

**Today's Experience, Tomorrow's Biodiversity...** **Sue Townsend**, former Head at Preston Montford and now the [Studies Council](#)'s Biodiversity Projects Manager, probably has more experience of hosting i.d. training courses than anyone else.- a hugely important part of the FSC's work backed up by its excellent [publications](#), **Richard Burkmar** has worked with the NBN and with the Merseyside Biodiversity Partnership, as well as having had the benefit of cake and courses at Preston Montford and other FSC centres (as part of the academic courses now run in association with Manchester Metropolitan University). He became the [Tomorrow's Biodiversity](#) officer in April 2013. This Esmée Fairbairn-sponsored project is concerned with how long-term gaps between ID skills and recording needs may best be addressed.

**Interview by Paula Lightfoot with input from Ben Deed, Martin Harvey, Gail Austen-Price, Teresa Frost, Craig MacAdam and Bex Cartwright.**

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**PL** Welcome to the [NFBR Google Group](#) and thank you very much for agreeing to take part (and to be the guinea pigs for the first interview slot!). First of all, congratulations on celebrating the [Field Studies Council](#)'s 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary this year! For those who don't know the background, can you tell us a bit about how it all began [70 years ago](#)?

**ST** Thanks Paula – we hope some of you may be at one of our members events and join us in our celebrations.

In 1943, Francis Butler (who was a London County Schools Inspector) recognised a lack of opportunity for young people to experience education out of doors. At a meeting held at the NHM on 10<sup>th</sup> September that year, the FSC (then called the Society for the Promotion of Field Studies) was born. Our first president was Sir Arthur Tansley. In the post war period of austerity, a remarkable generation of centre managers maintained the first FSC field centres with nothing more than driftwood and nails made out of reclaimed wire!

Read about it [here](#) or for a more complete account there is a paper in the [Biological Journal of the Linnean Society, Volume 32, Issue 1, pages 31–41, September 1987](#).

**PL** Thank you for your response, and yes (with my [Yorkshire Naturalists Union](#) hat on!) we were pleased to attend the 70th anniversary celebrations - Tarntastic at Malham Tarn!

So next question - the FSC delivers a wide range of environmental education – from school field trips to professional development courses- but one area of your work we thought would be especially interesting to NFBR members is the Biodiversity Fellows (Bio.Fells) project – can you tell us a bit about it, how is it funded, what are the aims and who is involved?

**ST** FSC [Biodiversity Fellows](#) is funded by the [Defra Fund for Biodiversity in the Voluntary Sector](#) administered by [Natural England](#) and runs from 2012 to very early 2014.

FSC has been working in partnership with a large number of tutors and National Recording Schemes and Societies to offer a series of funded one day courses (free to registered Bio.Fells) and a number of bursaries for residential courses supported by expert tuition from regional, national and international experts, active mentoring and post-course support by tutors including access to resources, trialling the use of webinars, training in online recording. Some of these have been held at FSC centres in England but most have been in other locations and have included field training and lab sessions.

The programme was drawn up in a great hurry due to the limitations of the funding. It simply would not have worked without an expert co-ordinator – Pete Boardman. Pete is a skilled field entomologist who is Project Officer for 2 of the FSC biodiversity projects. He is just supporting and leading Invert Challenge events this week – which is why he isn't online today.

Full list of courses offered in 2014 is available [here](#).

**PL** Congratulations to Pete and everyone else involved in pulling it together in the timeframe!

So what sort of response have you had so far? What sort of people have signed up to become Biodiversity Fellows - are they all volunteer recorders or are some professionals, what sort of age range are they, and what range of existing skills and experience in recording do they have?

- ST** There have been over 400 people enrolled on the programme – many are known to us through their engagement in previous training schemes such as [Invertebrate Challenge](#) and the [Biodiversity Training Project](#).
- It is really interesting that people have joined us to become Bio.Fells to be part of a network of training events and identification and recording information – not all have actually attended training courses as roughly 200 are expected by the end of this round of project funding.
- PL** So the networking and peer support aspect is very important. Our last online interview was about social media/networking and I see the Bio.Fells have a [Facebook](#) group. How useful has this been, and do the FSC use any other kinds of social media for training/mentoring in biological recording?
- RB** The FB group has been successful in a number of ways – providing a forum where a large number of Bio.Fells can reach each other (and where we can reach them too). There are something like 140 members on that group, which is a lot, but we need to remember that there are over 400 registered Bio.Fells. We are still learning – like everyone else – about social networking and its utility in a supported learning environment. But I am convinced that it has a major and growing role to play in one way or another.
- As part of the Bio.Fells programme, we will also be running some trial webinar training on the use of iRecord. This will be later in the year (or perhaps early next year).
- PL** I understand that the aim of Bio.Fells was to focus on improving skills in the under-recorded taxa (aka the 'uncharismatic' or 'difficult' species groups!) - have some courses filled more quickly than others? Have any species groups proved surprisingly popular?
- ST** Most courses have filled quickly. There are now no vacancies on any of the courses – but it is always worth asking as there are cancellations! The invertebrate events were probably, on balance, the quickest to fill – rather unsurprisingly as those recording schemes seem very well networked with national experts and there is much awareness in the recorder that they need to practice – and practising with a mentor is always so much easier.
- PL** That's great to hear - and interesting to know that there may be places available due to cancellation, worth keeping an eye on this then! I appreciate it's only been running for 6 months, but have there been any 'unexpected bonus' outcomes from the Bio.Fells programme so far, e.g. any interesting new records or useful networking connections made?
- ST** We haven't collected them all in yet – but there are so many! I think the biggest surprise is the sheer number of people who have joined us to be a Biodiversity Fellow – without yet receiving training or direct support. That many people interesting in recording difficult taxa is fabulous and we intend to nurture and grow this network as best we can.
- MH** It's great to see so many people developing their skills and interests in these "difficult" species groups. One of the longer-term measures of success will be how many new records get sent in to records centres/recording schemes as a result. How can we best encourage people to translate interest and skills into records?
- RB** We push record submission really hard at the Bio.Fells courses and Pete is collecting metrics on the number of records submitted to feed back to NE. It's not always easy because although we can easily count the records submitted through certain iRecord accounts etc, some recorders prefer to use other routes so we have to collate information from a large number of sources.
- We have to stress how important the records are, and we have to also try - as a community - to make record submission as easy as possible.
- PL** I think I should acknowledge Pete's efforts again here - he's entered loads of records in iRecord that were made during the field courses!
- ST** Absolutely - and encouraged everyone else to do the same!
- RB** I'll second that. His efforts have been super-human!

- PL** The Bio.Fells courses are (I believe) aimed at those who already have some experience of recording and want to develop their skills or branch out into a new taxonomic area - what would you recommend for complete beginners who want to get started in recording - is that one way in which the Bio.Fells network could grow?
- ST** I suspect we need to add more links to both [NBN](#) and [iRECORD](#) throughout our work - and not just on the Bio.Fells courses. County Recorders are still really important - as this route to verification often gives important feedback to the recorder
- PL** Just to pick up on this earlier point made by Sue - there are a couple of PowerPoint presentations created for Bio.Fells tutors showing how the NBN Gateway is a useful resource for volunteer recorders: <http://www.nbn.org.uk/Tools-Resources/NBN-Publications/Training-material.aspx> (scroll down to the bottom!). With my NBN hat on, I would like to do more to ensure volunteer recorders are aware of this resource and that it meets their requirements - after all they supply the records that keep it running!
- ST** Thanks Paula - we promote and use that one and I think it is really good - perhaps we should have more links to it from [NFBR](#) and ask [ALERC](#) to circulate it?
- GA** Hi! I'm new to this & hope that I'm doing the right thing! What do you think has been the secret for FSC longevity? Now that the state of the environment is in the nation's psyche & there are numerous organisations concerned with geographical regions as well as taxon groups, how do you think that the FSC managed to stay at the core of environmental education?
- ST** Hi Gail. Throughout our 70 year history, we have crafted our services and products to suit the perceived needs in schools, amateur and professional markets. I think that the main reason that we've been successful is because of our flexibility and a lack of dependence on external funding.
- PL** Bio.Fells courses are free or half price I think, but participants still have to pay for their accommodation if it's a residential course and they might need to buy equipment and ID guides to pursue their studies at home – has this proved to be a barrier for some people? And if so, how might it be overcome?
- ST** We have picked up this evidence from [Invertebrate Challenge](#) – and are aware of some of the problems. Mobile equipment, a focus on day rather than residential courses, access to electronic resources are all contributing to make the workshops accessible. There are still reported difficulties though – and we are happy to collect further information – to use grant speak 'evidence of need' to apply for funding to continue to support those just starting out in identification and recording. Most interesting comments have been more about location for the day courses – there have been a number of people who would like them closer to their own homes – regional support and training is a very important area – and fostering support near interesting sites – as so well demonstrated in the [Cyril Diver project](#). <https://www.facebook.com/CyrilDiverProject>
- PL** Ah yes, the excellent [Cyril Diver project](#) - our hosts for a wonderful field meeting after the NFBR conference! You mention one-day rather than residential courses but that raises another issue - how much can you realistically cover in a one-day course? Getting involved in local projects is definitely a good motivator to carry on learning and recording. In addition to providing ongoing mentoring through the BioFells project, do you also put participants in contact with their local records centres, county recorders and local natural history societies?
- ST** I agree Paula - there is a real issue as the residential helps so many people to be immersed in their subject and develop and practise with others. I suspect there is a growing body of evidence for a progression approach to enable people to come for days - then attend a longer course - and perhaps then be supported by regional workshops. As to the networks for other supports yes we certainly encourage people to join the national recording scheme and make contact with other regional groups.
- PL** Of course it works both ways - local and national recording societies and projects can presumably use the BioFells network to get information to people who might be interested? e.g. I posted information about a recent 5-day seaweed recording field trip in the BioFells

Facebook group - but are there other communication channels to reach all BioFells that could be used by local records centres, national schemes etc?

- MH** In the latest NFBR newsletter, John Newbould makes some interesting points about the value of encouraging and supporting local mentoring networks to provide follow-up support after training courses. Barriers to this include the lack of venues and equipment to continue working on the difficult groups (which could perhaps be tackled with suitable funding) and just not having enough people with common interests in a particular area (which is harder to put right!). Online mentoring is available through [iSpot](#) and many other sites, and I'm sure there is lots of scope for developing more online tools, but these work best in the context of people learning from each other in the field and lab. Need to support all these things! John's NFBR article: [http://issuu.com/nfbr/docs/nfbr\\_newsletter\\_46\\_-\\_july\\_2013/28](http://issuu.com/nfbr/docs/nfbr_newsletter_46_-_july_2013/28)
- RB** I agree with you, Martin, that what is needed is an integrated mix of people meeting and online tools to support them. We are only just starting to discover the ways in which the new communication opportunities can help build mentoring and support networks and I think that, in a way, it's a thing that can't be rushed - it has to evolve. Although initiatives like [iSpot](#) that build some infrastructure first and put it out there have shown that there is a place for this too.
- ST** I agree Martin - we all learn in such different ways and we need to maximise the connectivity between all these fab resources. I think John Newbould is absolutely right in his pleas for consideration of local mentoring groups - something that Pete's Invertebrate Challenge project is using to really good effect - having produced a really strong local network - including new county recorders. The connectivity makes it all so much more sustainable.
- BD** I wonder if there is room for a wider network of organisations to support the learning of and wider network of Bio.Fells. I am currently supporting a local BSBI mentor in their work running the online course through resources and space if necessary. I know the Liverpool World Museum would be keen to engage more and see collections and resources used. Perhaps a clearer list or a sign-posting site that gives directions for people who want to engage locally. How they can do it and what is available to them might be a useful service? I would be very pleased to see people coming in and using the LRC reference books, equipment and guides and i am sure there are many other organisations that might also.
- ST** If people want to take a step further – there are heaps of beginners' day courses – not just FSC but a whole host of regional and local providers including recording societies. A residential course or field meeting may be the next step – and these range in course length. If people are complete beginners – I would recommend their local group. Normally the wildlife trust or LRC will know which groups are active in any area – and the National Schemes and Societies with their network of expert county recorders are great. Last but not least – [iSPOT](#) is a fab free on line resource for checking identifications. I suspect NFBR could do really well in pulling some of this together and I agree with Ben - we could work better together to centralise information - another role for NFBR?
- RB** Hi Ben. There's so much going on at those kinds of scales that centrally collating it will take a lot of resource, but, as you say, sign-posting centrally to other sites that give the detail would help as you suggest. I'm sure that there are lots of ways we could make the advertisement and marketing of under-used resources better. Perhaps this is something that the NFBR could play a really useful role in.
- BD** It doesn't all have to be done by one organisation though? I agree a lot would need to be worked out but there are enough people and organisations out there who together could build such a resource..
- RB** Of course not - and it couldn't be done by a single organisation, but it has to be hosted somewhere and you need a 'central' organisation to do that like NFBR or Lin Soc for example. There's nothing to stop this happening now really when you think about it, but the fact that it hasn't really yet happened is an indication that it's not as easy as it sounds.
- ST** HI Ben, I think it'd be an amazingly powerful collaborative project. It should be led by a neutral 'broker' - hence earlier thoughts that it could be NFBR/Lin Soc and would take work from any course provider to submit appropriate training events. I think it could be even more useful if it identified the gaps in provision and reviewed the attendance/successes of the courses in some way. I suspect even with

everyone say posting in an agreed template etc - there will be some feat of organisation in bringing it all together. Interestingly - many years ago - and I am showing my age now - the Countryside Commission did this alongside Natural England and published an annual list of courses which they set up a bursary fund to attend for volunteers and NGOs!! We could revisit that!

- CM** At Buglife we identified this as an issue early on. Whilst our workshops were fully funded and free to participants the feedback we received was that they couldn't take their skills forward as they didn't have the guides at home. We now charge for our workshops but the charge is for a copy of the ID guide that we use on the course which participants take home with them.
- RB** That's an idea worthy of more consideration Craig. As more electronic resources become available, the situation might ease a bit, but in the meantime I think that this is a very good suggestions.
- TF** Do you think there is room for a centralised (NFBR?) biological recording training website? Many LRCs collate relevant courses/events for their area e.g <http://www.sewbrec.org.uk/event/events-calendar/> and that is something we are considering in Cumbria. But a national portal could be helpful as a one-stop-shop if wildlife trusts, LRCs, museums, FSC, natural history societies etc all uploaded their own training events – especially if people are willing to travel outside their county. Search by location and taxa group...
- RB** You can never have too much too much publicity for courses and it would be great to have a centralised source. Keeping these things up to date and focused takes effort of course. Sue knows of a Linnaean Society initiative to do something similar - she's checking out link now.
- ST** At the moment - the person chairing the group is Ronnie Edmonds-Brown from Hertford University. She is leading on the courses 'directory' work instigated by the Lin Soc Taxonomy and Systematics committee. I suspect it could well be a joint NFBR/Linn Soc Initiative? It could be a positive areas for NFBR development with support from a learned society?
- BC** Hello Sue and Richard, Hope I'm on the correct thread... I have a question I hope you can answer? I am on the Invertebrate Challenge and the Biodiversity Fellowship; are there any plans to produce any sort of certificate of attendance for participants on any of these or further projects? I have just graduated and I am struggling to decide how best to describe the type and level of training I am receiving through these courses when applying for jobs or on my C.V. It would be great to have a FISC for invertebrates in a similar way to the botanical skills test that would be recognised by potential employers, Bex.
- ST** Good point Bex - at the moment the BSBI Field Identification Skills Certificate [http://www.bsbi.org.uk/field\\_skills.html](http://www.bsbi.org.uk/field_skills.html) is a brilliant way of assessing peoples skill levels through a one day thorough test. FSC would be really interested in looking at this for other groups. As to certificates of attendance - another good point - we haven't done this for this year - and we all know that attending doesn't necessarily mean competence - but that people would also like a record that they have undergone the training. How do others feel about this - is it something we should do?
- PL** Re certificates of attendance - FSC courses would count as CPD (continuing professional development) which is a requirement of CIEEM membership (I'm sure we'll touch on this later in the interview with Sally Hayns) so I think certificates would be useful for those who are using (or would like to use) their skills in a professional context.
- RB** As a member of CIEEM myself, I agree that courses - like those run by FSC - are excellent to show that CPD is up to date and these kinds of courses - structured learning - tend to 'score' really highly on CPD credit. But having an actual paper certificate doesn't help. It's just logging the hours that's important. And to actually get \*accreditation\* for a course is a completely different kettle of fish.
- PL** We have another interview starting in 25 minutes - but don't worry we can keep posting in this thread after 2pm too - but I would like to introduce another topic that I think will be very interesting to NFBR group members. The **Tomorrow's Biodiversity** project. Rich, Sue, can you tell us about this new project - what are the aims and the timeframe?

- RB** Tomorrow's Biodiversity is a 5 year project funded by Esmee Fairbairn. The first two years is a desk research/consultation phase to identify those gaps in training and resources that FSC could help fill – and which are, strategically, the best value for us to tackle. Years three to five are about delivering training and resources.
- <http://www.field-studies-council.org/supporting-you/fsc-projects/current-projects/tomorrows-biodiversity.aspx>
- PL** So during the research and consultation phase, which organisations are you consulting with? What opportunities are there for individuals /organisations to get involved in the project?
- RB** There will be ample opportunities to be involved. We will capitalise on existing contacts with individuals – for example the bio.fells – and many organisations. I'm currently doing a lot of desk research before consulting widely since I think that is the right way round to do it - it will mean that I'll be in a position to get more value from the consultations. We will talk to anyone that wants to engage with the project - naturally the national agencies, national RSS, BRC, Open Uni, iSpot, ALERC, NFBR etc.
- PL** During years 3-5 'delivering resources' - presumably this includes ID guides and keys (which the FSC do so well!) but will it also include online resources that are free to use? Could it include a central database of courses/resources/projects as Ben Deed suggested? If FSC provided the framework, the various organisations could edit their own content?
- RB** It will almost certainly produce online resources - of one kind or another - which are free to use. A central database of courses/resources is a possibility. The initial research and consultation phase (including what we are doing now) is to evaluate different ideas and - importantly - match them to gaps that the FSC feels it is best equipped to fill. So it's all open to debate really and anything is possible, but not everything is possible!
- I should also say that the nature of the Tomorrow's Biodiversity project is that the remit is initially quite plastic. Until we have completed the research & consultation, we don't know what taxonomic groups, types of resources or even habitats or protocols we will need to focus on. Things will start to firm up in the second year. (The project is six months in.)
- ST** Thanks, Paula. I am keen to see how we recognise people achievement and skill level on courses - so I will be really interested in the debate later today.
- PL** Does it cover the marine environment or just the terrestrial and freshwater environment?
- RB** With our current network of centres and associate tutors and biodiversity fellows anything is possible. The process of evaluation includes such considerations as: where are the monitoring gaps; what is FSC equipped to deliver; where can FSC add most value; and – importantly – can we make it financially sustainable for FSC.
- PL** I'd better ask this important question before the next interview starts at 2pm! **Rich and Sue, what do you think NFBR should do to support the development of skills in species ID and biological recording?** (and thank you to Teresa Frost and Ben Deed who have already made excellent suggestions earlier in this thread!)
- RB** Today is a perfect example of what the NFBR can do. A strength of the NFBR is that it draws members from all parts of the wider biological recording network and therefore brings together a host different experiences. NFBR should be a forum for creative thinking and spreading good practice around biological recording. Biological recording and ID skills are undergoing resurgence, partly in response to a need brought on by an environmental crisis and partly thanks to new paradigms and tools – e-Taxonomy if you will. These are both worrying and exciting times and we will need effective communication if biological recorders are going to make effective use of an increasing rich and complex set of tools. NFBR can play an important role in that communication.
- ST** Well - I think communication is the key - but specifically to signpost useful events. Anything from Government lobbies, new publications, training courses. I think there as a really useful role in being a one stop shop for a training events calendar nationwide.

PL Thank you both for those responses about what NFBR can do - on the theme of communication, we will write up this interview, make it available via the NFBR website and raise awareness of it through our social networking channels.

As the other interview has now started, I will say **THANK YOU BOTH VERY MUCH** for taking part today, it has been fascinating to learn about Tomorrow's Biodiversity and Bio.Fells, both very exciting projects with lots of potential for collaboration and communication between the whole spectrum of people and organisations involved in biological recording, and NFBR are keen to support both projects in any way we can.

I hope you enjoyed taking part - despite the rocky start (my fault - I've now ensured that all members have permission to post!) - and please do post questions/comments to our other interviewees if you have time to stick around or join us later!