

## **Annual Report; OVA Himalayan Balsam Project; 2017**

It has been an interesting year and I offer thanks to all who took part! 2017 saw the completion of our sixth year attempting to control Himalayan Balsam (HB) on the Colaton Raleigh brook. It has been a slightly frustrating year in that, although long stretches are now almost completely clear, rogue outbreaks (a problem alluded to in the 2016 Annual Report) keep postponing the attainment of our target: full control of the tributary. It is worth clarifying what that target means: not the complete elimination of every plant but a state in which a very small group, in a few outings, can clear the few clusters that remain. The Tale Valley Trust has just about achieved this from their Escot House base over 12 years.

That having been said, there was one key aspect of the 2017 campaign that was hugely positive: the number of volunteers.

### **Volunteers**

After last year's disappointing drop in the numbers, this year has seen a wonderful improvement. Before our first outing, eleven new volunteers had signed up. Two lived in Tipton St John so ended up in John Gardiner's group in that village. One dropped out but 8 made it into the field to join the stalwarts from earlier years. Better still, another five joined us during the course of the summer. The impact can be seen on Table 1 below:

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Participating Volunteers</b>	<b>Outings</b>	<b>Hours</b>	<b>Hours per Volunteer</b>
<b>2012</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>309</b>	<b>22.1</b>
<b>2013</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>245</b>	<b>15.3</b>
<b>2014</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>375</b>	<b>13.9</b>
<b>2015</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>301</b>	<b>15.8</b>
<b>2016</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>255</b>	<b>23.2</b>
<b>2017</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>384</b>	<b>15.4</b>

**Table 1 Participating Volunteers 2012-17**

Last year's drop to just 11 volunteers was particularly disappointing but

publicity, especially in the Newsletter and at the AGM, resulted in the gratifying surge. As can be seen in Table 1 above, numbers were almost back to the 2015 high of 27 and the hours put in reached a record 384. It should be said that the figures for “hours” are quite crude estimates. For example, we always meet at 9.30am and if we stop at 12 noon, as we usually do, I call that “2½ hours” (coffee break included!).

Below, in Table 2 the individual inputs are illustrated (self excluded) and the right-hand column indicates the new members.:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Outings</b>	<b>Hours</b>	<b>New Member</b>
2 Bob Murdoch	15	38½	New
3 Gill Hamilton	16	37	
4 Mike French	12	34	
5 David Hatch	9	23½	
6 Jim Pithouse	9	23	
7 Gillian Withycombe	10	22½	
8 Pat Porter	7	16½	New
9 Jon Ratcliffe	6	14	New
10 Maureen Ratcliffe	6	14	New
11 Chris Bird	5	13½	New
12 Geoff Porter	5	12½	New
13 Clare Meiklejohn	4	11½	
14 Colin Randall	4	11	New
15 Martin Wisdom	4	10½	
16 Chris Poole	2	4½	New
17 Rosemary Humphries	1	3	New
18 Neville Humphries	1	3	New
19 Rosemary Hatch	1	3	
20 Mo Mills	1	2½	
21 Ben Abrahams	1	2½	New
22 Clara Abrahams	1	2½	New
23 Stella Gardner	1	2½	New
24 Louis Parsons	1	2½	New *
25 David Lindsey-Halls	1	2	

**Table 2 Volunteers: Individual Outings and Hours**

*\* visiting grandson!*

The impact of the new members has obviously been considerable. Himalayan Balsam has clearly impacted dramatically on Bob Murdoch's quality of life (Thanks so much Bob!) but as I have said before we hugely appreciate every single outing made by each and every volunteer. Between them those who, for one reason or another, only managed a single outing nonetheless, **between them**, put in almost 24 hours of work. That's an awful lot of HB removed if you reckon on a potential of 800 seeds per plant (Royal Horticultural Society).

## **Progress in the Field 2017**

### *The Timing of the Sweeps*

Three sweeps of the Colaton Brook have now become the norm. As can be seen from the Table 3 below, a regular pattern has set in. The first sweep takes up late June and July; the second August; and the third September and early October.

	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>
<b>First sweep start</b>	<b>13 Jun</b>	<b>19 Jun</b>	<b>22 Jun</b>	<b>15 Jun</b>
<b>First sweep finish</b>	<b>31 Jul</b>	<b>23 Jul</b>	<b>25 Jul</b>	<b>3 Aug*</b>
<b>Second sweep start</b>	<b>7 Aug</b>	<b>23 Jul</b>	<b>28 Jul</b>	<b>20 July*</b>
<b>Second sweep finish</b>	<b>31 Aug</b>	<b>20 Aug</b>	<b>29 Aug</b>	<b>26 Aug</b>
<b>Third sweep start</b>	<b>2 Sept</b>	<b>30 Aug</b>	<b>1 Sept</b>	<b>21 Sept**</b>
<b>Third sweep finish</b>	<b>20 Oct</b>	<b>13 Oct</b>	<b>13 Oct</b>	<b>12 Oct</b>

**Table 3 Timing of Sweeps**

\*complications: discovery of Adventure Playground "Hotspot" 22<sup>nd</sup> July

\*\* Away in Greece until 16<sup>th</sup> September

As can be seen, the dates are a little irregular this year. The second sweep started on 20<sup>th</sup> July before the first sweep had finished on 3<sup>rd</sup> August. This is explained below. Then Gill and I were away on holiday until mid-September so the third sweep started 3 weeks later than usual.

It was noted last year that the timing of the sweeps is important because it constrains our ability to expand the territory covered. The hope is that we will

move to a situation in which the sweeps down the brook last 2 weeks rather than four so that we can then look around to help elsewhere. This year, apart from an initial opener with Clinton Devon at Yettington, we managed just one outing to another tributary: Fluxton (see below p 15).



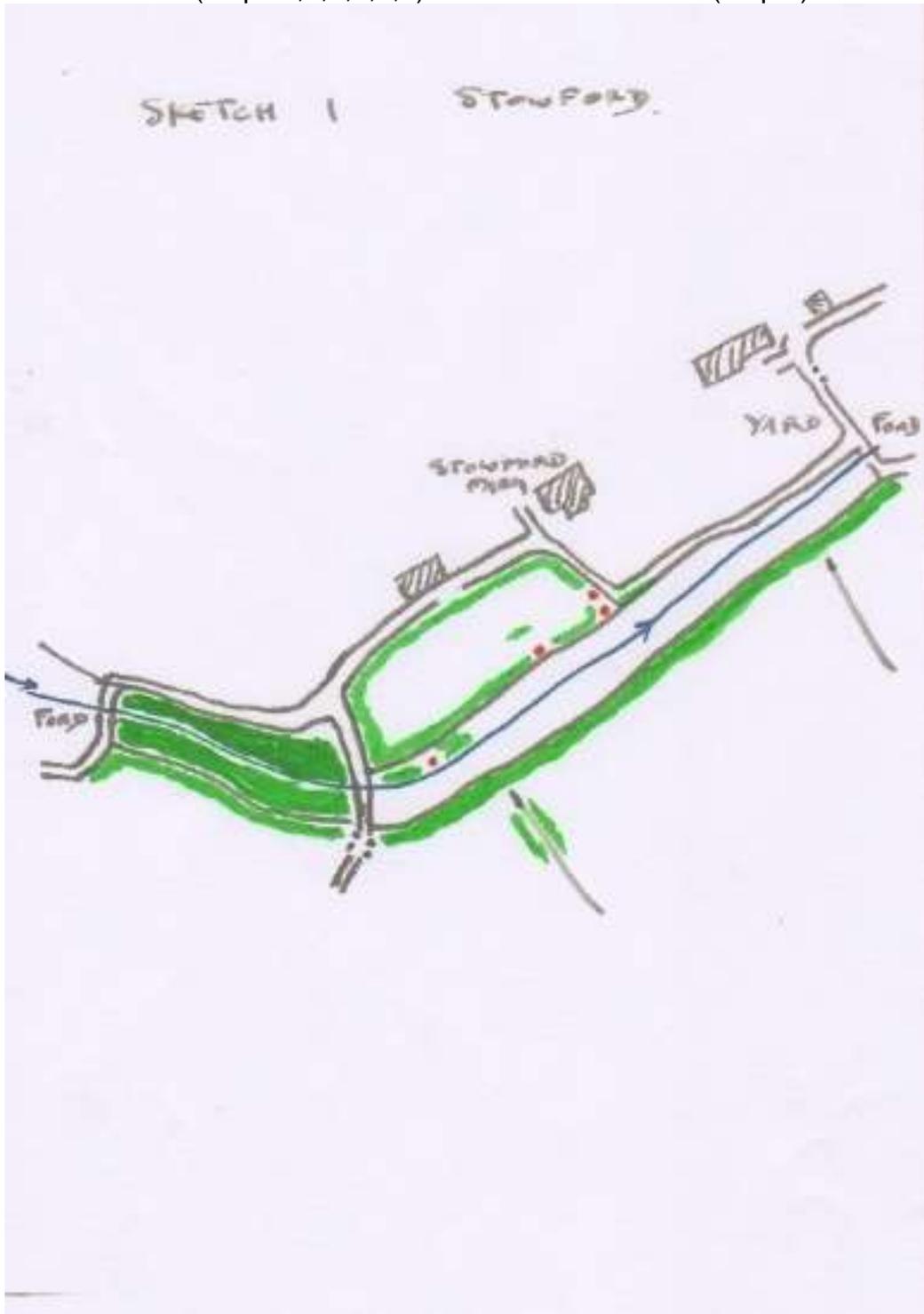
**Coffee break in meadow opposite Colaton Raleigh Church;  
on our First Outing; Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> June 2017**

Rosemary Hatch (right) is about to distribute slices of her delicious home-made cake that boosted team productivity throughout the summer.

**Progress in the Field: Colaton Brook: the 7 Sketch Map Summaries**

As in previous years, the sketches show the approximate distribution of HB encountered on the last (third sweep). As such they are the best indication of the current state of play and may be compared with previous years. HB is

shown by red dots roughly representing a small cluster of perhaps 5-10 plants. Where surrounded by a circle that represents a "hotspot" of perhaps 30-50 plants. The green shading shows approximately the location of Himalayan Balsam in 2012 at the start of the campaign. Blue indicates the Colaton Brook (Maps 1,2,3,5,6,7) and its two tributaries (Map 4).



**Sketch 1 Stowford; Third Sweep**  
Stowford Farm is GR 061871

This first sketch covers the highest reaches of the Stowford Brook on which Himalayan Balsam was found in the first season in 2012. The brook enters the area from the commons and flows north-east down to the ford (to Back Lane, Sketch 2) just below the farm.

As can be seen, this headwater area is clearly under control. For the first time on this third sweep no HB plants were found on the south side of the brook whether on the stream bank or the adjacent field boundary hedgerow. Surprisingly the hotspot that had appeared in 2016 on the field boundary running south-east on the lower side of the map, has been completely eliminated. For the first time also the hedgerow on the right bank, where the brook enters the map, was completely clear.

All that remains is to eliminate the very small scattering of plants on the north side of the brook.

### **Sketch 2 “The Avenue” (below)**

This area lies immediately downstream from Sketch 1. The ford leading to Back Lane can be seen on the left. From there the brook winds eastwards and then curves north before heading eastwards again. North of the river are two open fields in the west (one an orchard) and a more wooded block in the east. HB has always been found in the stream in the west and, back in 2012 over the whole block north of the river in the east. In fact it was in this block that the campaign started back in 2012!

South of the brook, Back Lane runs west-east and is flanked by a hedgerow on the south side in which HB used to be common. Half-way across the map, a gate on the north side of the lane gives access to an open corridor (“The Avenue” for want of a better term) flanked by a conifer plantation to the north and another on the steep bank up to Back Lane to the south. This corridor gives access (with a scramble) to the top of end of Colaton Woods (Sketch 3).

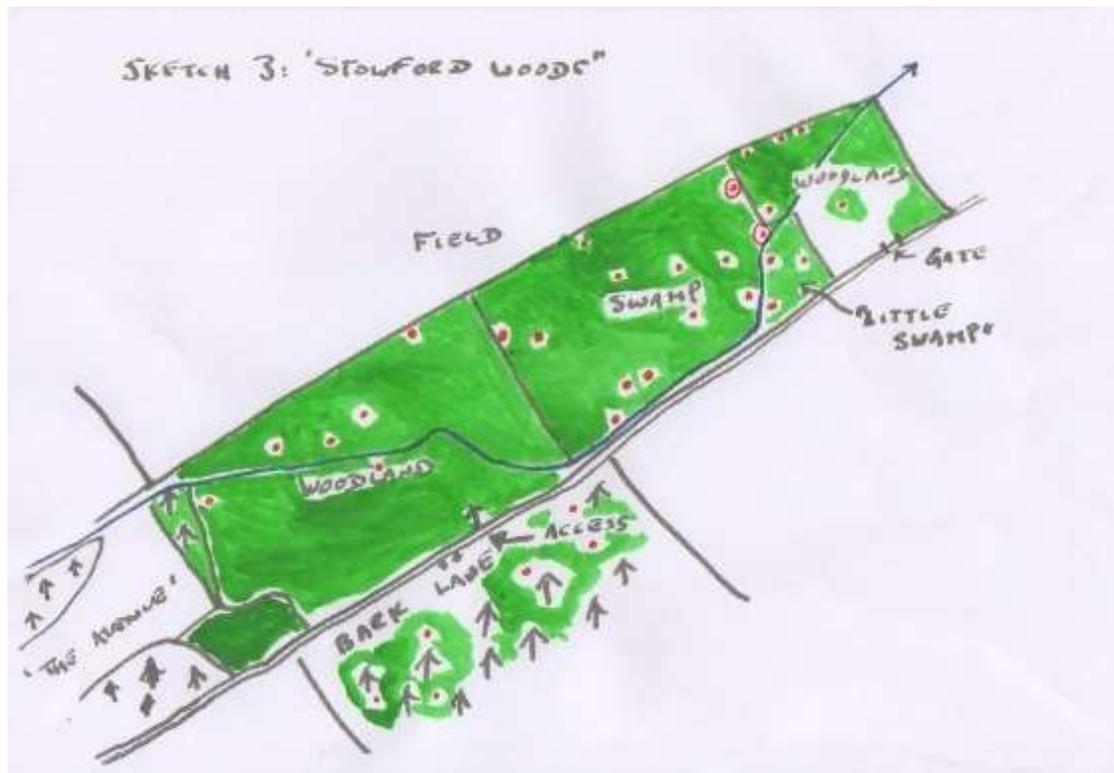
The map indicates a couple of positive features:

- The hedgerow along the south side of Back Lane is completely clear
- North of the brook, the river bank in the west was clear for the first time, while in the east there were no more than half a dozen plants.

On the other hand the Avenue itself, although hugely improved from the early days, still has a sprinkling throughout its length. Indeed I have shown two “hotspots” at the eastern end. This is an awkward area that is densely vegetated with head-high bracken for the early summer months and it is only in September that it dies away so that visibility is improved. Only then is it easy to mop up the small clusters that are exposed.



**Sketch 2 "The Avenue"**  
Lower Stowford Farm has GR 061872



### **Sketch 3 Stowford Woods and The Swamp**

The top (northern) corner of the rectangle is at GR 067876.

Note that the woodland of Stowford Woods is not indicated (green) on the 1/25,000 OS map.

### **Sketch 3 Stowford Woods and The Swamp** (above)

This block lying downstream from the Avenue has always been problematic. Working downstream (from the lower left of the map) there are three blocks lying north-west of Back Lane (in fact below it) and one to the south-east (ie above it).

Below Back Lane:

- Stowford Woods (marked "Woodland" on the sketch; but note the comment above regarding the OS map)
- The Swamp
- A third more irregular block consisting of two areas:
  - "The Little Swamp" between the brook and Back Lane.
  - The "Bottom Wood" which extends on both sides of the brook.

Above Back Lane:

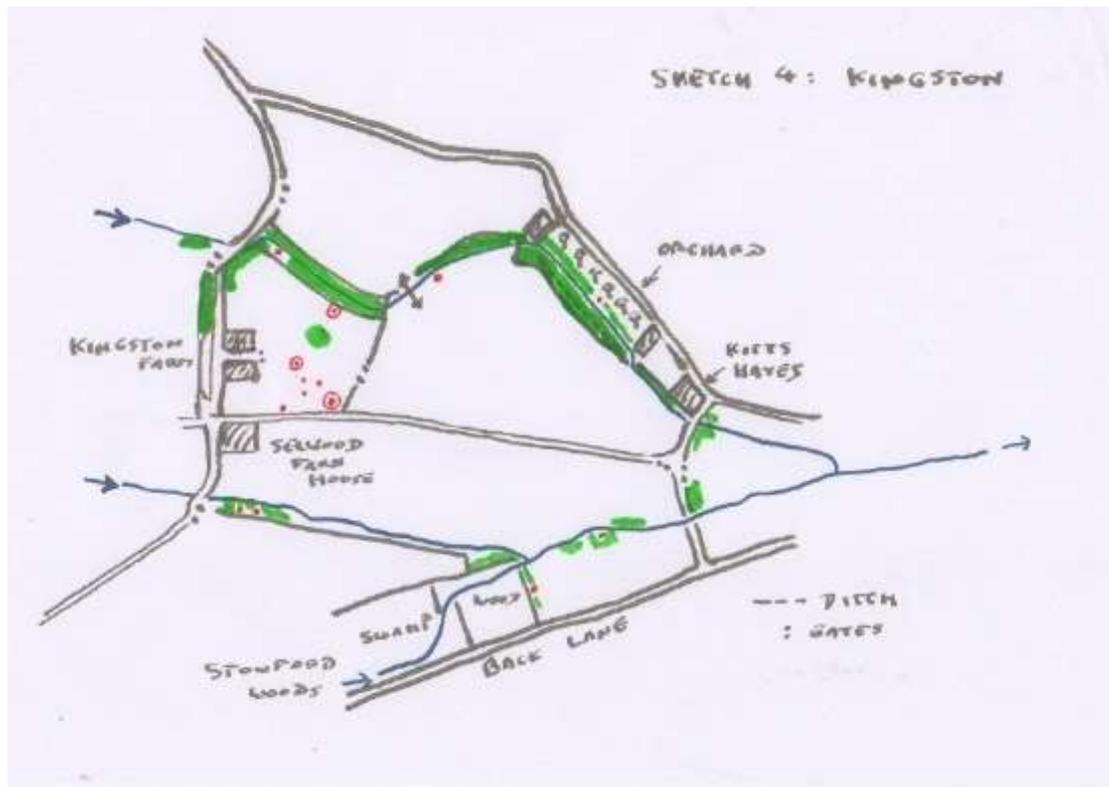
- A conifer plantation that we have come to refer to simply as (The Plantation"

Despite the continuing presence of HB, a great deal of progress has been made:

- Stowford Woods: Much of this block is completely clear but three or four small “hotspots” refuse to give up on the left bank area (ie north of the brook). The situation is encouraging not only in comparison with 2012, when the whole woodland floor was a sea of HB, but in relation to recent years, several hotspots having been eliminated.
- The Swamp: I have used red dots rather than shading in this year’s maps because real progress has been made. The upper half of the swamp was not at all bad in the third sweep. However densities remain high in the particularly wet areas at the bottom end adjacent to “Bottom Wood”.
- The “Little Swamp” persists with a low level of infestation made problematic by the recent spread of brambles.
- The “Bottom Wood”, although showing quite high levels of infestation north of the brook especially at the upper end adjacent to the swamp, was completely clear for the first time in the larger sector south of the brook.

“The Plantation” above Back Lane was not included in our campaign until 2015 although there was an awareness in 2014 that there was some infestation there. It was thought at the time that Clinton Devon would handle it as it is well away from our riverside target area. We have been taking full responsibility in the last three seasons during which time bramble infestation has outstripped HB. Much progress has therefore been made in reducing that HB infestation but at considerable expense in terms of time spent cutting access ways through to the targets. Even a brush-cutter sortie in May did not resolve the problem.

#### **Sketch 4 Kingston Farm and the Two Tributaries** (below)



#### **Sketch 4 Kingston Farm and the Two Tributaries**

Kitts Hayes house has GR 068878

The main brook flows roughly west-east in the bottom of the sketch where the Swamp and Bottom Wood (from Sketch 3) can be seen as a fix. The two tributaries are:

- The Kingston tributary in the north entering from the commons (left-hand side of sketch) before winding to the orchard and Kitts Hayes.
- The Selwood tributary to the south of the farm which also enters from the commons and flows roughly eastwards down towards the corner of Bottom Wood below the swamp.

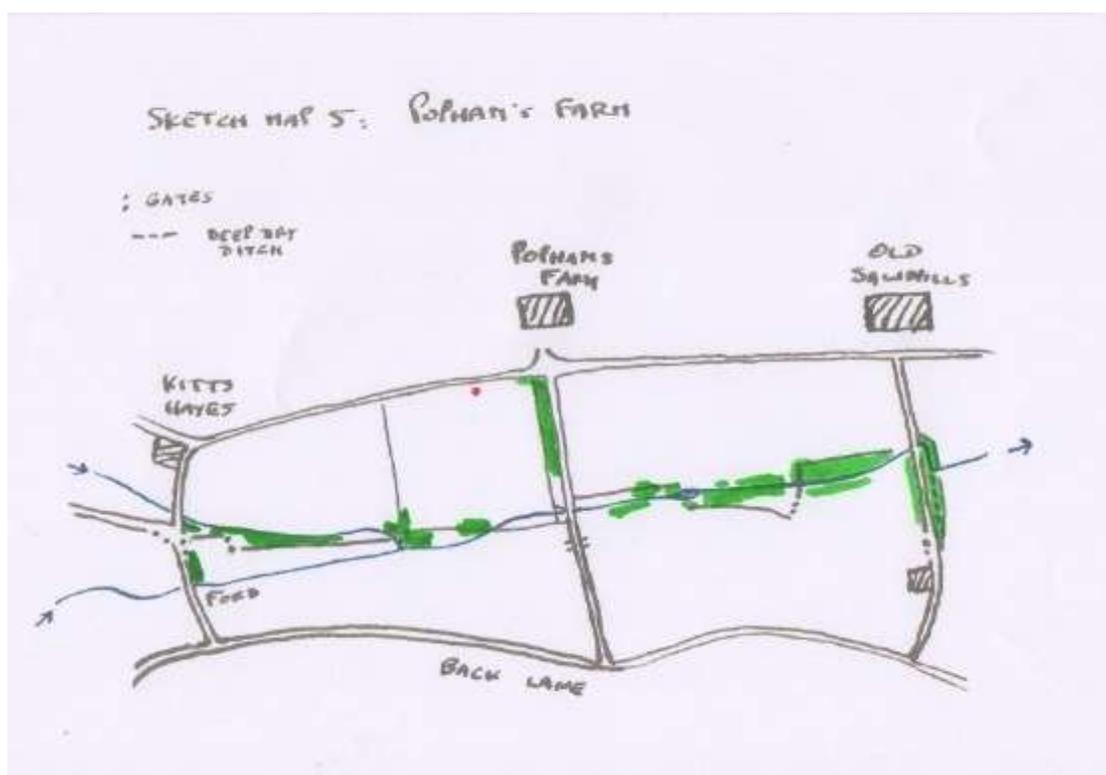
This block now rivals the Swamp as the most problematic and this is entirely the result of the unexpected large new hotspot that was discovered on the farm dump in July 2016 and then around a large stack of bales in the field above the farm dump a month later. As the sketch shows, these persist even on the third sweep along with scattered small plants in the field between the two and bigger clusters below the farmyard. Another negative this year has been the emergence of a worrying new hotspot at the bottom of the slope adjacent to a red-brick small shed by the brook.

All this was disappointing because the traditional target area along the brook to the orchard is mostly excellent. True there is a small hotspot still on the brook just below the muddy gate (arrowed on sketch) but to our delight, only one plant was found in the complex of ditches and banks that run along the south-west flank of the orchard. This is hugely encouraging.

The new hotspot is thus almost entirely responsible for denying us the pleasure of declaring the Kingston brook under control

As to the Selwood brook, the only infestation has been at the **bramblehaven** (illustrated). Here the story is very encouraging in that, although bad on the first sweep, it much improved on the second and by the time of the third there were not more than half a dozen plants.

### Sketch 5 Popham's Farm (below)



### Sketch 5 Kitts Hayes to the Saw Mills.

Popham's Farm has GR 072878

The comment made in relation to the Kingston brook sadly applies to this long reach below Kitts Hayes. By the time of the third sweep the riverine areas were completely clear. Control has been achieved, which should be cause for celebration!

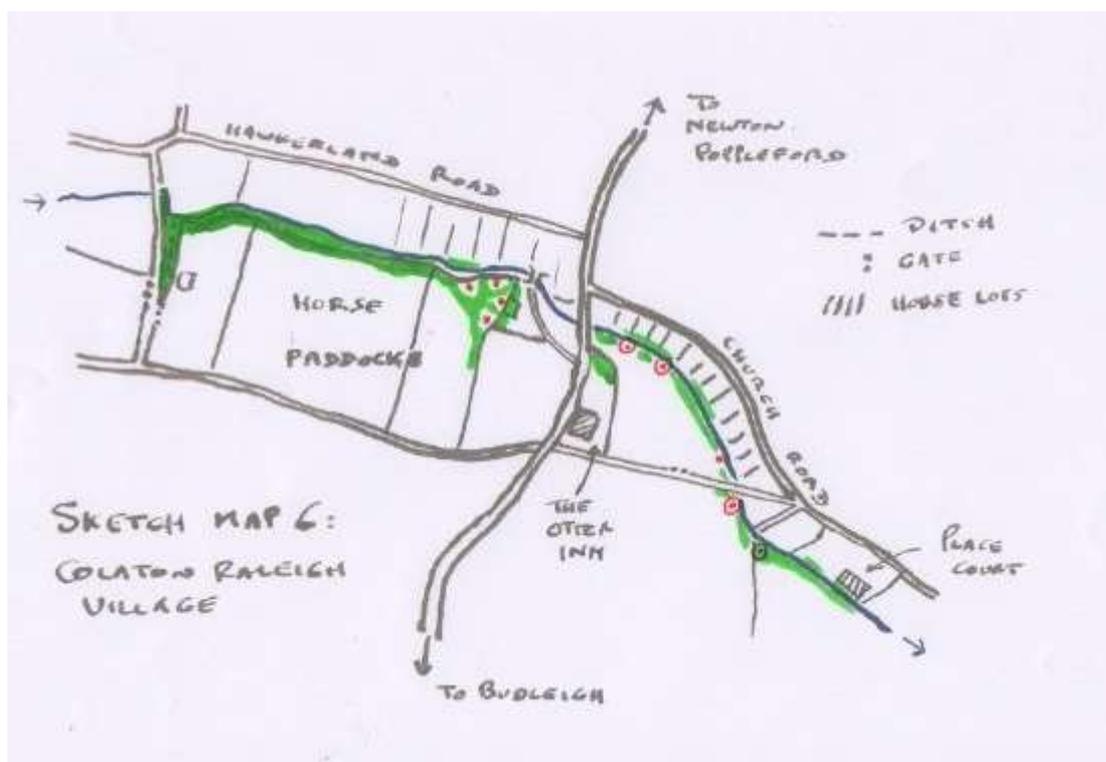
But sadly **yet another new hotspot** was spotted and reported by Bob Murdoch early in the second sweep on 3<sup>rd</sup> August (when we were still reeling from the discoveries below the main road near the adventure playground! See below p 12-13) Annoyingly the location was in a sense identical to the one at Kingston Farm: all around a large stack of plastic-wrapped bales. They are located in the yard by the black barn almost opposite Popham's Farm on Hawkerland Road. Again, surely someone could have reported this to Clinton

Devon Management so that we could clear them before any danger of seeds popping.

By the time of the third sweep there were not more than half a dozen plants surviving, so the hope is that this hotspot will be as short-lived as the one commented on in Sketch 1.

### **Sketch 6 The Village: Horse Paddocks and Adventure Playground**

(below)



### **Sketch 6 Horse Paddocks and the Adventure Playground**

The Otter Inn on the main road is a noted landmark

There are two obvious divisions:

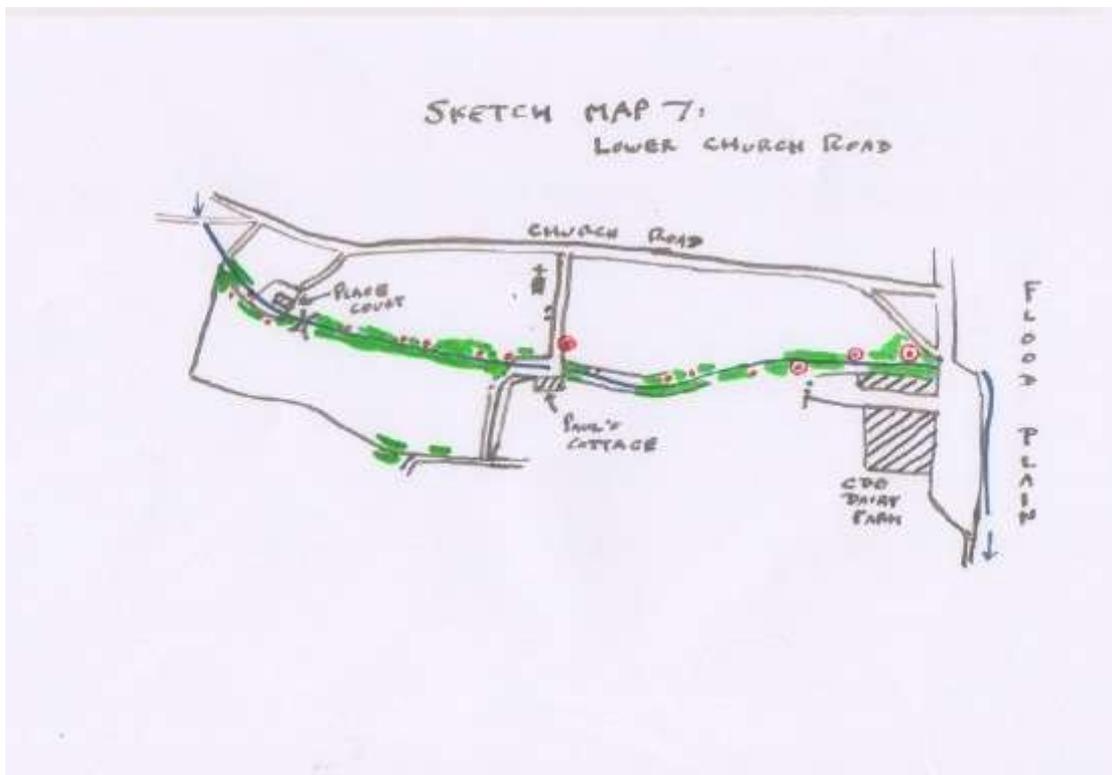
- The Horse Paddocks above the main road. At the far western end, outside the uppermost paddock and running along the north-south lane, there is a deep trench which, in its northern section takes the brook and feeds it under the bank and into the paddocks. In the southern section it is dry. In earlier years both parts of the trench were seriously infested but, by the third sweep this year, both are now completely clear. The same can be said of all the paddocks except the very bottom one. A sprinkling of plants disappointed on the third sweep. Nonetheless this section is good and can be said to be under control.
- **Another New Hotspot:** Sadly this cannot be said of the second reach below the main road (see Sketch 6) running right down to Place Court. It

also consists of two sections separated by the pathway running ESE from the Otter Inn car park to the brook. Both of these had been cleared since 2014 by a local resident.

On a reconnaissance on July 22<sup>nd</sup>, just 2 days after the second sweep had started, Gill and I checked this stretch below the main road. To our horror the banks of the brook in the top section (upstream from the adventure playground to the road) was a mass of pink blossom and seed trusses. It turned out that there was also a hotspot downstream below the footpath from the Otter Inn. A phone call revealed that the local resident had been too busy to attend to it for an unspecified length of time, presumably dating back into 2016, judging by the density of growth. This was a setback. The consolation is that perhaps it explains why the section below it (Sketch 7) running down to the dairy has not been as good as it should have been in recent years. Cold comfort!

As can be seen on the sketch, the hotspot continued at the beginning of the third sweep, though on a reduced scale.

### **Sketch 7 Place Court to the Dairy (below)**



**Sketch 7 Place Court to the Dairy**  
Otterton Church is a noted landmark

This final section (Sketch 7) of the Colaton Brook runs from Place Court right down to the Clinton Devon Estates Dairy on the edge of the Otter Flood Plain. It also has two sections: above and below the north-south lane from the church to "Paul's Cottage".

- The upper section above Paul's Cottage. This contains the riverine stretch already referred to as being somewhat disappointing, certainly compared with the reaches above village (see Sketch 5). A positive point nonetheless is the virtual eradication of the hotspot that appeared in 2015 on the footpath above the southern field (ie green patches in south-west of Paul's Cottage on Sketch 7). Now that the infestation in the reach above this section has been tackled (Sketch 6) there is every hope that in 2018 the level of infestation will show a sharp fall. The same applies to the lower section.
- The lower section. From "Paul's Cottage" the stream runs down through a "tunnel" of overhanging trees (not green on the sketch) to emerge into the open half way to the dairy. The tunnel has always been clear but there has always been very bad infestation where the brook emerges from it. Now there is almost none. However below this, down to the fenced enclosure (drain exit) and ultimately the bridge, HB is rampant. It should be said that the fenced enclosure was originally our terminal point but over the years enthusiastic volunteers have pressed on downstream into the heavily infested zone of the flood plain.

One unwelcome surprise on the third sweep was the emergence of yet another new hotspot of just 4-5 huge plants away from the brook on the lane from Paul's Cottage to the church (see Sketch 7).

### *Progress in the Field and Target: Colaton Brook: Conclusion*

The aim must be to have a set of 7 sketch maps that look like maps 1 and 5, which is to say all green and a minimum of red spots. Above the main road I have no doubt that, if the new hotspots at Kingston Farm had not been allowed to establish themselves, the only serious problem would have been the Swamp on Map 3. On that Map the left-bank sections are under control. On the right it is true that some HB persists in The Avenue, Stowford Woods and the plantation above Back Lane. But all are improving as also indeed is the Swamp.

Below the main road the great hope is that it will be possible to take control of that huge new hotspot above the adventure playground and that this will make it easy to take control of the reaches below it on Sketch 7.

A fervent hope for 2018 is that no new hotspots arise and that we hit our target of complete control in all reaches.

### Progress in the Field: Other tributaries

The plan is that, as HB continues to be eliminated on the Colaton Brook we will find time to help in neighbouring areas. We managed this twice in 2017: once at the beginning of the first sweep and once late in that first sweep.

- *The Combined “Opener” with Clinton Devon Estates; Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> June:* 9 OVA volunteers (4 new) joined Kate Ponting and a comparable number from Clinton Devon Estates (CDE) to commence work on a new venture (for CDE): the (East) Budleigh brook, commencing at the highest known point at which HB has been found: in Lemprice Farm. This lies in Yettington close to the main through road Kate had set this up and would continue there later in the year. Given the size of the party, achievement exceeded her expectations. We no longer have infestation this bad in the Colaton Brook and it was a trip down memory lane in this respect: working in the same very small patch for half an hour at a time (and with the temperature at 30C!). Nonetheless we completely cleared a large block made it possible to work a little further downstream. The main aim though was to keep that top sector clear throughout the year.
- Saturday 15 July six of us took the opportunity to offer help to John Harding and the Tipton St John’s group. He took us to the Fluxton brook which is on the west bank of the Otter half way between Tipton and Ottery St Mary. As such it lies in a key location. A medium-term aim has always been to link the largest tributary valley of the Otter, the Tale, to the OVA/Clinton Devon block from Newton Poppleford to the coast. The Tale Valley Trust has been at work controlling HB since 2005 and John Harding, has only recently organized the group in Tipton. He jumped at the offer and we enjoyed a morning below the road (and sewage works!) down towards the flood plain.

### Other Areas

Ted Swan reports that progress at Newton Poppleford fell away after a good start. A serious situation exists once again at their equivalent of our wet area: Goosemoor (Goosemoor Farm on the A3052 from Newton Poppleford to Exeter lies at GR 070895).

Ted worked with John Harding’s Tipton John group throughout the summer. They make good progress tackling tributaries on both flanks of the Otter.

### Other Issues

*CABI (Centre for Agriculture and Bioscience International) Rust Project*

David Hatch has developed an initiative to have the Lower Otter included in CABI plans to test a rust fungus that debilitates Himalayan Balsam. Seed samples have been submitted and a decision is awaited. If successful, the prospect would emerge of attacking the highly infested flood plain zone of the Otter, something that is probably beyond the capacity of volunteers hand-pulling.

## **Conclusion**

It has been a good year and, equally important, thoroughly enjoyable. The only qualification is that the three who emerged at the top of the table (Table 2 above) putting in the most hours, paid for it. Self, Gill and Bob Murdoch all, on separate occasions, fell into the Colaton brook! Fortunately no bones were broken, which is just as well because the two of our team who took an excellent First Aid course in October had not yet been initiated into the arts. Apart from that, the only mishap was that poor Gillian Withycombe lost her car keys somewhere on Map 7. None of which should put readers off. We are always wanting new volunteers and can guarantee hours of good company in the open air with the most delicious cake at coffee time. (See photo p.4)

Patrick Hamilton  
Acting Chair,  
Natural Environment Committee.