

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

Interview with: Craig Thomas

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Interviewer: Lynne Fox

This is Lynne Fox for the Thorne and Hatfield Moors Oral History Project. It's Thursday 7th December 2006 and I'm talking to Craig Thomas at Moorends Nature Reserve office. Afternoon Craig.

Afternoon.

You work now for Natural England, could you just tell me a bit about your role within Natural England please?

Yeah, my official title is Thorne and Hatfield Moors Project Development Manager, which is a new role, well, I say new, it's two years old, which is relatively new and unusual in Natural England. My job basically is to increase the access, both physical and intellectual onto the moors.

Can I take you back a little bit and perhaps see how we came to this point that we're at today and just tell me a little bit about your background. Where do you come from, where were you born?

I'm from Huddersfield. But I've lived at Filey now, which is where my mother's from, for the last fifteen years.

And how, how did you come to, did you have an interest in nature or have you come to this by another route?

Yeah, I've got a degree in botany, but my main passion is birds, I'm the Yorkshire bird recorder, I'm also the recorder for Filey Brigg bird observatory, so that's where my passion is. But after my degree I did actually go into business, firstly as an accountant and eventually I became the managing director of a company and I decided on a career change about four and a half years ago and got a job with English Nature as it was then, a temporary contract as a project development manager for a cover sands heath land project base in North Lincolnshire and Lincolnshire and I did that for three years before I got this job.

What kind of project was that? Was that, did that have any similarity to the one that you're working on now?

Yeah there was quite a lot of habitat work there as well, it was, it was protecting the heath land and restoring it. A lot of the heath land in that area had been planted up or ploughed so there was an element of habitat restoration. But since it was a heritage lottery funded project there was also, key to that project was access as well. So it was a case of balancing the two, increasing the value of the habitat but at the same time letting people enjoy it and appreciate it, appreciate why it's important to be kept, how it must be preserved into the future and there's great similarities with that project and this one.

And you say that you decided on a career change, was it a conscious choice to seek employment with English Nature, or was that something that just came your way?

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It's, this is a relatively relaxing sort of job, it doesn't seem it all the time I have to admit, but it's, it's got different pressures to business which is very cut throat, can be quite selfish and I just kind of like felt I needed a change and I kind of like gravitated back to where my training was originally. But at the same time I'm utilising a lot of the skills that I've built up in business doing project plans, business plans, working with several members of staff and colleagues, that's all sort of skills that you gain and garner through business, but essentially you get more of a reward it's not financial reward, but it is rewarding. You can actually see what you're doing on the ground and really appreciate it and that gives you a buzz.

And you say you have an interest in birds and you're the recorder for Yorkshire did you say?

Yeah, Yorkshire, yeah.

What does that mean?

The, there's a Yorkshire Naturalists Union and they have various sections and one of those sections in ornithology. The county is divided into four vice counties and then there's a chairman of those vice counties and our job is to collate the records on an annual basis and then publish them in a report for the entire county and that's something. Then we publish, literally, an annual bird report which details everything, the rare species but also the fluctuations in common species as well.

And where do those reports come from, who collates, who collects that information?

The vice county recorders and the chair of the vice county recorders collates the information from individuals through to societies which tends to be district based. They, they get information from the BTO, British Trust for Ornithology and they also get information from various databases then we collate all that together on a county wide basis and publish a report, literally annually.

How did this interest arise?

I don't know, it's difficult, I've always been interested in wildlife and the outdoors and I've been very interested in birds in particular since about nineteen eighty two. And I guess I had like a lot of people then, I had an observer's book of birds, which kind of like nurtured a little bit of interest. I can remember going on a holiday to Norfolk in nineteen eighty two with this book and seeing various things, I, which certainly weren't familiar around the Huddersfield area and you just like, take an interest, look, see what you can see basically and look in the book and then you want to see something that's slightly more exotic and you try and figure out where you can see that and that starts a ball rolling that certainly I've never stopped yet.

So, this interest that you have in birds has been one of actually bird watching and learning about the birds on the ground basically, as well as now you do the publications and the reports and so on.

Yeah, I mean I've been interested in writing up about bird records for quite a while and I've contributed to the Filey Brigg Bird Report for several years now. Most of my activity out of work hours is focussed on migration on the coast, which can be numbers of sea birds and small insect eating birds like pasarians [?], as well as the hope that you can find something exceedingly rare, particularly when they come over the north sea from the east from Siberia, which tends to be a phenomenon that happens in September and October each year and I suppose that's what gives you the real buzz, to try and find something very rare.

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And have you done much bird observation on Thorne and Hatfield Moors?

Yeah, yeah, I mean I've been in the past there, that's a famous site for nightjar. It's also the most northerly area in the UK for breeding nightingale. So yeah, I've been familiar with it in the past, visited a few times over the summer months in particular and obviously now I'm getting a bit more of a chance, although not as much as I'd like, but a bit more of a chance to occasionally go out there and see what I can see.

Did you come to Thorne and Hatfield Moors before you actually were working in this area or has it been since you've been working in this area?

Yeah I've come a couple of times in the past. I didn't know much about the site, that was Thorne, not been to Hatfield previously, but I'd been to see the nightjars on Thorne in the past, but only a couple of times and it's just, it's just such a vast landscape, that's what I remember most, even more than the birds I'd come to see. It was just this huge, huge area that's, you just come across really quite unexpectedly as you go across the farmland and then suddenly you're into this huge site that's almost hidden.

And did you have any problems with access at that time?

Not if you're prepared for a long walk, that is an issue that we need to address now.

Was it always like that?

Well, you could go on, onto Thorne, if you were prepared for a long walk, cause it's a heck of a walk from Moorends onto the site, and then obviously then you've got a huge site to, potentially you could walk round or walk across or even part of is a big walk in itself. So yeah, I think you do have to be dedicated, you've got to be really sold on wanting to go before you actually get there. I'd like and certainly the aspiration of Natural England is to try and make the site easier to physically access so that we can take people on who perhaps aren't as dedicated at the moment as ourselves and then realise what a fantastic site it really is.

Did you come onboard, at what stage of this sort of buyout and restoration project did your role come onboard really?

It was after the, after the buyout. Obviously the government have spent best part of seventeen million pounds to secure this site and one other in Cumbria and also to pay for restoration, which is obviously done by Scotts and so I came on the back of that, and as far as I'm concerned and a lot of colleagues are concerned obviously this site was bought by the government but in essence by the tax payer. Which means that everybody has actually paid for the site and certainly I would like to see as many of those people be able to enjoy it as I do and actually access it as easily as possible without impinging on its obviously high conservation value and that's essential. You need to increase access without damaging the site, but I certainly think it can be done, there's a large network of track ways on Thorne which have been put in, in the past, to allow big machinery across the site and we can utilise those same track ways now to take lots of people on the site. That's certainly something we're looking forward to doing in the next few years.

Do you envisage a lot of people visiting in the long term?

I'd like to think so I mean at the moment we've got very few people on site and it's also very difficult to know exactly how many people do visit the sites. There's several relatively remote

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access points and it's very difficult to put a number on it, but in the future yes we'd like to see far more people, when we say lots we're not talking hundreds of thousands, but potentially accommodating tens of thousands several years hence would certainly be, be not too ambitious and also we need to bear in mind that that access will be focussed on the very edge of the site, either slightly off site or just on the edge of the site, maybe down at Hatfield. So you will have hot spot areas where a lot of people, or relatively a lot of people will go, but with vast landscapes like these there will always be massive areas that remain quiet and unspoilt. Even if we achieve high visitor numbers in just one or two small areas

We're obviously now coming to talk about the idea and the plan for this restoration work and public access project. Can you perhaps, can we perhaps go back to the early days and talk about what the idea was behind buying this for the public and what we were going to do with it and why, what you were asked to do at the early stages?

Well, we want to establish a peat land of excellence and we can do that through the restoration, I mean it's got all the European designations of a lowland raised peat bog, a degraded lowland raised peat bog capable of restoration and obviously a lot of the restoration work has been done now, just about finished. It takes a long time then for the site to restore. Vagaries of the climate nowadays we're reliant on rainfall and we're reliant on a vegetation naturally re-establishing but we're confident that it's, it's gonna do that and indeed it's started to do that already.

On the back of that we want to, to use the site to educate people. That's not formal education, it's a looser term of education. We want to educate people about why this site is so valuable and I firmly believe that the best way of doing that is to actually take people into the site and actually show them what a peat bog is, people have got various ideas, and until they actually go they haven't really got a clue a lot of the time and through taking people on over the last eighteen months it's quite clear that once people have been taken to the middle of the site and shown it they've got a much greater enthusiasm and understanding of what the whole project and the whole site is about. So that's key, we need to take people, particularly the people who live very close to the site that haven't got a clue what's just on their own doorstep, we would like to take those sort of people onto the site, not traditionally the sort of people that may be have interested in the conservation movement, but it's very much their site and it'd be great to take them on there and just show them what they've got, what wonderful landscape, what wonderful habitat wildlife they've got on their doorstep.

But the whole site is not just about wildlife, it's got a fantastic heritage, evidence obviously of peat mining back to the thirteenth century as well as the wealth of material that obviously we can show in recent years. It, it shows evidence of climate change, a topic on everyone's lips at the moment, but it's, the way it formed, the way it is now, how the surrounding landscape has been changed over time and the pollen analysis on the site can show exactly how it's changed over time. It can also give an indication of where we might be in a hundred, two hundred years time, you know, so it's, it's got an interest far beyond just the wildlife.

So what are the basic issues that face you, what are the problems and the stumbling blocks, you talked about the difficulty of actually getting onto Thorne Moor in particular from Thorne and Moorends and the other access points, what are the basic difficulties and issues?

Well there two for, one is actually physical access and the second one would be altering the mindset of people. Physical access because it has been an industrial site till very recently where access has been discouraged and we now need to turn that round and encourage access. There are very few access points, certainly easy access points on Thorne in particular, and we need to try and get a mechanism or a way of getting people to the edge of the site where they can park their cars or be

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dropped off by bus or whatever, where they feel safe and then they don't have to walk vast distances to go onto the site. We need to ensure people that they won't get lost on the site, we need to way mark, we need to put observation platforms in where people can orientate themselves and we need to compartmentalise the site into manageable chunks, because any small area of the site would be a big reserve anywhere else and we've just got lots of big reserves stuck together in a huge one. So we kind of need to break down the perception that it's an area that you can get lost in and you can be worried about your own safety and dealt with properly that's not the case. It's also the mindset of this huge site, it's biggest selling point is it's a vast wilderness, a big landscape in lowland England and there's no other like it in the country. That is a good selling point, but it also puts people off for the reasons I've just mentioned. For the fear of getting lost, the fear of disappearing into a ditch and never be seen again, so we need to change those perceptions as well.

And what are some solutions that you've been considering?

Better way marking, the observation platforms, better interpretation, guided walks, there's gonna be healthy walks as well, where a member of staff or a volunteer will take people out and start breaking down the perceptions that people have. We're working in partnership with the local authorities both in Doncaster and North Lincs to put in a bridge across the Swinefleet drain to join up Crowle Moors with Thorne Moors. So it's just upgrading track ways, better signage of them, better interpretation, increasing the accessibility online, so people can get a feeling for the place before they actually visit. So those are the main areas of activity we're concentrating on.

And do you envisage it sort of, free visits, more or less, that people can just come on their own, apart from the guided walks that you just talked about, that they can access it at any time, they can go out for a walk and they can just walk around, where they want really on the site?

Yeah, absolutely, I mean that's fundamental they will be free, and it's free now to go on, there's no charge, there's no need for a permit, it is basically open access. People can go on a massive network of network trails, there's a leaflet available already, there'll be several more in the future, where people can trace where they're going. But yes, we want to encourage people to come on the site as much as they can. Hatfield's already got two car parks which are just on, on the site, on an aggregate area, sandy area, and there's two car parks there that are open in daylight hours, there's some birds hides there, there's an observation platform already on Thorne and there should be more to follow. So yeah, we're putting in infrastructure bit by bit over the next couple of years to, to aid people's enjoyment of the site.

And what are the possible problems that might, that you foresee, that you might come across if that goes ahead and you are successful in encouraging free access by quite a large number of people?

Well, we need to, we need to explain about why the site's important. There are, there are issues on there, there are ground nesting birds, such as the nightjar, it's an internationally important site for a species called the nightjar which is a summer visitor from Africa and the site has special protection area status because of that. It's got more than one percent of the UK population of this species and they nest on the ground and obviously they could be disturbed by people, particularly dogs, dogs will sniff them out and flush them off the nest, and they tend to have very white eggs which are highly visible to predators such as crows. So they are susceptible to disturbance, so in their, in their breeding season we would encourage people to have their dogs on a lead. We don't wanna see people not bring dogs onto the site, we realise from a recreational point of view, a lot of people that want to use the site will probably want to bring their dogs, but if they, certainly in the breeding season, can have their dogs on a lead that will be great, and that will aid their enjoyment and protect the site and protect the nightjars. So that's probably the main issue, obviously there's a network of

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ditches across the whole site, and drains. We're networking pathways now, flagging them up, way marking them, where it's safe to go. Obviously they, we can't just literally wander over the whole site otherwise you'll get wet feet, so it's very much a case of getting a network of paths and people can enjoy whether they want a half a kilometre walk or if they want tens of kilometres walks then they should be able to do both on site.

There's clearly a potential clash there between the interests of the general public and the interests of conservation and has that caused you problems and do you see a solution?

Not really no, I mean, everything we do mustn't impinge on the conservation value of the site. So any proposal that we put forward from an access point of view that must basically be tested by one of the conservation officers within the, within Natural England, who does something called an appropriate assessment and they will assess the proposal put forward and the mini project and it won't be passed, given the green light, unless the conservation officer thinks that there won't be a detrimental affect on obviously the breeding birds or the habitat and obviously we don't put forward anything that's gonna damage the site. We don't envisage big buildings on the site, we're not putting down lots of hard standing, we're very much treating the site delicately trying to accommodate the two, trying to accommodate larger numbers of people, but at the same time never ever damaging the site. It is a peat land, peat lands tend to be wet, spongy and will be susceptible to a lot of people walking over them, damaging the peat, so we, we change routes, we use the tracks that I alluded to earlier, they've got hard standing where machines have gone on. There maybe the odd little section where we put board walking down to protect, we can divert paths and so through, through that careful management I'm confident that we're okay. Hatfield in particular has got a large area of gravel pits down on the south west corner, where the peat has been stripped off and Tarmac created the gravel pits through sand extraction and that's very hard standing and it can take a lot of people. So a lot of the focus of the visitor management is down on the south west corner of Hatfield where we're encouraging people to go there and there's a car park there and it's very much a hotspot of activity and that can cope with a lot of people without actually damaging the sub strate, because obviously its sand. So that's an area where we're encouraging more and more people to go in the future.

There was, there's been some talk about controlling the visitors in the form of actually physically constraining them and taking them where you want them to go and I'm thinking in terms of there being a suggestion of some kind of railway of that kind of access, is that, is that just hearsay or..?

No, I mean it would be great to have a railway, but not for the reason of restricting people where they could go. Much more the reason that you could take people whether they be disabled or whether they have small children and via a railway system deposit them smack bang into the middle of the site without them having to walk several kilometres to that point and at that point the site sells itself. The narrow gauge railway, obviously there has been a narrow gauge railway on in the past and that was used by the peat winning company to take peat off site. The proposal or certainly the aspiration it's very much only that at this stage is to look at the same sort of system where they can, where they can reinstate it and use that to take people into the middle of the site, but it's not a case of constraining people where they go. We very much want to encourage people to, to access the site and we don't want to restrict people into certain areas. Obviously we will be putting in infrastructure into the areas we think can cope with more people but there's not a case of you're not allowed in point X, so that's not the idea of the railway.

And you've mentioned about visitor information and making people aware of the importance of the site and where they can go and so on, there are leaflets and walks and guided walks and so on now. Is there a more permanent centre envisaged?

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Yes, we're hoping to have an educational centre down at Hatfield, again, corner of the lakes on the sandy area I mentioned a few minutes ago. We know that school children would love to come on the site, we know that schools would love to come on the site, we don't have the facilities at the moment, we need toilets, we need a covered area, and we're working with North Lincs Council and Doncaster Council to look at providing a facility, an educational centre down on Hatfield so that we can accommodate school children. And obviously it would also allow us to have public toilets on the site, which is something we know we need and an area where we could put interpretation up, both for obviously the school parties, but also the wider public as well. So yes there is, certainly in the pipeline, there is a hope for an education centre rather than a big visitors centre per se, down on Hatfield. That's something that we're hoping to deliver more short term.

And we talked about the site itself and visitors actually physically on the site and the things that you might do there. You've mentioned access on the internet, what other kind of off site access would you like to see, or is there some already happening. I'm thinking particularly of say, work with schools or things like that, education work?

Yeah, we're wanting to pick up on it, education is almost a bottomless pit of opportunity, it's like where do you start, where do you stop. We've made contacts with Osterfield, Field Study Centre, Hatfield Water Park, in Doncaster, who are both enthusiastic about bringing school children on the site. We're exploring funding for education officers, we're providing literature, risk assessments done by the site staff, now to schools. We've got a pond-dipping platform in place already and obviously we've got some bird hides. But through a, an externally funded project, which we're working on at the moment we're looking at increasing those facilities so we have permanent staff members on hand to help both teachers and the school children to visit the site.

And you've talked also about the partners that you have in the two councils, are other groups involved and helping or advising or offering their expertise in this?

Yeah, the, the moors sit in a geographic area called the Humberhead Levels, the Humberhead Levels has an executive partnership, which is made up of Natural England, Environment Agency, Doncaster Council, North Lincs Council, and English Heritage. And the aspiration of all those organisations is to have a flagship area within the Levels to talk about the importance of the whole area, as a barometer for climate change and the moors have been identified as that area. And so having a centre there which can talk, give the story of the moors in the terms of its wildlife but also in terms of climate change. How the peat lands are great for absorbing CO2 to help alleviate climate change in the future, how they're exceedingly good, how the peat acts as a sponge, so it soaks up water, at times of flooding it helps alleviate excess water on surrounding land. And so here we've got a site that can be utilised in the future as well as aiding and increasing its value for wildlife it will also help combat climate change.

We're looking at various mechanisms in the wider Levels where we can, we can take land and we can recreate habitat which is great for wildlife, we can also then take excess flood waters out of the river systems like the Don, so alleviating pressure down stream in Doncaster and other areas that may be ideally developed in the future and taking those flooding land and creating habitat and therefore combating climate change and this is the whole story that the moors, which sits in the middle of the Levels, can tell.

This is obviously not going to be a cheap thing to do and, who may be able and willing to support what you want to do financially?

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Obviously Natural England is very keen and they will support, as will the partners such as Doncaster and North Lines Councils. The Environment Agency are very keen to have a mandate to look at flood risks down river systems, so they're very keen in the project, but external funders could also be people like the Heritage Lottery Fund, they can be land fill tax operators, and aggregate tax as well, as well as somebody like Yorkshire Forward, Regional Development Agency, hopeful they'd all be keen to put something into this project. And one of the things we've got on Hatfield is a Neolithic track way, which is evidence of man's activity several thousand years ago also evidence that man had to leave the site in the past, again as a result of climate change. So again we've got a story to tell here, how the whole are of the Humberhead Levels has changed depending on climate and perhaps we're facing the prospect of one of those times again in the near future and the site and the surrounding land, how it's been managed and how we can manage it in the future, is very important.

Ok thank you very much.

Thank you.

[Recording Ends]