

## Eco-Tourism

A talk by Phillip Merricks reported by Terry Sutton

A fascinating talk, by former High Sheriff of Kent and farmer Philip Merricks, about the Elmley Marshes nature reserve on the Isle of Sheppey was given to a packed meeting, organised by the society, at St Mary's Parish Centre on March 16th.

Philip is a great believer in eco-tourism and this became clear in his passionate description of the birds and other wildlife that inhabit the "untamed wilderness" of 3,000 acres that border the estuary of the Swale that he manages on behalf of the Royal Society for the Preservation of Birds (RSPB) and which attracts 20,000 visitors a year.

He told how Elmley once had a population of 270 but was now down to four. The previous population was in Victorian times when the area was drained for the establishment of cement and brickworks.

Philip and his wife Corrine live in an ancient farmhouse with a dramatic history. It was there that James II (reigned 1685 to 1688) was detained after his arrest by the Constable of Faversham when, in 1688 on his abdication following the arrival of William of Orange (later William III), he prepared to flee to France, disguised as a chaplain. Philip told how he had shown Prince Edward the property when he was visiting the area.



*Elmley Marshes, Isle of Sheppey*

Using pictures on a screen the speaker described the many species of birds that flock to the wetlands where, over the centuries, man has constructed seawalls to turn some of the salt marsh into freshwater marsh suitable for grazing. The land, with its tidal creek system is poorly drained providing an ideal habitat for wetland birds, plants and other wildlife. To improve this habitat the RSPB leased the land from Oxford University in 1975.

Among the birds that visit Elmley are redshanks and lapwings, and various waterfowl that live on the rich food to be found in the low-tide mud of the Swale. When the tide covers their feeding grounds they form collective roosts.

Mr Merricks concluded his talk about the possibility of putting up lodges at Elmley where visitors could overnight to discover the wonderful bleak landscape which, in turn, he suggested could attract commercial investment and jobs.