

The Annual Report: **OVA and the Otter Valley Himalayan Balsam Campaign** **2013**

The year 2013 saw important developments in the Otter Valley Himalayan Balsam (Hereafter “HB”) campaign:

FWAG SW (Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group). This is the second year of the Environment Agency’s Campaign. Their lead organization is FWAG and members may remember that their lead man, Roland Stonex, was one of the four speakers at the OVA meeting in St Peter’s church on 16th February 2013. He explained strategy. In 2012 they had concentrated on the lower Otter valley and this year, 2013, they moved north to the middle-upper catchment, seeking to establish teams in the Wolf valley around Awliscombe. Their 2013 report is posted on this OVA website so that progress can be followed. A fundamental of the logic underlying overall strategy is that it is pointless attempting to tackle the main Otter river banks until all tributaries have been cleared, since the river acts as a conveyor belt for HB seed. FWAG’s progress will therefore be followed with great interest. In early 2012 I had visited Roy Coombs who is estate manager at Otterhead Estates in the source region of the river. There he had successfully waged war on HB for several years, as also in Honiton parish where he is responsible to the Town Council for the eradication of all invasive species. Apart from that, and apart also from the long-established campaign in the Tale Valley (Escot, in mid-Otter), FWAG have probably been operating in “virgin territory.”

Clinton Devon Estates. In our “home patch” (The Lower Otter valley from Newton Poppleford to the mouth) Dr Sam Bridgewater was appointed early in 2013 as Conservation Officer for Clinton Devon Estates (CDE)/Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust. This has strengthened the already excellent “HB relationship” between the OVA and CDE in the person of John Wilding. Sam has certainly made his mark. Quite apart from his excellent primary school field seminars on the heaths, he has taken a number of HB initiatives, organizing:

- A rather spectacular publicity boost on the opening day of the campaign (Thursday June 13th 2013) by “persuading” 40 marines from the RM Commando at Lympstone to participate. Local TV stations were on hand.
- a dozen or so volunteers from CDE to join the OVA team of volunteers on that opening day.
- a productive seminar/barbecue for all volunteers at The Otter Inn in Colaton Raleigh towards the end of the pulling season (22nd August). (OVA topped up the CDE funding for this productive event.) A range of issues was debated from the use of chemicals and machinery to publicity and the on-going problem of raising volunteers.
- key tasks such as the digitization of field maps to produce a permanent record of field inputs by different groups in 2013.

- general monitoring and “tidying up”, including strimming a small part of Stowford woods, as well as removing random patches of HB throughout the zone, including the commons.

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of Clinton Devon Estates in the campaign, given that it is the landowner for almost all of the land in our 5 parishes. Access to land is a prerequisite for any progress in clearing HB and it is enormously helpful to have a single landowner who, far from being a barrier to progress is out in front taking the initiative. FWAG have found access a problem in their attempt to carry the campaign into the upper Otter catchment in 2013 where ownership is fragmented.

A new East Budleigh Group. A wonderful new development occurred in July when Dr Nick Ward “emerged” and organized village volunteers to tackle HB on the Budleigh Brook that flows through their village.

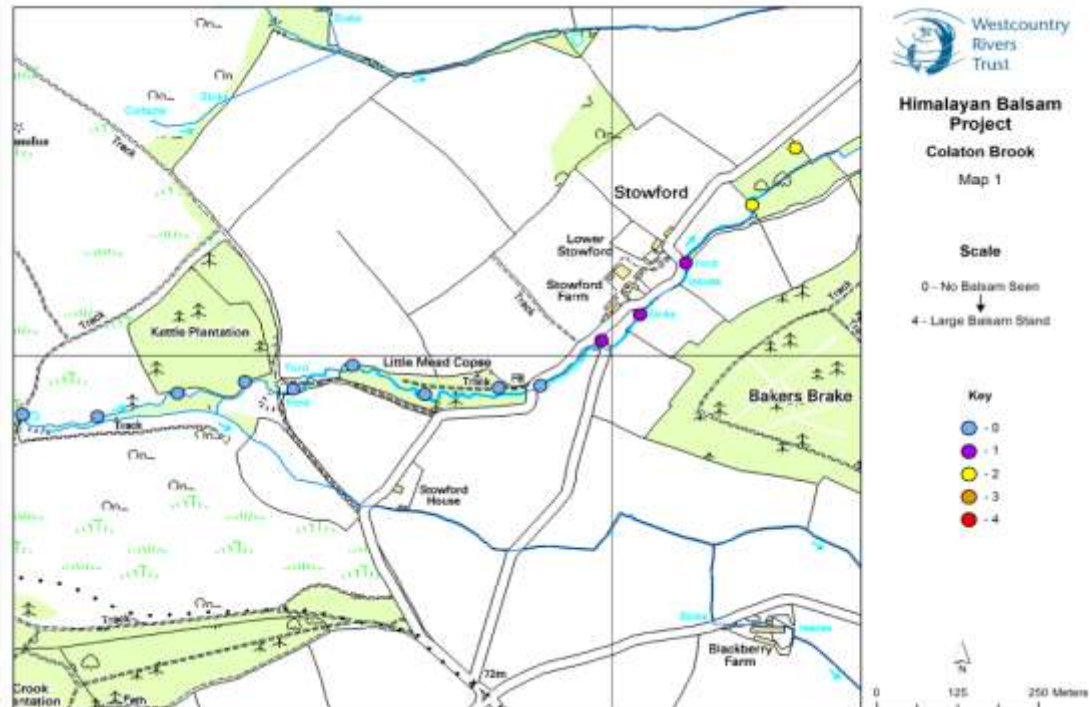
Although they did not commence work until well into the season (27th July), impressive progress was made. This, ideally, is what should happen in every tributary valley in the catchment. Each should have its own local team who know the terrain and can monitor on a regular basis. Dr Ward joins:

- Ted Swan and the Newton Poppleford team who for a number of years have been tackling the lower Back Brook up through the village to Goosemoor.
- Rob Jones in Hawkerland, where, for a couple of years and with some local help, he has been clearing the Hawkerland tributary of the Back Brook down to Goosemoor as well as clearing patches on adjacent commons.
- the somewhat different example of the RSPB who clear their reserve on Aylesbeare Common which is drained by the northern tributary of the Back Brook down to Goosemoor.

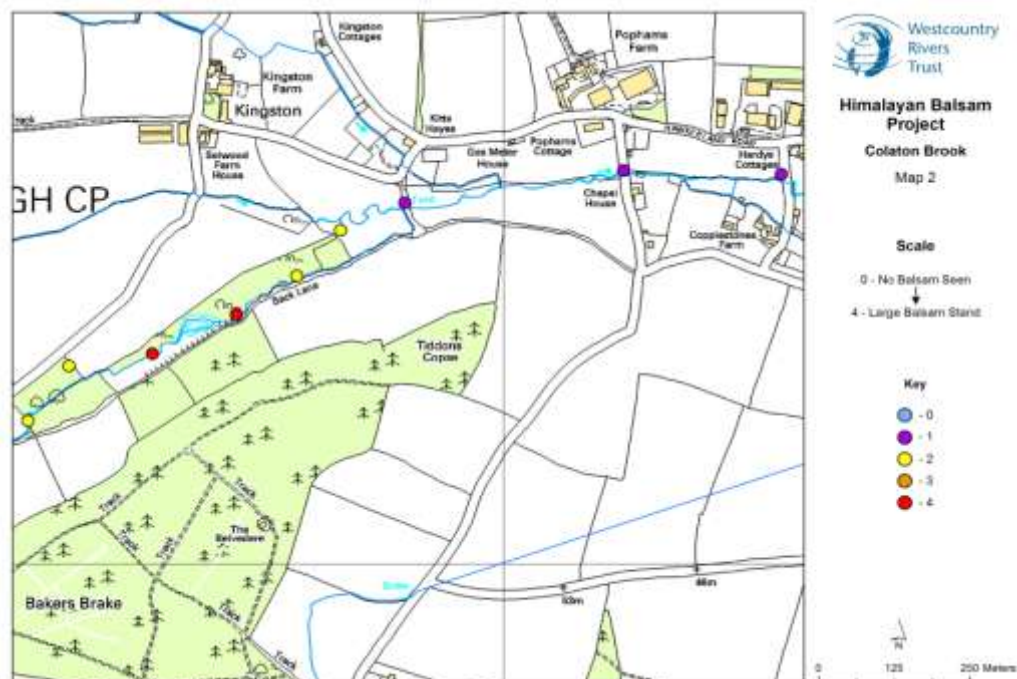
At the moment there are no such groups covering the Colaton Raleigh and Knowle tributaries. The OVA team has therefore concentrated on the former in both 2012 and 2013. In 2012 a team from “Budleigh-in-Bloom” tackled the Knowle Brook but sadly they had to withdraw in 2013.

The OVA Field Campaign 2013

Maps of the Stowford area (our key target zone) in the upper Colaton valley are taken from last year's report and presented below (The coloured circles refer to the degree of infestation with HB (red is bad; blue is clear):



Map 1 The Upper Reaches of the Colaton Brook: Stowford



Map 2 The Colaton Brook above Colaton Raleigh Village (top right)

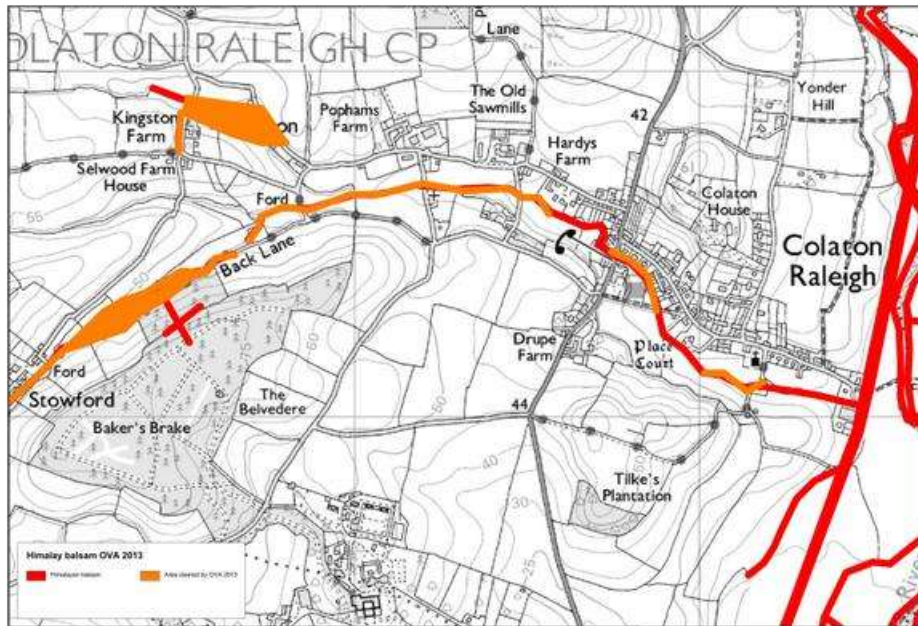
Introduction: the Geography

In order to make the following account meaningful both to current readers and as a record, it is necessary to spell out again some basics of the local geography. The main Colaton Brook (not named on the map) can be followed on Map 1 as it flows in a north-easterly direction through the hamlet of Stowford (little more than 2 farms) and on to Map 2 where it eventually curves to a more easterly direction and picks up two small tributaries on its left bank. These lie to the north and to the south of the hamlet of Kingston, consisting again of just 2 farms. The more northerly one, just north of Kingston Farm, is important, being badly infested, and, as can be seen, runs eastwards before cutting south-east past Kitts Hayes house, to join the main Colaton Brook. For much of this distance it is artificially straightened and deeply entrenched. We can refer to this as the **“Kingston Tributary.”**

Roads and tracks are important. Hawkerland Road is the main axis of the upper part of Colaton Raleigh village and can be seen running across the top of Map 2 past Pophams Farm and Kitts Hayes before disappearing north off the map to Hawkerland. A key access track for us during the last two years has been **Back Lane**, which can be seen running parallel to Colaton Brook on its right bank ie the south-east side. This lane is accessed at its upstream end across the ford by Lower Stowford Farm (see Map 1) or at its downstream end across the ford by the bend in the road just south of Kitts Hayes house.

With this pattern in mind, it is important to indicate the location of our prime target area: Stowford Woods. It looks surprisingly small on Map 2 (on which it is not named) and consists of the relatively narrow belt of woodland lying along the brook, on both banks and delimited on its south-eastern side by the axis of Back Lane. This strip is always referred to by us as **“Stowford Woods.”** On Map 2, it is not accurately portrayed because some is not coloured green which should be (the white patch) and some that is green (towards the downstream end just above the printed words “Back Lane”) should not be, being an open swamp. The large areas of woodland to the south-east of Back Lane (ie up the hillside) are, with one small exception, free from infestation.

Below I reproduce a part of the map compiled by Dr Sam Bridgewater (CDE) and recording the results of the 2013 campaign. It features as Map 3 below and it allows us to portray those results visually for the first time.



Map 3. Part of the Clinton Devon Map portraying the results of the 2013 Campaign

Notes:

- Red indicates the existence of Himalayan Balsam at the end of the season (ie uncleared or not cleared by OVA).
- Brown indicates areas cleared by OVA teams during 2013.
- The two small red blocks in the upper catchment (near Stowford and Kingston Farm), were cleared by CDE.
- The colours have not come across too clearly in some places. Below (ie east of) the main road there should be a brown stretch; followed by a red stretch past Place Court; then brown down to the church; then red to the main river. Above the road it should be red up to the first road (near Hardy's Farm); then brown right up to Stowford.
- There is one small area of activity that has been missed off the map: the smaller tributary of the Colaton Brook that lies just south of Selwood Farm House, has been cleared down to the main brook near the word "Ford" on the map. It should be brown.



Photo 1 The party of OVA Volunteers at Lower Stowford Farm on the opening day of the season; Thursday 13th June 2013

From left to right: Ted Swan (Newton Pop.), Iain Ure (Otterton), Rosemary Hatch (Exeter), Kevin Creton (Budleigh Salterton), David Hatch (Exeter), Gill Hamilton (BS), David Lindsay-Halls (Exmouth), Jon Roseway (East Budleigh), Jim Hunter (EDDC) and David Hutchins (Harpford)

Progress in 2013; The Opening Day

As the above Photo 1 caption indicates, the campaign opened on 13th June 2013. Our 11 volunteers assembled at Lower Stowford farm where we joined forces with a dozen CDE volunteers. Then splitting into two groups, the CDE team worked from the bottom of the woods near Kitts Hayes House, upstream (ie southwestwards), while we did the opposite, starting from Lower Stowford farm. It is no exaggeration to say that the results were spectacular. Last year, it took 22 outings from 7th June to the 31st July, to clear Stowford Woods, even with help from the Probation Service team several times in June. This year it was done by 3pm on day 1!! The pincer closed. Moreover the quality of the work was excellent. The Probation Service teams had done a good job in 2012 clearing some of the “primal HB jungle” in the upper part of Stowford Woods but it was

always necessary to “tidy up” after them. Volunteers always go that bit further and (fanatically?) seek out every last plant.

This impressive result must be attributed to a combination of the large number of volunteers at work (over 20) and a very encouraging factor: the reduced amount of HB to be pulled as a result of efforts in 2012. The latter is best illustrated by photographs. First, there is a reminder of the density of the HB infestation in 2012. It really was the case that the whole of the forest floor was thickly carpeted and that by the middle-late June it was over waist high. Photos 2 and 3 below were both taken on 4th July 2012. This is as far as the first sweep had reached by that date.



Photo 2. View downstream in the lower Stowford Woods in 2012, showing the limit of the cleared zone (foreground). The site is well downstream perhaps 50m from the swamp. Open fields can be glimpsed on the left. 4 July 2012



Photo 5 Part of the OVA team on the Opening Day; 13th June 2013



Photo 6 One Hour Later; Duty done.

Even this area shows a density less than in 2012 and the HB was quickly dispatched as can be seen in the Photo 6 above. So were all others on that remarkable Opening Day.

The aim of course is to have the whole of Stowford Woods completely and permanently cleared and looking something like the scene below in Photo 7. It was taken on 4th November 2013, after 4 sweeps (see below) when there were still odd late germinators that had escaped detection in parts of the woods. But this scene, which is exactly that in Photo 2 (the tree on the left can be matched) was completely free of HB at that time. This is the goal for the whole of Stowford Woods and for the whole Colaton Valley. It is surely attainable.



Photo 7 The woodland scene of Photos 2 and 3, completely clear on 4th November 2013.

Progress after the Opening Day, 2013

Of course there is more to the Colaton valley than Stowford Woods, as can be seen on Sam Bridgewater's map (Map 3). After the success of the Opening Day, attention turned to the rest of the valley remembering that Stowford Woods would always require further sweeps. The principal activities are listed below, for the record:

- By the 27th June **the first sweep** through the Stowford area was complete ie including, not only the Woods but also the brook above Lower Stowford Farm and the adjacent fields. On both banks HB has penetrated from the river along and over the hedgerows of adjacent fields. If it were not for ploughing and grazing by livestock, it would have covered these fields long since.
- Attention now turned to the "Kingston Tributary," the deep trench that carries the tributary from north of Kingston farm down to Mitt Hayes house and the main Colaton Raleigh Brook (as described earlier). This was hard work, involving cutting an access way along the ditch through brambles and saplings. The downstream half had never been cleared before. It was completed by 4th July.
- **A second sweep through the Stowford area** began on 11th July, 4 weeks after the first and two weeks earlier than last year. **It was completed by 25th July.** Shortly before this date, CDE had strimmed close to the ground in "The Avenue" an open corridor beneath overhead cables in Stowford Woods. It was badly infested and, being open, lent itself to strimming.
- Having completed 2 sweeps through the area that we covered in Stowford in 2012 and having extended to complete 1 sweep through the "Kingston Tributary", it was decided to **help Ted Swan and his group in Newton Poppleford.** Hence, on 4th August, seven OVA volunteers helped Ted at Goosemoor, the swampy area at the junction of the two main tributaries of the Back Brook near the top end of the village.
- Thereafter, on the 18th August, the team expanded downstream into new territory: **Colaton Raleigh village below the main road.** This followed a recce with Neville Bennett (NEC Committee, parish clerk and resident) who has been initiating activity in this stretch. Good progress was made but much remains to be done and this will be a priority in 2014. There are major clumps of HB and brambles along the stretch

running down past the church. It is also bad down towards the flood plain and of course on the flood plain.

- On the 25th August, a **third sweep was begun through Stowford**. This was completed by **5th September**.
- Also included was a **second sweep through the Kingston Tributary** so that the Colaton Raleigh Brook and its two tributaries were clear by this date down to Kitts Hayes.
- Later in September the cleared zone was pushed down to the vicinity of Pophams farm. Much of the land bordering the brook downstream from Stowford Woods is pasture and the principal problem lies in very large clumps of brambles which act as a haven for HB protecting it from the animals (see Photo 8 below).



Photo 8 A “bramble haven” on pastureland being assaulted by Lynn Jones, just below Stowford Woods

In such havens, HB will not be detected early and can reach considerable height and girth, as can be seen in Photo 9 below:



Photo 9 A well-developed HB plant from the above bramble haven.

Further downstream from Pophams Farm towards the main road, the presence of gardens creates a rare access problem that has not yet been resolved.

- In October and early November **a fourth sweep** was implemented through Stowford. Thankfully by this time, only isolated clusters of late germinators needed attention and most plants were very small.

One gratifying feature of the 2013 experience is that each sweep took much less time and labour than in 2012. This applied not only to the Opening Day, as described above, but to all subsequent sweeps.

Progress by the East Budleigh and Newton Poppleford Groups

East Budleigh and the Budleigh Brook:

Dr Nick Ward divided up the catchment into sectors and individual resident volunteers were allotted to each. Excellent progress was made given the late start and clearing extended right down onto the flood plain. . Two areas have been particularly problematic, both in the upper catchment: a former small reservoir below Yettington and, below that, the swamp/ plantation at the CDE Forestry HQ. The former was eventually cleared and significant inroads made into the latter.

The Back Brook:

- In Hawkerland, Rob Jones organised and implemented clearance for the second year down to the confluence with the Aylesbeare tributary at Goosemoor.
- In Newton Poppleford village, Ted Swan's group continued work through the village up to Goosemoor.

A New Threat: Otterton

In November Dr Sam Bridgewater reported the worrying spread of HB in Otterton, spreading east from the floodplain south of Newton Poppleford bridge and is beginning to cross eastwards over the road. This represents a threat to the middle and upper Otterton Brook valley which currently is clear.

Volunteers

Hours Input 2013

The hours input is listed below. The pattern is similar to that in 2012.

Hours and Outings by 16 Volunteers HB; 2013

Annual input of Hours	Number of Volunteers	Hours Total	Outings
Over 50	1	62.5	26
25-49	2	55	23
10 - 24	4	72	25
5-9	7	50	19
<5	2	5.5	2
	16	245	95

The total hours worked is slightly more than in 2012 when the input was 234 for 18 active volunteers. It is good that the effort was maintained but, as always, the “What if?” question arises. What if there had been 30 volunteers?

For comparison, the total number of hours worked in the Wolf Valley by Environment Agency volunteers and locals was 285 in 2013 in 56 outings (see the FWAG report on the OVA website). Clearly they worked longer hours spending over 5 hours in the field on each outing. As a matter of policy we have decided that our outings should aim at 2-3 hours and that all volunteers must feel free to stop whenever they wish. This of course is to encourage folk to volunteer.

The Volunteers Issue

It goes without saying that the campaign depends entirely on volunteers. The work that has been put in by those who have come forward has been wonderful and always “well beyond the call of

duty.” Looking back over both 2012 and 2013 two patterns are distinctive and somewhat disconcerting:

- the small number of volunteers coming forward and
- the substantial turn-over rate.

In 2013 the flow of volunteers remained small, the principal additions being generated at the OVA meeting in St Peter’s Church on February 16th 2013. Twelve new volunteers signed up early in the 2013 season but, as last year, not all made it into the field. Six did but 6 remained “inactive,” two for medical reasons, two working elsewhere and two simply not surfacing.

Worse, of the 16 who had been active in 2012, only 8 continued in our 2013 team:

- we lost 3 for medical reasons and
- 5 did not join our group outings,
 - two working independently (Rob Jones organizing Hawkerland and Neville Bennett in Colaton Raleigh Village).
 - 3 did not surface at all

So just 8 “old stagers” from 2012 continued their work with the 6 new volunteers to make a squad of 14. To these were added two during the season to restore a working total of 16: one a welcome emergence of an “inactive” volunteer from 2012 and the other a new one.

Of these 16, however, it should be noted that:

- Jon Roseway, quite rightly switched to Dr Nick Ward’s new East Budleigh squad, given that he is an East Budleigh resident.
- Similarly Ted Swan and David Hutchins both have their prime allegiances in Newton Poppleford.

Our aim should be to double the effective team size in 2014 (see comments below).

Digital Recording

At the Seminar in The Otter Inn on August 22nd Dr Sam Bridgewater offered to produce a digital map of progress in 2013 and to this end attendees recorded the necessary information on a base map provided. As noted already (Map 3 above) this work has been

completed and an invaluable record created, not just for the Colaton Raleigh Brook but also for the Budleigh Brook through East Budleigh and the Back Brook from Newton Poppleford upstream to Hawkerland. These will be invaluable as the years progress and ever more Otter tributaries are brought under control.

Targets for The Year Ahead: 2014

A number of issues will be addressed for the 2014 campaign:

Volunteers:

The problem of raising a larger number of volunteers will always need attention and, as suggested above, **we should have a target of doubling the number from 16 up to, say, 30 in 2014.**

One possible way of doing this could be by establishing a demonstration bloc on the banks of the main Otter river. This was suggested at the August seminar and is now being explored further. Last year a local farmer, Jim Pyne, had on his own initiative, put up illustrated notices telling people what HB is and urging them to pull it. A demo plot on the banks of the river, with volunteers on hand during, say, 4 week-ends in July, could reinforce Jim Pyne's message and result in increased interest and a flow of volunteers. Of course the "demo plot" would also be justified if it encouraged walkers to stop and pull HB regardless of whether or not they volunteered to join our team. This had been Jim Pyne's original plan.

Other options, most obviously those relating to the local media, will continue to be used. They were present in some force, including TV, at the Opening Day in 2013.

Local groups: a new group in Colaton Raleigh Village

As noted above, the emergence of a new group of volunteers in East Budleigh was a major "happening" for the HB campaign in 2013. This means that such "local resident" groups are now operating on two of our six tributaries: the Budleigh Brook through East Budleigh and the Back Brook through Newton Poppleford. Bicton Estate do also look after their tributary but there are no comparable local groups on the Colaton, Knowle and

Ottertton brooks, the last-named because HB is not established there.

A target for 2014 is therefore to establish such a group in Colaton Raleigh, in the first instance to clear the stretches through the village itself. During 2013 it emerged that some local householders below the main road do at present try to keep on top of it and Neville Bennett (NEC Committee) and I have undertaken to knock on doors or distribute leaflets in 2014 to see if we can expand upon this base.

Spatial Targets for 2014

For reasons outlined above, the OVA's prime focus these past 2 years has been on the Colaton Raleigh Brook. This will continue to be the case. It must be remembered that it is very unlikely that HB can ever be completely eliminated from an area. I have often cited the example of the Tale Valley Trust which has tackled the problem on the longest tributary of the Otter (running through Escot to the confluence just above Ottery St Mary). They have had teams out clearing HB every year since 2005. It is now very much reduced but, given the virility of this invasive species, it would re-establish itself rapidly if efforts were abandoned in a particular year. Each plant can spray up to 800 seeds over an area with a 7 metre radius. This being the case, the OVA did well to consolidate the assault on the Stowford area which CDE's John Wilding had identified as the most seriously infested area in the Colaton catchment before the campaign started in 2012. This core region received 4 sweeps in 2013 which was excellent. In addition, the 2013 campaign saw us extend downstream to the margins of the village and in limited sections within it. These were only pulled once and we did not reach the flood plain. **A good aim for 2014 would be to implement two sweeps for the whole length of the tributary downstream from Stowford right to the flood plain.**

That would leave just the Knowle Brook without a group. Technically this is not a tributary of the Otter of course as it flows directly into the sea. But it is badly infested and in 2013 it was included in the campaign under the direction of OVA Executive member and local Budleigh-in-Bloom chairman, Bob Wiltshire. Sadly the team could not continue in 2012 but, if resources permit, **it clearing in that brook should be resuscitated in 2014.**

Machinery: Strimming

The place of strimming in the campaign was discussed at the barbecue seminar in August 2013. There was general agreement that hand-pulling of HB in which the whole root system of the plant is extracted, is much the most effective way of clearing HB, as long as the plant is then properly disposed of and not given a chance to re-root. By and large, strimming is not desirable where HB consists of relatively sparsely distributed plants embedded in a wide mix of local plants. It is best used where there are continuous clear stands of HB so that minimum damage is done to local plants.

In addition, strimming is very helpful when HB is embedded in large blocks of difficult plants such as such as brambles and nettles. These can grow head high and provide a haven for HB until is mature and in full flower. This situation is common on the pastures which occupy large areas right down to the flood plain (see Photo 8 above). In places, volunteers have to cut their way into the heart of, say, large areas of brambles, using secateurs or loppers, in order to reach 7-8ft high monster HB plants whose pink blossoms are tossing in the breeze above the heart of the bramble patch and which have been hidden for weeks by those brambles.

For the record, strimming has been used on two occasions in the Stowford area; by CDE on both occasions. As reported in my 2013 Report, the swamp in Stowford Woods was strimmed on 26th July 2012 but with limited success. A month later there were abundant pink flowers across the swamp signifying the recovery of the plants. On that occasion stalks were left lying on the ground and many had simply re-rooted and flowered.

Shortly after 25th July 2013, the exercise was repeated in "The Avenue," an open grassy corridor with overhead cables passing through the top end of Stowford Woods. This is a much smaller area than the swamp, and on this occasion the strimmed plants were indeed removed. The results much more impressive as can be seen below in Photo 10 (p23).

The OVA is investigating the possibility of investing in its own strimmer for the 2014 season.

Conclusions

In summary, it may be concluded that 2013 has been a good year in that:

- The OVA consolidated and expanded control over HB in the Colaton valley and should extend it over the whole tributary in 2014.
- Groups organised by Rob Jones (Hawkerland) and Ted Swan (Newton Poppleford) did likewise on the Back Brook.
- Dr Nick Ward established a structure that has already made excellent progress towards controlling the full length of the Budleigh Brook.



Photo 10 “The Avenue” on 2nd September 2013; a very small number of flowering HB plants are easily removed.

- Within the Lower Otter, Dr Sam Bridgewater (CDE) has played a key role in consolidating the organizational structure. In addition to the Opening Day boost, his barbecue/seminar at the Otter Inn in Colaton Raleigh in August gave all active campaigners the opportunity to meet all the other volunteers involved in the campaign and to address issues that have arisen. This was psychologically and practically important for the coherence of the campaign.
- In the meantime FWAG have taken an important step towards making similar progress in the middle-upper catchment, establishing a nucleus of volunteers in the Wolf valley and linking to Roy Coombs at Honiton and Otterhead.

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