

# The otter story

Otter photos courtesy Darin Smith

The Wiltshire Wildlife Trust is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, and to mark it, Hills looks back at the very first project it funded through the Landfill Communities Fund.

In 1997, Hills gave its first landfill tax communities fund grant to the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, for a project to encourage otters back to Wiltshire's rivers. It was the country's very first grant of this kind, and fifteen years later, on the 50th anniversary of the Trust, the team can see the success of their hard work...

The Landfill Communities Fund is a government scheme which was set up in 1996 to fund community or environmental projects in the vicinity of landfill sites. Through the scheme Hills is able to give a percentage of the tax it owes to government for the tonnage of waste it disposes of in landfill, to organisations who deliver environmental objectives.

When the scheme was launched, otters were extinct in Wiltshire, and they had been for decades. The Trust identified the crucial need to embark on a project to encourage otters back to Wiltshire from other parts of the country where a tiny population had managed to survive the effects of organophosphate pesticides. Hills was able to support the project through the Landfill Communities Fund.

"By 1997 we already had a fantastic working relationship and we had faith that we could help the Trust with their project to encourage otters back to Wiltshire," Mike Hill, chief executive Hills Group, said.

It was going to be a challenge, but with partnership working between the Trust and Hills, everyone was sure the project could be a success. It was launched at Castle Combe Golf Course, next to the By Brook.



Photo: Paul McRae



Photo: Christine Townend



Photo: Chris Tracey



Photo: Steve Day



## Timeline

intouch takes a look at some of the projects Hills has worked with Wiltshire Wildlife Trust on over the last two decades, to find out how far it's come...

### 1989

Relationship launches with Hills' sponsorship of **Braydon Forest Countryside project**, working with landowners and communities to promote wildlife-friendly management.

### 1992 - 1993

The Trust receives keys to the new **Firs Nature Trail** still owned by Hills and leased to the Trust.

### 1997

Hills grants **country's first Landfill Communities Fund** to the Trust for the otter project.

Work begins in **Braydon Forest** to improve habitats for barn owls, including installing nest boxes.

**Schools Recycling Scheme** launched as partnership project between Trust and Hills, with Waste Warrior, a cartoon Viking.

Trust acquires **Clattinger Farm**, which is supported for many years by **LCF funding**.

### 2001 - 2003

Trust acquires **Langford Lakes nature reserve** in Wylve Valley, following restoration work by Hills.

The **otter taskforce records return of otters** to outskirts of Chippenham.

Trust acquires **Blakehill Farm**, with **LCF funding** playing a key role.



"On the day of the launch Robert Hill, chairman at the time, and Alan Pardoe, then Group chief executive, helped with the construction of an otter holt under the expert guidance of Trust staff and volunteers," said Gary Mantle, the Trust's director.

"It was great to see them getting so involved in what was to become a really big project across the county."

The Trust constructed 44 artificial holts in special places along the river where they knew otters would want to rest and find sanctuary. The holts are made of large sections of tree trunk to form a series of living chambers which are then covered with smaller branches and hidden away under brush.

The Trust also worked with 400 riverbank landowners and land managers to make sure habitats created the right conditions for otters, surveyed 450km of river, and trained hundreds of volunteers to spot signs of otters and water voles. They also advised water companies and others on the strategic management of water for wildlife, and contributed to local Environment Agency plans.

In the years following, the number of otters on Wiltshire's riverbanks was monitored.

"For some time, there have been signs of otters travelling along the south coast from Devon and Cornwall, and up the Avon

towards Salisbury," said Gary. "There have also been signs of otters coming from Wales through the Cotswolds, towards the Upper Thames, and reaching into the heart of Swindon."

But only now have otters finally returned to the whole of the county.

"Over the years Robert Hill has asked me whether otters have returned to the Kennet. Kennet is the last piece of the jigsaw, and it's taken a while, but we can finally say 'yes,'" said Gary.

So, it looks as though otters are finally taking their rightful place in the county, as part of our natural wildlife, but sadly the story isn't over for them...

We have experienced two dry winters with below average rainfall, which has resulted in low river flows and groundwater levels. The south west is officially in a drought, which is expected to last until Christmas. This has been followed by exceptional rainfall putting the rivers in flood and this means that, once again, otters and other wildlife are under pressure.

"We all have a role in using water responsibly and it's up to all of us to play our part in conserving our limited water supplies. After working so hard to get the otters back, making sure there is enough water in our rivers is crucial to keeping otters in Wiltshire," said Gary.



Photo: Darin Smith

**2004 - 2009**

Significant increase in Barn Owl numbers at Braydon Forest, with 30 nest boxes being used.

Waste warriors recycle 2,000 tonnes of paper, which equals 34,000 trees.



Trust buys Lower Moor Farm from Hills, who continue to help fund the reclamation of the land for wildlife.



Photo: Wiltshire Wildlife Trust

**2010 - 2012**

Joint project between Wiltshire and Gloucestershire Wildlife Trusts to improve habitats for dragonflies, supported by Hills through LCF funding.



Celebration of 22 years of Hills' involvement in creating living landscapes in the Braydon Forest with funding to continue work on restoring grassland through working with landowners and a new focus on greater community engagement.



Hills donates St Julian's Community Woodland, a newly planted wood in South Marston, to the Trust for the community to manage and enjoy.

Hills supports the Trust's Corporate Green Awards for the fourth year running.



One year anniversary of the Trust taking management of Penn Wood, High Penn, Calne, from Hills.