



# Great green ideas



**Rufus Bellamy, BH&HPA National Adviser on conservation and environmental management, provides details of inspirational award-winning projects**

In 2008, David Bellamy launched a new Award of Special Distinction for parks participating in the Conservation Award Scheme. Parks are nominated by the Scheme's assessors for these Awards, designed to highlight particularly good ideas or examples of best practice that show the way forward. The following projects won the Award in 2009 and provide real inspiration for any parks looking for new ways to improve their environmental performance and become better neighbours to their local communities.

## Andrewshayes Caravan Park Boosting biodiversity

Trees and hedges are a fantastic way of boosting biodiversity on a park – not only do they provide a home for a wide variety of plants and animals, they also help to soften the impact a park has on the landscape and provide privacy to visitors. One park that has gone the extra mile with its tree planting work is Andrewshayes Caravan Park in Devon.

*'We have always been a bit "over the top" with our tree planting,'* says Peter Lawrence, whose family has developed the park over the past half a century. Peter explains that over the years, they have done extensive tree planting and tree care work, including putting in fruit tree avenues and, most recently, planting a new native woodland containing nearly 2,000 new trees and shrubs. *'The new trees are taking really well and we have now incorporated the new area into our existing wildlife walk around the park. Our visitors think it is great,'* he says.

The park's overall treescape is now diverse and well managed. It includes many fine hedgerow and field trees, including some veteran oaks that have been retained in the

landscape and not damaged by excessive or unnecessary tree surgery. There are also some more unusual native and exotic specimens on the park, such as the Chilean firebush. Overall, it makes the park an oasis for both wildlife and human visitors. *'Our park is all about families and dogs so the tree planting works really well,'* concludes Peter.

## Beverley Park Getting people inspired

Getting people inspired about the environment often needs a bit of imagination. One park that has brought real creativity and flair to the challenge is Beverley in Devon, which has set up a new 'letter boxing trail' around the park.

At the park reception, sheets are available for wildlife spotters. These have a simple wildlife trail map on them and show 10 locations for visitors to find, with space for an ink stamp beside each. At these locations, FSC-certified nest boxes (with the holes blocked) have been sited. The colourfully decorated boxes each contain a different stamp. These are used to fill in the map and completed trails are handed in at reception.

*'Children and parents do the trail together as a family,'* explains Claire Jeavons from Beverley Holidays. *'All children receive a nature bookmark at the end of the trail so there is a prize for all! Some children come back and do the trail again to collect all our different bookmarks.'*

According to Claire, the children love it as they get to run around the park and explore. The parents also value it as a free educational activity for their children. *'It adds value to our customers' holiday experiences,'* explains Claire. *'They find it fun and interesting and it increases their awareness of the parks'* **continued...**



surroundings, environment and wildlife.'

The park created the trail at the start of the 2009 season because 'we thought it would be a good way of introducing our customers to our local wildlife and environment in an enjoyable and educational way,' says Claire, who is extremely pleased with the positive feedback that the park has received from its customers.

In fact, the project has been so successful that a letter boxing trail has been added to Beverley's sister park, Ashvale, this season. For 2010 at Beverley, they are also planning to add new elements to the trail, so that they continue to 'box clever' for wildlife.

## Clippesby Hall Championing the local area

What does being a good neighbour mean? Well, if you look at the work being done by Clippesby Hall, it means being a real champion for your area – in Clippesby's case the beautiful Norfolk Broads. 'We try hard to get our visitors to get out into the Broads in a sustainable way,' says Clippesby's Johnnie Lindsay, who explains that the park produces a 'Discover the Broads' guide to help its visitors do just this. The guide advises people on the best 'undiscovered' parts of the Broads to visit and shows them how to get around by bike and other sustainable transport.

'Visitors respond really well to the guide,' says Johnnie. 'They sit in our pub, the Muskett Arms, and enjoy local ales and other specialities while they read our guide and plan what they are going to do. It gives people a chance to find the real gems that they might otherwise miss.'

To give another practical boost to sustainable transport around the Broads, Clippesby Hall has also worked with the green transport group Sustrans to develop a local cycling network (it also hires out bikes to its visitors). This network provides cyclists with a signed network of back roads that they can explore safely on two wheels. The park also works with a local 'canoe man' who takes visitors to explore the waterways of the Broads – this year they have even managed to get exclusive canoe access to a wildlife area where a sea eagle has been spotted.

The highlight of Clippesby Hall's good neighbourliness work is arguably its involvement in the 'Festival of the Broads'. This is designed to spotlight all of the best bits of the Broads – an annual event that promotes everything that's great about the area and local businesses and attractions: real good neighbourliness in action!



## Fforest Fields Caravan & Camping Park Quality habitats

Rivers, lakes, ponds and other water features bring natural beauty to a park – and can be a fantastic wildlife resource, if properly managed. One park that shows what can be done is Fforest Fields Caravan & Camping Park in Mid Wales. Here, a series of streams, pools and lakes provide quality habitats for a range of species – frogs, toads, newts, otters, fish-eating birds, as well as marshland plants like valerian, meadowsweet, sneezewort and greater bird's-foot trefoil.

'The development of our ponds and lakes is an ongoing thing,' says park owner Katie Barstow. 'We started the campsite here about 20 years' ago and we wanted it to sit well within the landscape and make as little impact as possible.'

According to Katie, the development of Fforest Field's water features started when a mountain stream flooded to reveal its original course. 'We re-routed the stream down its original course through the park. We dug shallow pools for pond life, made waterfalls to oxygenate the water and put in a weir system to prevent winter flood destroying habitats,' she explains. The park also had two particularly wet areas, which the owners had always wanted to develop into lakes; these have been excavated and carefully landscaped.

'We let the vegetation around our lakes develop naturally,' says Katie. 'Bulrushes and other marshland plants are coming up and we are hopeful that the marsh marigolds that are elsewhere on the farm will establish themselves round the lake.' They have also planted locally-grown native trees and have plans to take down a commercial timber crop and replace it with native hardwoods.

As the park has developed its lakes, it has kept a focus on the way people can access these areas. 'We encourage our visitors to walk around the farm and everyone loves the lakes,' says Katie, who says that all of Fforest Field's water features have definitely provided boosts to both biodiversity and to their bookings.



## Postern Hill Caravan & Camping Site Environmental interpretation

Getting people involved and interested in the environment is an important part of any park's green strategy, but often budget constraints get in the way of good intentions. However, as Postern Hill, a woodland park in Savernake Forest in Wiltshire, shows environmental interpretation can be achievable, inexpensive and engaging.

*'I try and explain things in simple terms and get young people interested using pictures, tracks and fun activities such as a wildlife watching treasure hunt,'* explains Postern Hill's Rachel Pace, who is in charge of the park's environmental work. *'The motivation of all this work is to enhance the holiday experience, but I mainly do it because I love it and I believe in getting people on board as young as possible.'*

Among the initiatives Rachel has put in place is a butterfly garden that provides the information children need to identify what they have seen. The same approach is taken with birds. There is also a log pile in the middle of the park, which has an information plaque next to it which describes the minibeasts that live there.

*'We have a little conservation area in which we've got nature fact books,'* explains Rachel. *'We also organise nature activities such as bat walks (we have 15 species of bat that fly in and around the park) and making bird feeders out of old cones. This year's big new project will be growing sunflowers.'*

One example of how Rachel helps keep costs down, while getting people excited about the environment, is her i-Ranger project. The park budget doesn't stretch to a full-time ranger, so Rachel has ingeniously developed an MP3 player that plays an information talk about wildlife on the park. It's a cost-effective idea that provides visitors with a self-guided walk and allows them to enjoy the park and learn about its wildlife as they ramble.

## Merlewood Country Park Water conservation

In these days of wet summers, water conservation has perhaps fallen off the radar a little. However, this doesn't mean that parks have stopped thinking about it and many are managing to cut their utility bills by cutting the amount of water they use. One of the pioneers in this area is Merlewood Country Park, which nestles on a hillside overlooking the River Wyre and the hills beyond.

*'At Merlewood we have spent a great deal of time encouraging our holiday home owners to conserve as much water as possible and we saw quite a dramatic reduction in the overall water usage for the park itself,'* says park owner Michael Ward. *'However, to complement this we needed to find ways in which we, as a company, could also reduce our daily water consumption.'*

To meet this challenge, Michael decided to fit an underground rainwater collection tank in the garden of the park manager's bungalow. This collects rainwater from most of the bungalow's roof. The water that is collected is used to irrigate all the gardens and flowerbeds at the entrance to the park and the flowerbeds around its main amenity building. It is also used to clean all of the park's machinery and its eurobins and to ensure that the entrance car park is kept clean at all times.

*'This installation has proved very successful and popular with all of our staff,'* explains Michael. *'It also means that during periods of drought when water restrictions may be imposed, we can continue to maintain and look after the park as always. We are now looking at ways of installing such a system on our residential parks.'*

## Oakdown Holiday Park Payback

There are many ways for a park to support its local community, but money is often an issue. One way round this is to ask visitors to pitch-in through a visitor payback scheme. One park that has employed such a scheme to great effect is Oakdown Holiday Park, which has used it to help its local East Devon community of Sidmouth in a rather unexpected way.

Oakdown Holiday Park, owned by the Franks family, has used the money raised to sponsor a 'Jurassic' garden display. The display, which features a floral version of *Rhynchosaurus spenceri* (one of East Devon's prehistoric residents), is a collaborative effort between the Jurassic Coast Trust, Sidmouth in Bloom, East Devon District Council Streetscene gardeners and the park itself.

*'We came up with the idea after we had heard about visitor payback schemes and when we knew that Sidmouth in Bloom was looking for assistance,'* says Doreen Franks. *'The Jurassic Coast Trust came to us to ask whether we would like to work with them and from there the project grew.'*

The skeleton of the ancient creature that is the centrepiece of the garden was made in metal by a local foundry. This was then filled with various sedums and placed in a garden planted with various seaside grasses. [continued...](#)

Oakdown's payback scheme asks people to pay 10p a day when they book a touring pitch; holiday caravans pay £1 a week and private owners £10 a year. *'In the first year we raised over £1,000 for the Jurassic garden display'*, says Doreen.

The park hasn't just benefitted from the goodwill it has received from the town for the imaginative floral display. It also won the President's Cup in Sidmouth's annual 'In Bloom' competition. *'It's given us some publicity, but it's just such a super thing to be involved with that it would have been really worth it anyway'*, says Doreen, who hopes to continue with the visitor payback scheme in years to come and find other ways to use the money to be a good neighbour.

## Otterington Park Renewable energy

Parks of all sizes are now investigating the feasibility of renewable energy to reduce their environmental footprint and, hopefully, save money in the process. Otterington Park in Yorkshire is now letting its visitors shower in water warmed by the sun. It has made its investment in greener heating by installing nine advanced flat plate solar panels on the roof of its shower and toilet block.

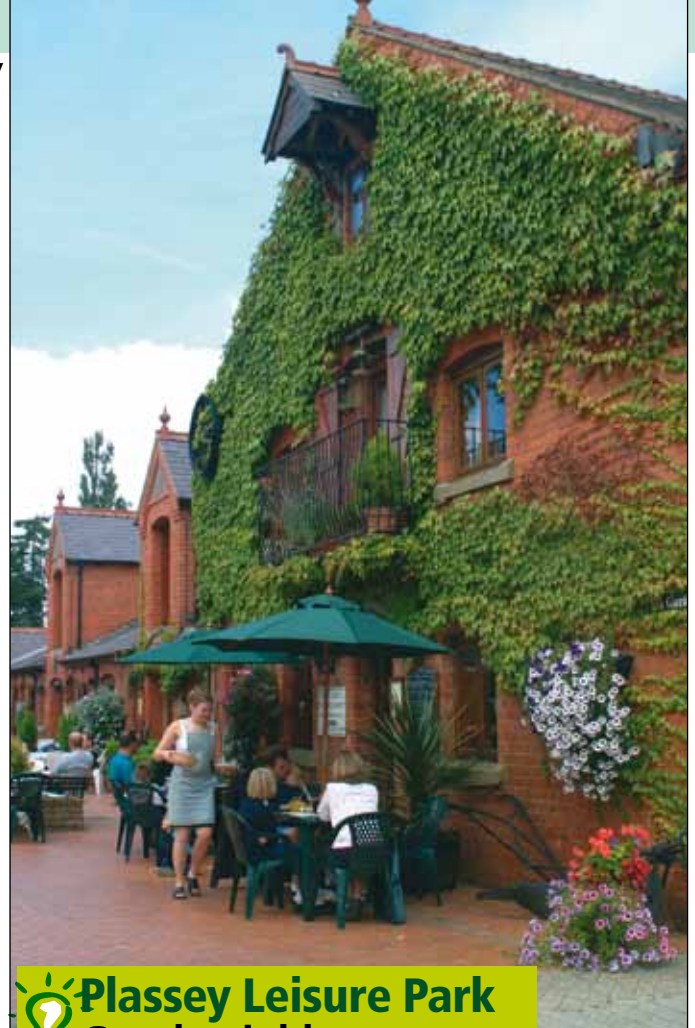
*'Our motivation for installing the solar-powered water heating system was practical'*, says park owner Carol Bowe. *'Our touring park is open from 1 March to 31 October, which is the best part of the year for harnessing the power of the sun. Irrespective of how long it takes for the system to pay for itself, we felt that we must gain in the long run.'*

Before installing the solar-powered water heating, the park relied on an oil boiler and electric immersion heater to heat water. *'With the old system we had problems at peak holiday times, when it just could not supply enough hot water for all the showers and the water ran cold'*, says Carol. She is pleased to report that since installing the solar-powered water heating, which is linked to the old system, they have had no complaints about showers running cold because of a lack of hot water. *'The old system is thermostatically controlled, so it only clicks on when the temperature drops from the solar power. We are certainly not using as much oil as we were previously'*, says Carol.

Stickers above each washbasin, and in each shower room, announce that Otterington's water is heated by solar power. *'We think that our visitors really appreciate it'*, says Carol.



Solar panels at Otterington Park



## Plassey Leisure Park Good neighbour

Plassey Leisure Park near Wrexham has really taken the development of local tourism – and good neighbourliness – to heart. Next to the park is the award-winning Plassey Craft and Retail Centre, set within a beautifully restored range of Edwardian farm buildings.

*'We give craftspeople the space and opportunity to do their work'*, says park owner John Brookshaw. John is justifiably proud of the way in which the park has used redundant farm buildings and turned them into an award-winning initiative that has won an award for farm diversification. It is also a great example of how to encourage local business.

Many of the businesses in the centre have a 'local' perspective (such as promoting Welsh food) and include a garden centre and a blacksmith. Together with the park, they form an important focus for the local economy. *'It's an ethos as well as a practical thing'*, says John. *'Whenever we have a vacancy we promote crafts rather than retail'*, he explains, adding that the centre's latest arrival is a local photographer.

The focus on supporting the local economy continues elsewhere on the park. Much of the food used in the park restaurant and coffee shop is locally produced. 'People do enjoy that and love knowing that they are getting a real taste of Wales,' says John. 'If we are doing projects on the park, we also use local tradespeople.'

The park also boasts over 240 acres of farmland; here a pathway through the farmland has been turned into a nature trail. Among the groups that come and enjoy this further example of Plassey's good neighbourliness are Wrexham Bird Watching Club, whose members have spotted over 50 species of birds on the park.

## Riverside Caravan Park Wildlife habitats

Creating wildlife-rich woodlands takes time and commitment. One park that has made the necessary investment and reaped rich rewards is Riverside Caravan Park, near Benthams in Yorkshire.

'Over the past five years or so we have fenced off footpaths and riverbanks from farmland to allow natural regeneration of the riverbank with seeds from trees and shrubs,' says park owner Thomas Marshall. The park has also introduced hawthorn and blackthorn hedges around the park to encourage wildlife to nest during the breeding season. 'This also provides a good barrier between areas of the park to stop people and children running round,' says Thomas, adding that the park has rebuilt several walls, including a wildlife wall that allows field mice, stoats and rabbits etc. to nest.

Hedge-laying at Riverside Caravan Park



'I am a farmer at heart and love the countryside and its way of life,' says Thomas. 'The environmental benefits that come with the work are twofold: job satisfaction and the increase in the birds and animals that come as the food chain is here for them. It also introduces a lot of our customers to animals and birds that they are unable to see elsewhere and allows them to experience them in their natural environment.'

To give the maximum benefit to wildlife, all the planting at Riverside has been native to the surrounding area so does not look out of place in the landscape. Trees and shrubs that will provide food for birds and other animals during the winter period are also planted.

According to Thomas, part of Riverside's success comes from the partnerships it has set up with local groups. For example, the park has a partnership for funding with the Lune Valley Habitat group. It has also been involved with the local Benthams Anglers group and they are undertaking a joint venture to restock the River Wenning with brown trout and sea trout fry.

## Ross Park Ecology management

Large-scale ecological management that boosts biodiversity is an ongoing challenge that takes commitment, expertise and innovation. One park that shows just what can be done is Ross Park in Devon. The Lowe family, who run the park, have purposely kept two large conservation fields, a recreation field and a dog-walking field, as open space for wildlife and for visitors to enjoy quiet recreation. 'We leave as much as we can for conservation to help preserve the countryside,' says owner Helen Lowe. 'People come to our old farm to enjoy the space and the natural beauty, so it all makes good sense.'

To keep conservation at the heart of the park's management there is an ongoing project to replace hedging in between pitches with a much wider range of shrub species – for customer interest and ecological benefit. There is also an ongoing scheme of hedge widening, controlled hedge cutting and planting which has resulted in some wonderfully dense hedges. The park also has an extensive and expanding composting system. Home-grown compost is used around the park to improve its rather depleted soil.

The park also kept conservation firmly in mind when it recently built a new storage area. Following construction, they put in a new screening hedge using a mix of native species (60-80% hawthorn/blackthorn plus species including guelder rose, hazel, dogwood and field maple) and planted new trees to replace those it had had to fell. 'In many ways, it enhances the park by bringing in new species,' says Helen.

For years, the park's grassland in its conservation areas has been managed by mowing only in the autumn, but this has led to a predominance of aggressive species such as oat grass and creeping thistle. This year they are trying a different policy, mowing one field twice a year and leaving the second field to regenerate naturally into an area of woodland. Work has also started on a vegetable garden, which will supplement the park's restaurant, supply custom customers and provide fresh produce for the owners. *continued...*

## Springhouse Country Park Inspiring children

Getting children excited about the environment is important. The great thing is that it doesn't have to be complicated or expensive. For example, Springhouse Country Park in Northumberland has started a Children's Club. A caravan has been allocated for the use of visiting children and decorated by them with a wildlife theme.

The brains behind this project is the park's housekeeper Christine. *'She set it up from nothing'*, says Springhouse's Andrew Blackie. *'It's not official or commercialised. Instead, the children tend to take the lead and Christine tries to make it as interesting as possible by making up wildlife activities that are far removed from school lessons and as interesting as possible.'*

The club runs during the main season and there is a weekly activity, which introduces the children to wildlife and the local countryside. For example, bee-friendly planting which helps them to understand the role these and other insects play and to value them as pollinators.

All the park's staff are immensely proud of the club and supportive of Christine's work. The children just love the opportunities for wild play that the club gives them, as well as the informal learning opportunities it offers. One other eco-benefit is that the unit that is used as the clubhouse would otherwise have been scrapped (although it is serviceable). It is also worth noting that the space that it takes up could also have been used for another paying unit.

For 2010, the park is moving forward with the club idea. *'This year we will be focusing on the garden, perhaps putting in a new pond'*, says Andrew. *'It should be a great year for the children and the club.'*

## The Springs Putting nature back

Large-scale environmental management cannot only boost biodiversity, it can also change the whole look of a park for the better. One park that has used good environmental management in this way is The Springs which lies near Pershore, in Worcestershire.

Originally a sand and gravel quarry, the park has been transformed over the last 10 years, thanks to a large-scale tree-planting project. Over 100,000 trees (a mix of native, exotic and fruit trees) have been planted over the course of the project and extensive parts of the park have been landscaped.

*'We've changed the look of the park and tried to put it back to what it was like a hundred years ago'*, says Estates Director Ashton Hall, who explains that they have turned of the century photographs to refer to. *'We have turned it into a nature reserve that our visitors can really enjoy. They can see snipe, oystercatchers, bee orchids and many other wonderful things. We've invested a lot of money and time at this and are now reaping the benefits.'*

During the project, the park's staff have worked closely with a local landscape architect who has a keen interest in wildlife to ensure that they make the most out of the space and resources that they have. Boundaries have been heavily planted with willows and other trees to give natural breaks between meandering rows of caravans. Orchards have been created round the park's lakes and two woodland areas have been developed and carefully managed for wildlife. The park has also constructed a traditional Cotswold mobile shepherd's hut, which is used as a bird hide.

Tree planting at The Springs



The large amount of planting has made the park attractive to both visitors and wildlife. The planting programme has also provided local employment and helped the park blend into the landscape. Another benefit is that the scheme has itself become sustainable, with the creation of a central nursery. The project has also considered water conservation - mulch and woodchip (made from recycled wood, using the park's own chipper) have been used around all new plantings on the park, helping to cut watering by up to 70%.

## Skegness Water Leisure Park Local heritage

Being a good neighbour isn't just about helping the local economy, it's also about keeping the spirit of a place alive. One park that has steamed ahead with this very important work is Skegness Water Leisure Park in Lincolnshire. On 3 May 2009, the HM Principal Inspector of Railways formally opened the park's narrow gauge railway, the 'Lincs Coast Light Railway'. This railway is of great local and national historic interest and its restoration by the park has saved an irreplaceable bit of local heritage.

The railway was originally saved from the Cleethorpes seafront in 1985 where it had been run from 1960 by volunteers until its lease expired. Construction of the railway at Skegness has been under way since the mid-1990s and has been driven by a small group of volunteers. Now that it is functional, the park is hoping to recruit more local volunteers to keep the railway moving.

The railway includes many locomotives and carriages of national and local importance. One of the locomotives was built by the War Department to service the trenches of WW1. There is an ambulance wagon that has been restored following



*The Springs in Worcestershire*

instruction from the War Office. Some of the carriages are from the local 'potato railways' that serviced the Lincs and East Anglian potato farms, while other carriages have been recovered from the light railway used at Claycross quarry in Derbyshire. There is also a specially-built carriage used for shoots at the Sandhutton Estate in Yorkshire, along with a 1903 steam locomotive that was last running in 1985 before being restored.

## Thorpe Hall Caravan & Camping Site Biodiversity recording

A wildlife survey is a vital tool for any park conservation work: it can highlight key species and important things that can be done to boost biodiversity. It can also act as a touchstone for how a park is improving its biodiversity. One park that has really taken biodiversity recording to heart is Thorpe Hall in Yorkshire. The park and surrounding land has been studied for the last 30 years by experts from the Yorkshire Naturalists Union and other groups through the initiative of the local recorder Tony Ezard. *'We have bat people, fungi people and other natural historians visiting us'*, says Jayne Chatteron, the park's manager. *'It's great to know exactly what's on the park.'*

The landscape around Thorpe Hall consists of chalk grassland, a chalk stream and adjacent pools, woodland and neighbouring arable land. The total number of species identified in this one small part of the Yorkshire Wolds is 1,330. These come from 12 different groups (birds 165, flowers and grasses 181, trees and shrubs 54, reptiles and amphibians 6, mammals 20, butterflies 21, microlepidoptera 147, macrolepidoptera 306, Coleoptera 151, Arachnida 107, fungi 122, Mollusca 50). Unusually many of the less familiar groups of invertebrate have been found and extensively studied. They include some notable rarities, the most recent being the day-flying micromoth *Falseuncasia ruficiliana*. This is the only record of this creature for the whole of Yorkshire.

According to Jayne, Sir Ian Macdonald, the park owner, loves to take visitors on walks to show them the bounty of wildlife on the park. *'The favourite is the cowslip walk that takes place in mid-May'*, she explains. *'It goes past a bank that hasn't been ploughed in living memory and which is alive with wild flowers.'*

*'We like to share what we have got with our visitors, many of whom come from the city'*, explains Jayne, who says that many people come to the park and see things they haven't seen before. *'They get interested and go and buy a spotting book, then come back and see what else they can spot.'* ●

