



Brownfields for Butterflies and Business Conference 2008

Keynote Speech – Anthony Glossop – Chariman – St Modwen PLC

I have to confess that I was both surprised and somewhat skeptical when I was approached by your Chairman, Richard Southwell, in the Summer of 2005, with the suggestion that your organisation could work well with a property operation to each parties mutual advantage. Indeed, if Richard and I had not had a long standing business friendship, I might have approached this even more cautiously.

As it was, I found the approach positively refreshing. Our previous experience of single interest ecological groups had been largely negative. With a few notable exceptions, the activists whom we had encountered had been incredibly negative to the whole concept of property development. The idea that nature could exist side-by-side with the built environment was an anathema to them, even though all of us know that bats for example have lived in harmony with humans in lofts, outhouses and urban gardens for centuries.

Fortuitously, we owned substantial properties in three of the key locations identified by your organisation as butterfly conservation hotspots. These were at Berry Fields in Stoke on Trent, Coombswood in Halesowen and Long Marston in Warwickshire. Richard, therefore, suggested that we took these three sites as case studies to prove or disprove the notion that conservationists and property developers could work in harmony.

The project was that BC volunteers should record the habitat and presence or potential presence of rare butterflies on these sites, to make landscaping recommendations and submit a formal report.

The surveying was undertaken in Spring 2006 and the report presented to us in Autumn 2006. We totally accepted BC proposals. Already habitat management is being undertaken at Long Marston for the Grizzled Skipper by our local site staff in conjunction with advice from local volunteers (Terry Knight). At Coombswood Richard Southwell's recommendations have been firmed up by their recommended landscape contractor – John Brayford. A contract is agreed and the work will be carried out this September after the bird breeding season is over to assist the Green Hairstreak. At two sites in Stoke, Berry Fields and additionally Trentham Lakes we have received a report from Jane Ellis – final details are being agreed to enhance opportunities for the Dingy Skipper.

The issue facing St. Modwen was quite simply could we benefit the wildlife conservation movement whilst operating a viable property scheme.

In the end, I think we found it, in places, even better than that. Leaving an environment that suited butterflies meant that we created a landscape more varied than a conventional business park approach – perhaps not as neat, but probably more interesting – and its creation was probably less expensive, taking capital cost and maintenance into account, than the conventional alternative. Our own reports found:-

1. In some cases landscaping proposals actually reduced our set-up costs
2. In all cases, maintenance costs were less because of the reduction in lawns or formally planted areas
3. Wood debris from the landscaping proposals will be used on site as a mulch and rubble from development will be used on site to make a wildlife rockery. In both cases, our carbon footprint is being reduced.
4. Involvement with Butterfly Conservation can only improve our ranking with the ethical investment community
5. Continued association and ongoing schemes with Butterfly Conservation and their attendant publicity will further improve our ranking and may encourage others to take similar action

In conclusion, it was very refreshing to be approached by informed people with a willingness to co-operate in a realistic and timely manner with knowledge and data on the location and habitats of endangered wildlife.

Wildlife is a difficult topic within the Sustainable Agenda that is often conveniently overlooked. This project has opened our eyes to what is possible and we will be looking to further involvement with Butterfly Conservation and any other wildlife groups who have a similar positive approach.

What I was particularly pleased with was the way that our own staff embraced the project and entered into it with real enthusiasm.

I would like to make an invitation - that if you know of a St Modwens's site where you think that we could help a rare or declining species please contact me and I will be happy to consider your proposals.