

Summary - MBL 029

John Wilson was born in Warton in 1935. His family had a poultry farm in the village. John was the first warden of RSPB's Leighton Moss reserve and worked there until retirement.

	John talks about his childhood in Warton including the slag tips, troops coming in for WW2, swimming in the Keer and his interest in birdwatching.
2.55	When he was young everyone collected birds' eggs. John's friends took a whole clutch of skylarks' eggs from the salt marsh. John saved some oyster catchers eggs which he cites as his first act of bird protection.
3.55	The farmers in Warton were related to John, so he could wander anywhere. John would help on his family farm. He would lead the horse during haytimings. There were 8 poultry farms in Warton when John was a child. His father's poultry farm was about 6 acres. John worked on the farm on Saturday mornings. His father was blind, but still ran the business.
5.50	During the war his father got an extra allowance because he was blind. They bred rabbits on the farm during the war. Warton Hall Farm, in the middle of Warton was his grandfather's farm (now disappeared); originally it was a stable for horses.
8.00	John loved being outside. When he finished grammar school he worked with his father before working at Leighton Moss. Poultry farming in the early 1960s were becoming uneconomic to run. When he was young there was no traffic in Warton. They used to put water on the road during winter to create ice slides. John states that a big change in Warton has been changing front gardens into parking lots.
10.15	John started by collecting eggs and then he started to record nests. He got a pair of binoculars at the age of 10. He would walk a standard route and record what he saw every weekend.
11.30	He talks of changes in birdwatching. John talks of a past example where a birdwatcher gave him a SAE so that he could let him know if there were sightings. When he was young, John would bird watch on Saturday afternoons. There have been dramatic changes on the salt marsh. John talks of effect on bird populations of turf cutting. There used to be large numbers of oyster catchers and plover on the saltmarsh no longer because of dog walkers etc.
15.20	John talks of how he got the job of warden at Leighton Moss. He was the youngest member of the Lancaster and District Birdwatching Society. He started as a warden at Leighton Moss on May 15 th , 1964 - no one met him or told him what to do. He had no training until the September. During his first couple of months his main focus was to protect the area from egg collectors. He built the first hide on the causeway from his own materials. Money at the reserve was very short.
18.26	The land (Leighton Moss) was owned by Leighton Hall who offered it to RSPB. John talks of the relationship with the Reynolds. The land was originally used by shooters, shooting wild fowl. The RSPB eventually bought the land and shooting rights.
20.30	John talks of the birdwatchers and the club at Lancaster. John started ringing birds and organised local ringing. He talks of sharing birding info with the club and his interest in local birds.
22.30	In 1965 there were 375 visitors to Leighton Moss. He talks of his greatest achievement in building Eric Morecambe Hide.

24.40	John talks of the Warton village of his youth and how people from either side of the village didn't mix. His mother would walk to Carnforth to get fruit. When he was ten, he went to Morecambe Grammar School. John remembers looking at Warton from the prom at Morecambe; you could see the dust from the quarry. His teacher lived in Silverdale and was very supportive.
27.45	They would go to Lancaster shopping. John's mother took him to other places: the first he remembers is Leicester. They had no car. John went to America when he was 17. His mother had met his father when she started to work for him after leaving agricultural college.
29.30	John wanted to work outdoors, perhaps a gamekeeper. He was the 5 th warden in the country employed by the RSPB. John talks about contact with RSPB. His experiences of farming helped with the job. He had to make his own decisions. He knew everywhere on the reserve spending all of his time outside managing and observing. He talks of changes to landscape and to farming and how that has affected changes to bird population. He talks of changes to woodland
35.54	John ran evening classes to increase his income and spread the message. He also gave lectures which was an important part of the job. He talks of his achievements, creating hides, and learning how to manage the reed beds. His most wonderful day was finding bearded tits nesting which at that time were restricted to Norfolk and Suffolk. John talks about marsh harriers which were near to extinction in the 1970s. Before the reserve at Leighton Moss reed beds were burnt - they changed reed management.
40.41	John talks about his favourite local places to birdwatch, changes to ringing and his study of bearded tits.
41.55	Arnside and Silverdale offer a wide range of habitats. John talks about the habitats of Morecambe Bay and counting waders around The Bay. John talks about the differences in the numbers of black tail godwits and the decline of some bird populations.
45.13	John is the President of the Landscape Trust. He talks briefly about the Landscape Trust.
46.00	John talks about the changes to birdwatching and the struggle to get people to do bird counts. There have been changes to salt marsh areas, including increase in dog walking. Future for local bird life? He talks of his fascination for nature. His mother shared her knowledge with John. He talks of enjoyment of geography at school and his connection with the Rift Valley.
53.36	(break) There were 7 farms in Warton now two. Where John's present house is was once the stack yard of a farm. John's grandfather rented the farm. Whilst he was the warden John lived at Leighton Moss in the house which is now the office. John talks of the Bittern population and the possible causes of decline.
	Interview by Emma Aylett Summarised by Emma Aylett
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