



the
**endless
village**
revisited



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INTRODUCTION

Every so often, in all fields of endeavour, an event occurs or something is achieved which has a profound impact unforeseen by those involved. Just such an impact was made in 1978 by W G 'Bunny' Teagle's report for the then Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) 'The Endless Village'. (So named because in 1843 the Midland Mining Commission described the Black Country as 'an interminable village'. Even today the apparently amorphous conurbation of Birmingham and the Black Country is, in reality, a collection of individual communities well known to and recognised by local people.) For almost the first time in this country the nature conservation value of urban green spaces, indeed of urban areas in general, was recognised. In addition, by reviewing the land-use history of the area, direct links were made with the history and culture of local people and their communities.

'The Endless Village' was a pioneering study of the natural history of Birmingham and the Black Country, and one of the first of its kind in any industrial conurbation. It influenced nature conservation work in towns and cities throughout the United Kingdom and led directly to much current policy and practice. The Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country (then called the Urban Wildlife Group) came into being as a direct result of the publication.

The idea of 'The Endless Village Revisited' was born in 2003, the 25th anniversary of the publication of the original. It seems appropriate that the impact of the book should be reviewed and the original survey should be at least partially repeated and updated. Sustainability and sustainable communities are now being espoused by all, and Bunny's work still has much to teach us about these

concepts, unheard of as they were when he did his work. The ways in which nature conservation practices have developed since then contribute to helping people to understand their heritage, help to deliver current policies for urban regeneration, and equip future generations with the skills and knowledge needed to protect and improve wildlife and its habitats in the West Midlands and elsewhere.

The natural heritage of Birmingham and the Black Country is inextricably woven into its social, industrial and cultural heritage. Generations of people have played, courted and picnicked in the bluebell woods and by the pools and streams of the spaces between their factories and houses. Their families' and communities' histories are etched into the landscape. For example Fens Pools in Dudley resulted directly from the Industrial Revolution in general, and the building of canals in particular. Today they serve as informal playgrounds, a green backdrop and an internationally recognised and nationally designated wildlife site.

Bunny Teagle saw these connections and alerted everyone else to them, and to their significance for both people and wildlife. His work, and that of those whom he inspired, has moved nature conservation from the preserve of scientists, naturalists and bureaucrats to its rightful place as something relevant to everybody's daily lives. His predictions can also be looked at to see which have come to pass. He thought, for example that 'the planting of motorway banks with native species' would 'do much... to increase the natural history interest of the Metropolitan County'. He also thought that the new lakes in the Cole Valley, and the new

pool at the Vale in Edgbaston, would 'make a significant contribution'.

Although Bunny Teagle did the research and writing of 'The Endless Village' the publication was made possible by the vision and persistence of George Barker, then with the NCC's West Midlands Office. He it was that fought for the miniscule budget (less than £500!) and championed the project amongst sceptical colleagues.

In a letter to George Barker in 1990 Bunny mentioned that he travelled about 1,000 miles by bus, and walked another 300 miles, in the course of his survey. Bunny could also have mentioned the huge amount of reference material which he amassed. This included field notes, record cards, correspondence, sketches, photographs and unpublished manuscripts. The present work has benefited enormously from this archive. It has generously been made available to the author by both English Nature (the NCC's successor) and by Bunny himself. Bunny's assistance is especially valued. He has been both unstinting and thorough in his efforts to provide more help and advice than anyone could reasonably have expected, and in spite of considerable difficulties in doing so.

These herculean efforts alone deserve recognition now, but the activities they led to, in terms of increased interest, awareness and resources for wildlife in Birmingham and the Black Country, need to be sustained to provide a permanent memorial to Bunny, George and all of those whom they inspired. There is a very good chance of this happening in the Black Country through the development of 'the Black Country as Urban Park'. Through the Black Country Consortium the four

Black Country Boroughs are engaged in a truly innovative and exciting project to base the area's renaissance on its natural and environmental assets. The scope and scale of the plan is impressive: tens of millions of pounds investment over the next 30 years, to better manage existing sites, create new ones, and help a million people to enjoy them. (See also page 87.) There could be no better endorsement of Bunny's vision and enthusiasm, or more worthwhile continuation of the work which he helped to start.