Norley Wildflower Memorial Walk – Why We Are Here

As read at the Inaugural Service at Norley Methodist Church, 7th June 2015
By Phil Gifford, Chair of Norley Wildlife Group & Walk Coordinator

When told the title “Why we are here” I immediately thought ‘Crumbs, even Stephen Hawking can’t do that! But I’ll have a go’.

When we made our bid to Grow Wild for lottery money, where we came 61st with only 60 places going, the following points were made as to why it would benefit the village:-

- A recognition of the sacrifice the men made and restoring an environment which would have been dear to them
- Improved sense of community by bringing people of all ages to work together and of the ownership of hitherto unregarded uncultivated places
- An increase in “healthy” walking and providing an opportunity for people to stand and stare and appreciate the beauty of wild flowers and wildlife
- An improvement in keeping the village free from litter
- Improvement in biodiversity from more opportunities for pollinating insects, and focus on their essential needs
- Help to change land management to improve pollinators’ access to habitat and essential resources such as road verges joining all the “Plaque dots” along the walk.
- Provide educational opportunities such as making bee boxes and the gathering, and sowing of seed.
- And last but certainly not least. Providing additional customers for the businesses in Norley, the route goes past the Tigers Head The Stores the Fortune Palace and The Carriers.

Fundamentally the walk seeks to makes a reality of the phrase “In honoured and grateful memory” which is on the brass plaque at St John’s, 87 Norley men went to War around 100 years ago only 78 came back, none unchanged and one Chris Fletcher was so badly wounded he took over two years to die.

The beginnings of the walk were last year when the proto Norley Wildlife Group keen to grow wildflowers made a visit to the National wildflower Centre in Knowsley. We wanted to grow wildflowers as this is the key to biodiversity it kicks everything off as it were. We went to a talk given by Richard Scott its director and were inspired by the transformation from essentially wastelands to beautiful carpets of flowers alive with insects. Many of the flowers were poppies and a poem “Break of day in the Trenches” learned long ago kept running through my head.

“Poppies whose roots are in men’s veins
Drop and are ever dropping
But mine in my ear is safe
Just a little white with the dust”
Well, the rest is history as they say, my wife Vanessa said “Why don’t we plant poppies around the village in commemoration”

The idea was greeted with general agreement and I proceeded to try and devise a cunning plan. I knew that there was a plaque in St John’s with nine names on it, another to Chris Fletcher and one to Captain John Roland Beazley he had a Croix de Chevalier D'Honneur, who were these men what did they do in civilian life, where did they live? Again poetry played a part, In Flanders Fields “where the poppies blow between the crosses row on row” it says they, “lived, felt dawn saw sunset glow, loved and were loved.” So having plaques surrounded by wildflowers, poppies in remembrance but also flowers that they would have been familiar when they too walked around the village came to mind. Where possible close to where they lived, so Jack Sander’s lived in Ivy Cottage, almost next door to me he would have walked round the corner to get to school or nicked across the fields when late!

We would need a guide with information about the men and obviously a map was necessary.

Once again a poem “In Memoriam” by Edward Thomas seemed to encapsulate the whole theme and literally so, once you see the map.

“The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood
This Eastertide call into mind the men
Now far from home, who, with their sweethearts
Should have gathered them and will do never again”

The walk therefore will always be a thoughtful one but also that will bring joy on seeing the flowers and pollinators such as butterflies, the poem on “Joy and Sorrow” will be recalled in stark clarity every time.

But one of the strongest reasons as to why we are here is yourselves. Our little group has worked very hard we have known frustrations and disappointment but many of you here today generously supported and encouraged us and have done some marvellous things, like Ann Crawford, our modest mapmaker for one, so we’ve done it, something we hope that will be of lasting value to everyone. Richard Holmes the Military historian, himself now sadly passed away said “As we are now, so once were they: as they now are, so must we be. Let us remember them all, not with bravado or bombast but with the respect that their sacrifice demands. Now Go and walk the walk- Well perhaps not straight away!