

NEWTOWN SURVEY REPORT 1985

L.E.L. Cox

Before presenting the main contents of this report I would like to start by including extracts from two letters received from George Lawrence in New Zealand. They recognise the very great service paid to the interests of natural history by Bernard and Eileen Hayward and the subsequent studies enjoyed by increasing numbers of students and their contributions to the developing work at Newtown.

I tried to outline the historical background to the Newtown project in my report included in the 1982 *Proceedings* and made particular reference to the work of George Lawrence and Oliver Frazer. George's letter reminds me of the debt we all owe to the awareness of Bernard Hayward whose action set in motion the activity that culminated in the establishment of the Reserve.

Extract from letter (1):

Bernard and Eileen Hayward, 57 High Park Road, RYDE, Tel 63449

Berni and Eileen were farming the Brickfields area at Newtown during the 'fifties'. Berni had been crippled in an accident at a boat yard and managed to farm on crutches! A really tough bird. Eileen and Berni both kindly and fond of kids – used to welcome us as naturalists (mainly John Wilmott, Bill Barry and myself at first).

I haven't got the facts with me but I believe it was sometime in 1958 he 'phoned me to say,

'If you want to see this area become a nature reserve you'll need to do something about it quick. I think they are planning to put a nuclear power station here . . .'

He based this assumption purely on his observations of the behaviour of a group of surveyors working near the entrance to the harbour. How right he was!

I then 'phoned Ron Machin, Bill Shepherd, Mercia Seabroke, Oliver Frazer and one or two other folks! Between us we formed a temporary committee to discuss, investigate, and, if possible, take action. The first survey and all subsequent actions sprang from this.

Letter (2):

George Lawrence, P.O. Box 93, Russell, Bay of Islands, New Zealand.

Dear Lou,

My wife and I very much appreciated the opportunity you gave us to see the exhibition set up by your student naturalists. We are very impressed by the evidence of original, as well as scientific, thinking and by the standard of presentation. Some of the exhibits reveal artistic talents too.

The evidence of a lifetime of field work suggests to me that the future of all species of flora and fauna on this planet depends on what can be achieved by the efforts of groups of knowledgeable and determined conservationists. Here in New Zealand an increasing number of people are accepting this concept and facing up to it.

The way in which your students are following up and developing the work of Cowes pupils of the fifties, sixties and seventies promotes optimism for the future.

Molly joins me in offering our congratulations to the Newtown project and our deep gratitude for the pleasure it gives us.

Yours very sincerely—George Lawrence.

The twenty-seventh survey was held at Newtown this year from Wednesday, May 15th to Wednesday, May 29th. The advance party arrived the previous day and in due tradition the rain started as we put out from Cassey Bridge.

The advance party included Colin Newbold, Matthew Parker, Wayne Tyler and Peter Turner.

The main party was much younger this year and included a larger number of third year students attending camp for the first time. I was impressed with the way newcomers readily adapted to the daily routines and natural history studies and soon formed a cohesive, responsive and tolerant unit.

Students attending during the survey period were as follows:

Third Year students: Kathryn Bell, Vicky Biggs, Elizabeth Bownas, Justin Brett, Dale Cooch, Paul Jones, Paul Newbold, Tim Pressey, Rebecca Price, Paul Revert, Robert Stewart and Lorna Woods.

Fourth Year students: Helen Brown, Kirsty Larkin, Peter Turner.

Fifth Year students: Matthew Parker and Colin Newbold.

Sixth Form: Jeanette Norris, and Elizabeth Price.

Former pupil, Wayne Tyler and prospective pupil Emma Philo.

I was assisted by Mrs. Philo from the Mathematics Department during the first week. Her presence was invaluable. I do appreciate the ready way she adapted to the conditions and way of life in camp and proved to be such a dependable aid.

In the second week Tracy Hart, a former pupil of some years, who started in her Third Year, was my assistant. It was pleasing to have the assistance of a young woman, who came initially as a junior, returning to act as leader and adviser.

I was pleased to have the expert assistance of a number of visitors on occasions during the fortnight. Two past VIth Formers, Nick Osborne and Paul Burland joined us during the first week-end and became extensively involved in the bat watching. Clive Chatters contributed three days with the botanists. Frank Heap joined us on two occasions armed with his bat detector. He also provided us with a wattle hide for testing and evaluation. Jessica Holm joined us for two days, in the second week, armed with a radio collar which was tested out on a wood mouse. Jonathan Cox gave us two days of help and advice and Connie Pelham joined us for three days giving advice on photography and insect studies. I am again appreciative of her efforts to ensure that we always have some excellent insect photographs.

I am indebted to all these visitors for the enthusiasm and expertise which they bring for the benefit of all students and which adds so much to the variety and value of experience available to them. I am particularly pleased that we have so many able people who are members of the I.O.W.N.H.A.S. whom we can call upon for help.

We also enjoyed a brief visit from an R.S.P.B. survey team assessing the redshank and ringed plover populations.

This year we enjoyed comparatively good weather following a dry, cold spring. The improved conditions enabled the camp to proceed smoothly and effectively and enabled so much more to be accomplished. The response of the students to the blossoming of life at Newtown was most encouraging. Our main activities followed the usual pattern and were as follows:

Mammals

The usual trapping grid was set out in the camp site under the general direction of Colin Newbold and Matthew Parker. They again organised an efficient survey and presented their results accurately and effectively. The results show for the third year a steady wood mouse population. The bank voles have crashed from their very high numbers of 1984, although not as low as in 1983. We caught no common shrews this year compared with eight new catches recorded in 1984. For the standard grid the figures are:-

	1983		1984		1985	
	New	Recapture	New	Recapture	New	Recapture
Wood mouse	17	43	15	43	18	74
Bank vole	1	0	13	117	5	10
Common shrew	1	0	8	*	0	0

* not marked

Amongst the catches two wood mice and bank voles were trapped carrying marks of previous trappings.

Colin redrew his transect to show the vegetation cover in relation to the positions of the mammal traps. His survey of the rabbit population shows the increase in their numbers within the camp site and the spread of their burrows following last years removal of cover from the adjacent farm lands. This move may well prove of advantage to the site as the shift in their grazing will help to keep open existing grassy areas and perhaps limit the invasion of scrub.

Jessica Holm's visit and subsequent night vigil, tracking a wood mouse fitted with a radio collar, served to show how far those small mammals may traverse in the course of an evening. Certainly in this instance the mouse ranged from the top of the site to the waters edge, on the southern shore, in its feeding activities. Students were on two-hour stints from 10.00 p.m. to 6.0 a.m., although not responding too eagerly as the time advanced towards dawn. The wood mouse ranged extensively from its home trapping zone throughout the night until it was apparently caught by a predator in the early morning. Its signals were traced moving rapidly towards the Dark Pond until transmissions abruptly ceased, the line of the disappearing signals led towards a series of runs, presumably stoat, near the pond.

Colin Newbold has assembled a number of skeletons found within the camp site. These make an interesting addition to the display.

Frank Heap and Paul Burland continued their investigation of the bat populations and still seek to locate the roost sites. The whole student group was involved in manning observation points pinpointing the time of emergence, subsequent flights and flight paths. Bat watches were mounted on the following occasions: May 18th, 20th, 25th. Despite early posting and comprehensive placing of students to likely areas the roost sites remain unlocated. There was certainly plenty of activity commencing at 9.20 p.m. and lasting for an hour when all activity would cease.

Birds

A very encouraging year for the bird watchers this time with a further increase in species close to the site and in nearby habitats.

I was again indebted to Wayne Tyler, a former pupil, for his enthusiastic support in organising and manning the hides. He was well supported and encouraged by the interest and enthusiasm displayed by our new students. In particular the hide records prepared

by Tim Pressey and the drawing associated with habitats presented by Helen Brown and Kirsty Larkin in the display are evidence of their careful observation and recording.

The salting to the south of camp provided interesting bird watching again this year. Here I must draw attention to a mistake in my last report as I have recorded temporary bridges being built to the 'north of the camp'. Bridges were refurbished and a hide erected on the south salting. A pair of oyster catchers nested within the salting and not close to the seaward edge as last year and afforded an excellent opportunity for observation. A pair of redshank also nested on the salting.

The meadow this year was alive with birdsong and activity. We welcomed one of our school governors, Mr Colin Nicholson, on the second day of camp and in a general survey of the meadow with the intake students the following birds were observed paired and active: yellowhammer, two pairs of whitethroat, two pairs of blackcaps, three nesting pairs of linnets, three pairs of chaffinches. A general observation hide was erected in the meadow. The Tuesday following students at first reported a wren nesting near the hide. This eventually proved to be a willow warbler that hatched its first three chicks on Sunday May 28th. A cuckoo was also a regular visitor to the meadow.

An observation hide in the Dark Pond enabled students to see a moorhen with chicks and spotted flycatchers, in addition to the usual chaffinches that form part of Matthew Parker's continuing study. His three years of records are an important part of the display.

A natural hide was erected by the fresh water ponds by Peter Turner who maintained an enthusiastic watch. Birds seen from this location included heron, Canada geese, shelduck, mallard and black-headed gull. Watchers from the pond often had the opportunity to observe hares displaying in the nearby fields.

A wattle hide, loaned by Frank Heap of the National Trust, was erected on the main salting and proved to be an excellent addition, enabling students to record observation of shelduck, canada geese, redshank, black-headed gull, herring gull, common tern, sandwich tern, a black-tailed godwit and an injured Brent goose.

For the second year running there were no nesting gulls on the wall to the south of the Clamerkin.

Botany

Introductory field work was started with the help of Clive Chatters. Students were concerned with the identification of the most common species in the area and relating them to habitat. Amongst the more interesting were the presence of early purple orchids along the north cliff and green-winged orchids in the meadow and in the fields towards the fresh water ponds.

Following last year's recording of an adders tongue fern, Clive discovered patches of the plant in the meadow immediately to the west of the camp site hedge.

Insects

In keeping with the fine weather there were increased records of insects. Amongst the butterflies identified were grizzled skipper, green hairstreak, small copper and painted lady in the meadow; brimstone, holly blue and common blue within the camp site.

I was greatly helped, as usual, by Mrs Connie Pelham. Her records of finds with the students include unidentified larvae on blackthorn and hawthorn, larvae of drinker moth, figure of eight moth and yellow tail moth. Her photographs of a newly emerged damsel fly, azure damsel flies and cast skins of may fly indicate the response from the pond life to the warmer weather. Her slides are completed by the inclusion of pictures of

a gold arches moth, green wasp, cuckoo wasp, the frog hopper *Cercopsis vulnerata*, seven spot ladybird and a brown argus.

Pond dipping

An absorbing activity that provided the students with many specimens for observation and identification. The display includes some excellent work, particularly that presented by Vicky Biggs. The variety of ponds provides a range of habitats and variations in life. The Dark Pond yielded our first recording of the freshwater cockle, identified and confirmed by Jonathan Cox. A first record for Newtown associated with the Dark Pond included a grass snake seen frequently swimming in the water. In addition a grass snake was discovered on the girls' site on the first day. To my knowledge this is the first time that any snakes have been seen on the Brickfields site or associated territories. The site abounded with newts and toads. All three species of newt were seen and identified during the week.

Fossils

There were regular visits to the reef coinciding with the lowest tides. They were not very productive. Some small pieces of bison and elephant were found but nothing to measure up with some of the past finds. Certainly we were unable to reach the lowest tide level because we did not experience sufficiently low water. The furthest reefs were only just exposed at the lowest tides.

Erosion

The last four years the records have been kept by Colin Bell. Since he has departed to Portsmouth Polytechnic to study Engineering his place is taken by his sister Catherine who made a good start to her studies at Newtown. She has updated the computer file and entered it onto the school network. In addition Robert Stewart measured the movement from the datum line and with assistance from Stuart Wisbey the scrub was cleared along the length of the line and at right angles to each measuring point. The sequence of drawing in the display shows the continuing loss of material from the cliff face.

Photography

I am indebted to Mrs. C. Pelham and Tracy Hart for their photographs in the display. Most of the slides are mine this year as the student intake is in the transition period and we have to train up a new team. However, Colin Newbold has an excellent collection of prints available in the display. He has also edited 8mm film produced in the last five years, putting together the best available material. It constitutes a useful record and includes some excellent work by Peter Turner showing the grass snake swimming. Oliver Fraser gave us his full support as usual.

Wardening

We had a few visitors over the Whitsun period. It may well be that our policy of welcoming those who land and offering a conducted tour has had a good effect in terms

of good will and an appreciation of 'what is going on'. We welcomed the County Solicitor, Mr. Malcolm Lloyd, who had the opportunity to observe the camp in full swing.

Previous work on erecting fences and gateways was completed enabling the site to be excluded from poaching by cattle. Colin Newbold completed an enormous task in wiring the Eastern Boundary. The fire site was moved away from the cottage garden in order to allow the garden site to recuperate. Continuous bad weather in the past combined with poaching by cattle and students' feet has led to the loss of grass. With careful management the site should soon be restored.

Finally my annual thanks to Oliver Frazer for his ever present support. To Pat Ewbank, the Reserve Warden, who never fails in our support. To Sandy Leath for his prompt and efficient shipping of our equipment.

Considering that we had lost most of our senior students this year I believe we had a very successful fortnight's survey. It is a measure of the quality of support I have received from all those adults concerned with this survey and of the ready response and growing maturity of the students participating.