

# Island Reserve

*There's an aquatic dimension to this conservation project which demands particular expertise, and some unusual equipment.*

The 107 acre Amwell Quarry Nature Reserve, near Ware in Hertfordshire, sits at the north end of the 26 mile long Lee Valley Regional Park. It is designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), a Special Protected Area (SPA) and a RAMSAR International Designated Wetland Site and provides a refuge, particularly for wintering birds. It is here that Hertfordshire and Middlesex Wildlife Trust (with funding from the Biffaward Landfill tax credit scheme) have employed Venables Tree Care and Conservation Services (Venables) – a successful family run business who specialise in conservation work – to maintain the reed beds and open up the islands to attract more wintering birds.

Venables is run by three partners, Patrick Venables (Pat), Pat's older brother Dennis, and Pat's son Steve, from their base in Goff's Oak in North London. The family has a long tradition of working within woodlands, although not always in conservation. Steve says, "The family has been involved with tree work in Hertfordshire for the last 150 to 200 years. My great grandparents were woodsmen involved with woodland clearance. They would strap axes and cross cuts to their bicycles and go off into the woods for two to three weeks at a time."

Steve joined the family firm in 1999 and became a partner in 2002, initially against his parents' advice. "I tried working as an aircraft engineer but hated being in the same

place day after day, so I went to study Environmental Management at Cranfield University. I thought maybe I could work as a ranger or a park manager – actually doing the work, rather than asking others do it. I knew I would be cursing the work otherwise. My parents said tree work was too dangerous, too hard a market and not enough money. I joined the company to get some 'on the job' experience.

"When I joined, the market was not interested in a company with practical experience. It counted for nothing. I brought academic knowledge to the company and clients were impressed with that. Clients asked how they could create otter holts or water vole habitats. Having researched them at university, I (and therefore the company) was able to offer solutions and then come out into the field and implement these things. Having this knowledge pushed us to the front of customers' minds. We now have a lot of conservation clients as well as the general tree surgery side of the business that my father started just as the London Councils were getting into it in the 1970s."

In order to look after the trees in Barnet Park and most of the trees on the Hertfordshire roadsides, Venables run three Unimogs, two 6-inch TP wood-chippers, and are looking at investing in the 8 inch version. "We find TP wood-chippers are a great compromise between cost, reliability and build quality.



(Above) Team Venables: Patrick Venables sits resting against the Bobcat mini digger as he steers the pontoon via its 4.0 Mercury motor. (Below) Disembarking the Bobcat mini digger from the Versadock modular float system onto the island at Amwell Quarry Nature Reserve where the team is working for Hertfordshire and Middlesex Wildlife Trust.



They also fit perfectly behind the Unimogs. For the bigger tree work (removing large trees) we converted a Bedford lorry into a timber crane. It has a crane on the back and a Hiab on the front with a log grab. It tows a large trailer which we put timber on, or it is towed by

a Unimog and carries even more timber."

Conservation work requires specialist equipment, especially when the work is undertaken on an island in the middle of a lake. Venables first investigated the idea of floating their machinery due to the needs of a client, Lee Valley Park. Steve says, "They approached us about a year ago with the idea of creating a kingfisher habitat. We needed to excavate some of the surface off an island and rebuild it with sand, then cut the face off the side of the island so that the kingfishers could then burrow into the sand and nest. We would need to float the machinery out to the island, so we came up with some costings. This job, along with another island clearance (cutting, felling and digging down to encourage the reed growth and improve sight lines so that people in the bird hide can see across the lake) enabled us to buy the pontoon."

The island in the middle of the lake at Amwell Quarry Nature



(Left) Rowan 'Chav' Tarplee coppices using a Stihl chainsaw in the tree. (Right) Steve Venables uses a Stihl MS 480 chainsaw to fell mature willow for the fish refuge.



(Left) Steve Venables with Ellie Minns, Reserves Officer for Hertfordshire and Middlesex Wildlife Trust. (Right) Silhouette of Bobcat mini digger with customised log grab, picking up poles and brush to put on the bonfire.

Reserve is a relatively small site, 30 metres wide by 150 metres long. On the brightest morning of the winter so far, 'Team Venables' (Steve, Patrick, supervisor Jon Rhodes, Sam Fynan (with glasses) and Rowan 'Chav' Tarplee take 30 minutes to load their 1.5 tonne Bobcat mini digger with customised log grab, their Stihl chainsaws (MS 200 up to the 880) and themselves onto the 3 by 4 metre pontoon. The Versadock modular float system (towing a small dinghy) reaches the island in five minutes.

When the team finish unloading the pontoon, they hold one of several meetings that will take place throughout the day. This discussion covers which trees are to be felled and the order in which activities will take place, making sure that the team know where each person will be at all times. After a final equipment safety check, Rowan goes off to coppice the semi-mature woodland of willow and alder on the

southern end of the island, opening it up to marginal vegetation and ground cover. John and Sam stack some timber to be used for building artificial otter holts and the rest of the poles and brush is piled so that Pat in the mini digger can feed the bonfire. Steve walks to the north end of the island and fells mature willow trees into the water with his Stihl MS 480, to create a dense fish refuge. He will take the dinghy out later and fell the tops, making it harder for birds to land and 'fish'.

Ellie Minns, Reserves Officer for Hertfordshire and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, arrives on the island. Having reviewed the morning's progress, she says, "Venables has worked for the Wildlife Trust for a number of years and on most parts of this reserve. Earlier this year, they winched out willows and willow stumps in the north end of the lake because they were invading the reed bed and drying it out. Getting rid of the willow creates

wet pools in the reed bed. Amwell Quarry Nature Reserve is a sensitive site, an SSSI for wintering wild fowl (gadwall, shoveller and wintering bitterns). The work that Venables are doing will encourage more wintering birds to visit and enable other breeding birds to use the island. It will also help the fish populations. The otter holts will increase the biodiversity value of the site. For us, the value of working with Venables – as well as being a good contractor – is that they know what they are doing in terms of wildlife and nature conservation. Most importantly, due to their experience they understand what we want from a job."

Steve likes being 'on the ground', in the thick of things, rather than asking others to do the work for him. Venables are currently re-designing their website and stationery to reflect this growing side of their business and they are hoping to get Arb Association accreditation to become an approved contractor.

For Steve, one of the reasons that they have been able to expand the company, which employs up to eight full time staff in the winter, is the inherent expertise within this family business. He says, "I learned the conservation theory, but there are not many work placements where you can have access to this kind of expertise on the job. Colleges are very good on the basics, but they can't teach you how to fell a tree on the side of an island when it is two foot in the water. These are the sorts of things that you only learn with experience, and luckily the team has my father, who has already made all the mistakes, to pass this knowledge on."

"There are a lot of tree surgeons out there cutting down trees just for financial gain. The public and our clients can see that we as a company are not just cutting trees down. We are doing our bit for the environment and for conservation."

Carolyn Locher



(Left) Unimog and TP 6 inch chipper used on general tree surgery jobs. (Right) Reed beds at the north end of Amwell Quarry Nature Reserve where Venables winched out willows and willow stumps to create wet pools.