

Standing up for Hertfordshire's countryside

CPRE HERTFORDSHIRE RURAL LIVING AWARDS 2014
Judges' Reports

Environment Category

The projects nominated this year were very varied - and all very worthy. They included:

- making a wildlife meadow on part of a roadside embankment;
- an infants' school which made 'going green' a fundamental element of its whole ethos;
- a large scale co-operation between local authorities and volunteers to improve an extensive area of countryside for public access and wildlife conservation;
- a film about a project to re-vitalise a whole river valley.

We welcome nominations of both large and small projects. Please start thinking now of good ones to nominate next year and encourage all your friends and contacts to do the same. Each is assessed according to how well it meets some of the following seven criteria:

- promoting access to the countryside;
- celebrating Hertfordshire's landscape;
- enhancing the countryside for all to enjoy;
- being imaginative and innovative;
- promoting local food and/or food production;
- having potential for future development; and
- whether it is both on-going and environmentally friendly.

The judges really enjoyed reviewing this year's nominations and were excited by the range and number of good projects being undertaken around the county. It was not easy to decide which ones should receive awards.

Anthony Oliver

Environment Category Commendation: Oxhey Woods Conservation Volunteers There's a band of merry men and women who volunteer their time to tend to Oxhey Woods - a 240 acre Local Nature Reserve in a suburb of Watford, parts of which date back 10,000 years to the last ice-age. It is the largest Local Nature Reserve in the Three Rivers District and the group is active in representing the views of woodland users to Three Rivers District Council and the Countryside Management Service.

The Conservation Team are a knowledgeable and dedicated group who work tirelessly to keep this ancient woodland healthy and ensure that the woods are accessible and inviting to all. From glade creation to pond restoration, from pathways and waymarker posts to correct management of the mid-19th-century rhododendron walk and resuscitation of heathland areas, the team's expertise, year-round enthusiasm and hard work is heartening and impressive.

The judges visited twice - once having phoned ahead, once unannounced. One visit was conducted in glorious sunshine, the other in a torrential downpour - but nothing dampened the volunteers' spirits or work ethic.

This is an ongoing project for the good of the wood - it is also one that unites two very contrasting local neighbourhoods - Oxhey Woods span both an affluent area as well as an area that is far less

privileged. The volunteers enable local groups to use and enjoy the woods - including a weekly Health Walk for which the Easy Access Trail is invaluable. The dedication and forward-planning of the volunteer group will ensure that the woods are a well-used and much loved local amenity.

Oxhey Woods Conservation Volunteers are worthy recipients of the CPRE's Highly Commended Award in the Environment Category.

Freya North

Environment Category Award: Redbourn Infants School Eco Council

We visited Redbourn Infants School one afternoon in June. All the signs were that it was a pleasant semi-rural school, looking much like many others in Hertfordshire.

The only suggestion that this might be something different was the impressive Robot, Scrappy, who stands proudly outside the school.

Redbourn Infants School is an Eco School, and it was only when we entered the school itself that we began to understand just what this means and how far children, staff and parents have embraced the concept.

The school is supported by its own Eco Council, with two children from each class meeting regularly. We were amazed by the range and reach of the projects that the whole school is engaged in:

- Web cams follow the progress of birds nesting in nest boxes;
- awards are given to children who walk to school most, classes that recycle most and teachers who turn off lights and appliances;
- a gardening club with a greenhouse made from plastic bottles;
- a muddy kitchen;
- and a recent development is a Forest School.

What is remarkable about the school is how, since the Eco Council was started just three years ago, thinking about impact on the environment and sustainable living is now engrained in everything the school does. Leadership and support of staff mean that the approach will continue to be part of the school's DNA. The judges have no doubt that the school is producing young people who are interested and motivated to understand and do more about their impact on their environment. These young people will become the decision makers of the future, and we can only be positive and optimistic about this.

Rob Rees

Community Living Category

This Award is intended to acknowledge particular community activities that benefit a local community and deserve wider recognition because they help contribute to the enhancement of rural life in Hertfordshire.

In judging the entries for the Community Living Category, we have looked for those activities that:

- add value to community life;
- are supported by the community;
- are innovative;
- are able to be used by all the community;
- help bring the community together
- demonstrate a vibrant community;
- and are sustainable (in the various meanings of that word).

The nominations for the Community Living Award were fewer than last year, but the standard was very high.

A special mention goes to the owner of the ‘Country Bumpkin’ at Tewin. He uses local suppliers that contribute to the local economy, organises traditional country pursuits events and actively encourages the support of various local charitable events.

Community Commendation

The Highly Commended Award goes to Cottered Village Festival.

Cottered is a small village but with a very active community. A dedicated team ensures that their Village Festival is a great success and attracts people from a wide area. A lot of effort goes into organising a wide ranging variety of activities. The money raised benefits the village. 2013 proved to be one of their best-ever events, following a BBC gardening programme featuring the Cottered Japanese Gardens. Never underestimate the power of the media!

At our judges’ meeting to consider the entries, we were unanimous in our choice of both the winner and the commendation. These entries scored highly against all the criteria. Entries deserve to be congratulated for their service to their local communities and their contribution to the enhancement of life in rural Hertfordshire. Community living in Hertfordshire is alive and well.

Joyce Jackson

Community Award: East Common Play Area, Redbourn

Our decision on who should be the recipient of the Rural Living Award came down to what was, in effect, the total involvement of a community in a project. And not only that, but the structured way in which the project was conceived and managed is, without doubt, a lesson to us all.

We have all seen old and worn-out play areas in our communities which have often become a meeting place for the disillusioned teenagers so, what this community decided to do was to start again from scratch and make a new play area which was accessible to all: to children both able-bodied and not; to grandparents and great-grandparents, whether in wheelchairs or not, and to provide a range of equipment which could be enjoyed by all.

So, a playground committee was formed some three years ago, complete with its own constitution, to upgrade the area. There were innumerable surveys of all the children in the village (and the parents too) and so got ideas and photographs of the sort of equipment they wanted. Through a very impressive number of fund-raising events, in which all the community

appears to have taken part, they raised £70,000. We were also pleased to see that they didn't just go to one supplier but chose items from across the board. With help from Groundwork they have made a playground area which is totally accessible to all.

When I visited, 3pm on a Monday afternoon, the playground was full of children all having a great time from tunnels in mounds to the junior zipwire, swings, slides, a boat for pirates, a couple of slides etc. etc. They seemingly got a lot of small amounts of help from a large number of people: making a cake, doing some posters, getting a Star Wars weekend and so on.

They have cleverly kept back some of the money for maintenance over a 10 year period and have children from outside the immediate neighbourhood using the area because it is so good.

Judith Watson

Dorothy Abel Smith Award: James Crawley of Redbourn

This award goes to a young person aged up to 18, who has made an outstanding contribution to Rural Living.

We are giving it to James Crawley of Redbourn who has made an outstanding contribution to his community. Seven years ago he reconstituted his village Youth Parish Council and is currently vice-chairman. Determined to keep going, he has helped raise money for a new play area and for the new youth club. He volunteered at the youth club as a young mentor supervising children using computers. He has learnt Braille to support a young girl at school and writes in Braille to a boy in Primary School. In spite of indifferent health, he has faced everything bravely and continues to think about other people and their problems more than his own.

Peterkin Award: Dr Janet Woodall of Walkern

This award goes to an adult who has made an outstanding contribution to Rural Living.

We are presenting it to Dr. Janet Woodall of Walkern whose contribution to village life has been immense. Ten years ago she took over and transformed the village Journal. This publicises and encourages new enterprises in the village and includes recording local history. This interest led to her to found a History Society. Her village has links with Magna Carta and she is leading the 2015 celebrations. Her nominator writes that Walkern is immeasurably more lively, neighbour- and neighbourhood-conscious as a result of her enthusiasm and efficiency.

Dorothy Abel Smith