fund is managed by Natural England with monies sourced from companies paying for a government licence to extract aggregates.

We were successful and the money will mainly be used to replace the dilapidated boardwalks at Little Marsh and Ireland Bay. They pass directly through large areas of reed bed, and these improvements will allow safe access to far-flung parts of the reserve, an essential part of our guided walks programme.

Quality for schools



A level students from Chipping Campden doing ecology fieldwork on the shingle ridge

Slapton Ley Field Centre is one of the first organisations in the country to be awarded the Learning Outside the Classroom Quality Badge, recognising it as a provider of quality, safely-managed educational experiences for young people!



The Quality Badge is a brand new government scheme, combining learning and safety for the first time into one easily recognisable award.

Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, said: "Educational visits are among the most memorable experiences in a child's school life. Quality Badge offers teachers a guarantee that not only is a venue providing the sort of educational value that they can build on in class long after the visit, but they also have the appropriate risk management structures in place.

"It should ensure that many more young people have memorable, exciting and valuable learning outside the classroom experiences. I congratulate Slapton Ley Field Centre on being awarded the badge."

Andy Pratt, head of Centre said: "I am immensely proud of Slapton Ley Field Centre being awarded the Quality Badge. It is a real stamp of approval that the activities we offer young people are recognised as being of high quality.

"We have always worked closely with local schools and youth groups to provide quality learning in a safe environment. We know that children really benefit from these important experiences and it's great to have all our hard work recognised in this way."



Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families

**1959
2009**
SLAPTON LEY
FIELD CENTRE

Slapton Ley genesis

Ian Mercer recalls how it all began

In 1957 Gerald Oakley (secretary and treasurer of the Field Studies Council), who had saved FSC from bankruptcy in 1951, met Philip Michelmore on the beach at Slapton. One wanted to expand the FSC; the other to find someone who could fulfil the terms of Herbert Whitley's will – to use Slapton Ley and its environs 'for scientific and educational purposes'.

They did a deal and the compensation for not rebuilding the Royal Sands Hotel, finally ruined in the D Day rehearsal,

bought the tiny Whitegates House and land around it – and the nature reserve would be leased for £1 a year.

The first warden was appointed and arrived in January 1959. It was easy to see in a raw, bleak winter wind, with reeds bending out of steely grey water, why the Ley was yet another Excalibur site, and that this Field Centre would never compete in the glamour stakes with a hall or a mill or a fort. The spring brought concrete, two wooden labs, some adjustment of the ground floor of Whitegates – and students arrived in April.

But the summer of 1959 was a remarkable one, long, hot and dry. The Ley contracted to reveal a 15m shore with annuals in concentric zones mixed with aquatics left high and dry and that dullest of rarities – strapwort in large quantities. Rocky shores were balmy, viewpoints clear, and teaching here was obviously going to be a doddle.

FSC staff in 1968, with Middlegrounds as a new addition to the Centre



In January a band of students swapped city life for a weekend in the countryside – and they helped make a big improvement to access and safety in parts of the reserve used frequently by visiting school groups.

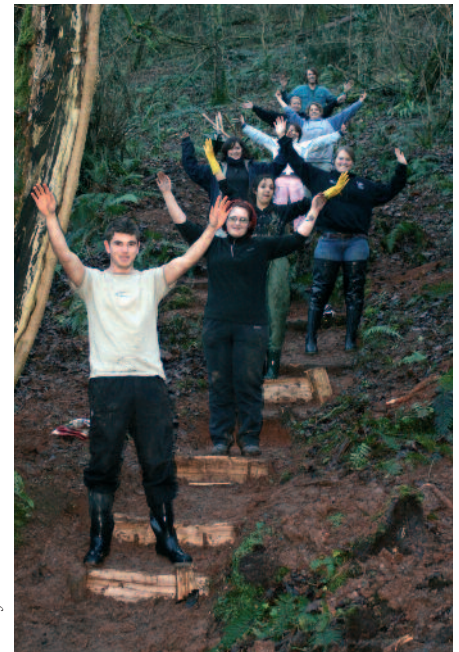
The 13 students arrived from the University of Plymouth's volunteer department, Volunteers in Plymouth (ViP), for a weekend of conservation work around the reserve.

Day 1: The first task was to repair steps in Slapton Wood leading down to Slapton Stream, a key location for biology lessons. The timber used to make these steps was sourced from within the reserve. While they were there, some of the group put on waders and grabbed a spade in order

to go in and clear parts of the stream which had silted up.

The next job was to start clearing overgrown vegetation from Wood Lane, an ancient pathway leading up to Slapton Wood. Loppers and bow saws were used to chop back over hanging trees and clear dense brambles.

After a hard day's work, an excellent dinner and a pint or two of local ale, the volunteers were looking forward to their bed!



Day 2: Refreshed and eager to go, it was back to finish the clearing of Wood Lane. It was a long way to drag branches to the top of the lane, but they were a hardworking and determined bunch and now the lane is far more accessible.

Then onto Slapton Sands for a beach clean, as part of the Marine Conservation Society's (MCS) Adopt-a-Beach scheme. To improve the coastal environment for both visitors and wildlife, the team walked from Torcross to the Memorial car park at Slapton picking up litter as they went. After a few hours of cleaning, eight bags of rubbish had been collected including trainers, a bin and even a sofa cushion!

Everyone had great fun and left with some fond memories of Slapton Ley.



The summer also revealed the (by then traditional) use of Slapton Sands for self-catering holiday-making, where pairs of buses swung off the A379, slung a tarpaulin between them for kitchen-diner, with the nearest bit of reed bed as latrine. Nature reserve? We thought someone must have been joking.

But look at it now. Slapton became a fieldwork pioneer, ecologically and geographically, in its first decade and research boomed in the next three. That 50 year-old enterprise and the physical and pedagogic work of the 1960s have paid off beyond the wildest dreams of even those heady days.

Environmental understanding for all

A change is as good as a rest, as they say. So during the large numbers of geography and biology A level groups that help fill our Centre for most of the year, it is always nice to get the chance to teach groups that have different needs and require different experiences. Jon Banner (assistant head of Centre) explains why two groups were both a test to his teaching skills and a rewarding personal experience.

The first group was children visiting from Belarus, funded and organised by the Chernobyl Children Life Line charity and staying with local families during a four week visit to this country. Their visit to Slapton was an afternoon activity following English lessons in the morning.

The language barrier was a bit of an issue to start with, but as we walked through the nature reserve we didn't need to speak too much as we used the power of our senses to help us appreciate the wildlife. After walking 'through the treetops', we made a smelly cocktail and discovered the invertebrates of the Ley, then ended the walk on the beach. As the children paddled in the water and skimmed stones, this was the highlight of the day for me, because most of them hadn't seen the sea before coming to this country! By all accounts they had a great visit and gained huge benefits from their month in the South Hams.

The second group was ten students (aged 6 to 12) from Coombe Patford School in Torquay, a school for children with autism. They had great fun exploring the tank at Torcross, building models of Start Bay in the shingle and then a bit of pond-dipping in the Ley. It was a very rewarding experience for both myself and the students, some of which had boundless enthusiasm and energy and I was very grateful for the support I received from the school's staff!

As well as the personal satisfaction I get from teaching these groups, the Centre benefits from allowing us to achieve our wider organisational aims of 'environmental understanding for all' and reaching a larger audience. I hope we continue to get this wide range of groups visiting the nature reserve; they gain obvious benefits from their experiences and they benefit the Field Centre staff that are involved in delivering those experiences.



Volunteers: an essential part of nature conservation

A volunteer leading a guided walk
Photo courtesy of South Devon AACNB Unit

You are at the heart of what we do – without your help, our work would be greatly diminished. We owe you, and would like to give you a huge thank you!

A number of local people generously give their time, taking part in different aspects of our work, including:

- carrying out practical management on our reserves
- surveying wildfowl, farmland birds and wildlife
- monitoring bird populations through a ringing programme.

But we are now at a crossroads. The needs of a nature reserve are constantly changing. As soon as we are successful in one area, such as delivering the right environment for dormice, or otters, then other issues arise to challenge us. In particular, we know that the key to the future of conservation will be in extending the understanding and appreciation of the natural world, making it relevant to as many people as possible.

We have just finished an exercise to assess how we talk about the nature reserve and portray our field teaching work to the people of the South Hams and our visitors. We already do a lot, but we realise that we will need to put even more time and effort in to this over the next few years. We will need more researchers, more surveyors, more people 'meeting and greeting' visitors, more listeners and more talkers.

To do this properly we will need resources for recruiting more and different volunteers, for training in the skills and knowledge that might be needed, and instilling confidence to deliver the work effectively. So this year we will explore how we might find the funds to do this properly and we need to do this in full consultation with our local communities and supporters.

For the moment, we just want to alert everyone about our plans. In the meantime, perhaps you might consider if you are in a position to offer us the gift of time – whether an hour, a day, a week, a whole month or more... before we come knocking!

Wildlife and arts courses

A range of introductory courses to learn more about wildlife or develop your painting and photography skills in residential or non-residential courses. All courses are led by an expert in their field.

South Devon birds, sights and sounds of spring

May 1-5

An introduction to birdwatching. Learn to identify the birds of South Devon through sight and sound. Led by Ian Mercer, naturalist and president of the FSC.

Stroll and sketch

May 29-31

Experience the glorious views around Slapton by foot, stopping to draw as we stroll. Led by Hilary Jean Gibson, painter, illustrator and teacher.

Coastal plants

July 19-24

Identify the flowers of Slapton Sands, Start Point and the Avon Estuary. Led by David Streeter, reader in Ecology at the University of Sussex.

The seals of the South Devon coast

July 20-24

An introduction to grey seals and the rhythm of their year. Observe seal behaviour, identify individuals and develop your field craft. Led by Stephen Westcott, leading British seal researcher.

Introduction to digital photography

July 31-August 2

Develop your digital photography skills through photographing wildlife and landscapes. Led by Adrian Davies, photographer, author and lecturer.

Capturing light in watercolour

August 7-10

Improve your painting with watercolours and paint the South Devon landscape. Led by Gerald Green, professional artist and author.

Please phone Slapton Ley Field Centre on 01548 580466 for more information.

Events programme

The run of the eels

Wednesday April 8, 10am-12 noon

Come and find out about the amazing story of the European Eel, and its journey across the Atlantic Ocean to Slapton Ley. After a cup of tea and a short walk over the cliffs, learn about and visualise their epic migration, before checking some elver traps to see if any of the young (glass) eels have made it in one piece!

- Meet at the Sea Breeze café, Torcross, 10am
- Adults £5, Children £4 • Great fun for all the family • Tea & coffee provided

Dawn chorus

Saturday May 2, 6am-9am

Sssshhh! Join us for a quiet morning stroll around Slapton Ley, listening to the morning song of our feathered friends as they wake to (hopefully!) a tranquil summer dawn.

Afterwards enjoy a breakfast of wholesome, local food prepared in our home kitchen.

- Meet at Slapton Ley Field Centre, 6am
- Adults £10, Children £7, Family £30 • Sorry, no dogs • Breakfast and tea/coffee included

Badgers and bats

June 18-September 10 (Tuesdays and Thursdays)

An evening exploration at Slapton Ley, watching badgers emerge from their sett, then look and listen for Slapton's many bat species on their nightly forage, keeping an eye out for glow-worms too.

- Meet at Slapton Bridge. Start time is roughly 30 minutes before sunset and varies through the summer, event usually lasts two hours
- Adults £5, Children £4 • Great fun for all the family • Sorry, no dogs

A Bird in the Hand

Saturday July 25, 8.30am-10.45am

Enjoy a feast of food and feathers with us! Join us for a breakfast of wholesome, local food prepared in our home kitchen at the Field Centre, then take a stroll down to Slapton Bridge to get up close and personal with some of our feathered friends by viewing the bird-ringing operation manned by the Devon Birdwatching & Preservation Society. Then observe some birds around the Ley (hopefully!) and learn some field ID skills.

- Meet at Slapton Ley Field Centre, 8.30am
- Adults £10, Children £7, Family £30
- Great fun for all the family • Sorry, no dogs
- Breakfast and tea/coffee included

Mammalwatch

July 29 and August 26 (Wednesdays), 10am-12.30pm

Go wild with otters, dormice, badgers, bats and a whole lot more besides! A morning adventure looking for animals great and small, and the tracks and signs they leave behind. Then come to see some photos and videos at the Field Centre, followed by a lunch of wholesome, local food prepared in our home kitchen.

- Meet at Slapton Ley Field Centre, 10am
- Adults £10, Children £7, Family £30
- Great fun for all the family • Sorry, no dogs
- Lunch and tea/coffee provided



Summer Safaris

3rd-7th August and 10th-17th August

Adventure and discovery activities all week at Slapton Ley for 8-11 year olds.

- 9.30 am-4.00pm • £17.50 per child

Back to nature

Thursday August 27, 2.30pm-7.30pm

Explore the wild woods of Slapton Ley National Nature Reserve through nature awareness, shelter building, making fires and storytelling. An experience to enjoy with the whole family. The day will end with an evening campfire on the beach with a chance to enjoy wholesome, local food and share stories from the day's adventures.

- Meet at Slapton Ley Field Centre, 2.30pm
- Adults £10, Children £7, Family £30
- Great fun for all the family • Sorry, no dogs
- Dinner provided

Seaside Fun

Weekdays, July 27-August 28, noon-3pm

Come and join our team for seaside fun and games throughout the summer! Events will include beach-based activities, entertainment and exploration, and you might even learn a thing or two!

- Meet at Memorial Car park, Slapton Sands
- Entrance fee is dependent on activity • Great fun for all the family • Packed lunch needed

Booking is essential for all events. Please phone Slapton Ley Field Centre on 01548 580685.

Slapton Ley National Nature Reserve (NNR) is owned by Whitley Wildlife Conservation Trust and managed by the Field Studies Council's (FSC) Slapton Ley Field Centre.

Head of Centre: Andy Pratt.

Reserve Manager: Nick Binnie.



in partnership with:

SLAPTON LEY
FIELD CENTRE & NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE

