



Discovering Bishop Copleston's Wetland Heritage

January 2012 sees the launch of a major new two-year initiative by the Offwell Woodland & Wildlife Trust for which it has been awarded a grant of £41,400 from the Heritage Lottery Fund. "Discovering Bishop Copleston's Wetland Heritage" will focus on the conservation of freshwater wetland habitats rich in biodiversity at the Woodland Education Centre, which have evolved from features created within a Victorian pleasure garden. The scheme will also provide education about the richness of the habitat, identification of the many species present and the way in which the water systems are managed to optimise water flow and levels using the Victorian sluice and leat system.



Dragonfly Pond supports a huge diversity of plant and animal life and is an ideal location for school children to undertake hands-on studies of freshwater ecology.

The project will attract a wide range of volunteer participation from school children and adults of any age and ability. Part of the initiative will see the removal of large amounts of silt from one of the Centre's ponds, and repairs to a broken culvert forming an essential part of the floodwater leat bypass system.



The broken culvert in the Victorian leat which will be repaired.

The original 'pleasure garden' was created in the early 19th century by Bishop Copleston, who lived in the village of Offwell and was Dean of St Pauls and Bishop of Llandaff. Within his pleasure garden he created boating lakes and a leat system which restricted floodwater from entering the ponds and lakes. Today, the 21Ha Woodland Education Centre includes 7Ha of wetland, comprising 3 ponds, a lake and a leat, some half mile long, which allows surplus water to bypass the sensitive wetland areas. It is part of a County Wildlife Site and an important breeding ground for up to 20 species of dragonflies including the locally rare Ruddy Darter.



Bishop Copleston (Image courtesy Allhallows Museum, Honiton)

The Trust will be recruiting a number of volunteers during the coming months, and they will be invited to undertake a variety of supervised tasks, including the reinstatement and maintenance of aquatic habitats and waterways, the ecological surveying of the wetland areas, and the 'adoption' of small areas for conservation and monitoring work. School children will be able to take part in a new wetland educational activity at the Centre and will be invited to attend a special launch day, when Bishop Copleston, played by an actor, will arrive at the Centre in Victorian costume to explain about the wetland and its history to the waiting crowd. In addition, a video and booklet will be produced about the Centre's wetland habitats and their heritage, along with some new web pages documenting the progress of the scheme. All volunteers contributing to the project and those participating in its educational activities will have the opportunity to learn new skills and knowledge, and will be able to enjoy and share these experiences with other like-minded people.

In addition to the valuable lottery funding for this project, the Trust will also be contributing £7,700 over this two year period, so it is important that we continue with our various fund raising activities as well as receiving donations from our regular supporters.

Whether you are a Woodlander, a school, a willing volunteer or simply have an interest in the countryside, if you would like to register your interest in participating in this exciting new initiative, we would love to hear from you. You can email us at offwell1@aol.com or telephone 01404 831881. We will then keep you informed of how and when you can take part. We look forward to hearing from you!