

# HELFO RD

## Voluntary Marine Conservation Area

Newsletter No. 37 Autumn 2008

### Eelgrass – flourishing in the Helford

The seagrass (*Zostera marina*) or eelgrass beds off Durgan Beach on the Helford are an important sub feature of the Fal and Helford SAC and the

extent of the beds has been mapped over the years by various volunteers from the Helford VMCA. Seagrass beds are an important habitat for the juvenile of a number of fish and invertebrate species and the Helford bed is also protected by two marker buoys which help to stop visiting yachtsmen from anchoring in the bay and potentially causing damage.

As part of the regular monitoring programme of the SAC, I and some volunteers from Cornwall Wildlife Trust (to whom I say a big thank you for all your efforts) came down to the Helford on the good boat EVA on the 17th July to see how the seagrass was getting on and to see if it had spread into the adjacent moorings. Although the weather was not perfect and the visibility not good, the team were able to carry out three transect swims measuring the percentage cover of the plants, makeup of the seabed and were also able to map the edges of the bed.

Preliminary analysis of the data show that the seagrass is in good health and that the extent has not changed significantly from the previous survey. However, there is some evidence that the seagrass has spread slightly westwards and isolated clumps can now be found in and around the moorings.

I hope that we will be able to repeat this study next and subsequent years and also include some more detailed work on both the health of the seagrass and a more accurate survey of the density and individual plant length of the grass on the Helford. Until then though, I am happy to report the seagrass on the Helford is continuing to flourish.



*Illustration by Sarah McCartney*

**Kevan Cook, Natural England**

**Aim:** To safeguard the marine life of the Helford River by any appropriate means within its status as a Voluntary Marine Conservation Area, to increase the diversity of its intertidal community and raise awareness of its marine interest and importance.

For further information relating to the Helford Voluntary Marine Conservation Area please contact

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Tel: 07710956734. Email: [Rhiannon@helfordvmca.co.uk](mailto:Rhiannon@helfordvmca.co.uk) **Chairman:** David Muirhead

**Design:** Sheila McCann, Cornwall Wildlife Trust **Illustration:** Sarah McCartney, Cornwall Wildlife Trust

# Helford Marine Conservation Group, Members Section

## MEMBERSHIP CHAIRMAN'S AUTUMN NEWSLETTER, 2008

When writing the Spring News Letter I, and no doubt you, were looking forward to a summer with plenty of sun, walks under clear skies and next to sparkling water. How disappointing it was that there were so few days like this. However our events programme went ahead as scheduled and was generally very well attended. Our last outside event, Snorkelling Safari was an exception, for despite clear and calm water only four people turned up. However David Ball, of Silver Dolphin Diving and Conservation, decided to go ahead despite our telephoned prediction to them of very low numbers. Our sincere thanks to him for his support, as those who took part in the snorkelling had a very interesting and instructive morning at Durgan.

Paul Garrard and his events planning team have almost completed the programme of events for 2009. This will be printed in time for distribution to members during January.

Membership of the Helford M.C.G. has increased this year to 265 of which 43 are new members. 19 did not renew their membership. This represents an encouraging small, but steady increase year on year since our inauguration. Our finances shadowed this increase. We have £2,272 in our current account and £1,813 on deposit. Full details of our end of year position will be available at our AGM in March 2009.

I would like to take this opportunity of thanking David Thomson for taking on the stewardship of our finances from Keith Davie at short notice. Keith has been unwell but I'm delighted to report that he looks forward to taking an active part in our committee again in the near future.

Charles Richardson has been quietly working to generate a business sponsorship plan for our group. I'm pleased to report that this is taking shape and during the coming year we hope that it will bear fruit – and funds!

Rhiannon Mather has settled into her new job as co-ordinator for the HVMCA (the advisory section of the Helford M.C.G.) succeeding Pamela Tompsett who is still much involved with the HMCG and of invaluable help to Rhiannon.

We believed that when Seacore Ltd. re-located from Gweek to Falmouth last year, their operation on the Helford River would be rundown. It would appear the opposite is true in that they are fabricating new

and innovative legs and machinery for their drilling rigs. The company is at the forefront of drilling rig design and operation with contracts world-wide and employ a majority of Cornishmen in their workforce – good news indeed.

Ben Wright is making good progress with his Duchy of Cornwall oyster farm in Port Navas creek and works closely with Natural England. More details on his oyster farming may be found elsewhere in this newsletter.

The construction of a fisherman's quay in Helford village has been approved by all the relevant bodies but some opposition still exists in Helford which has resulted in still more delays. Commercial fishing has existed in the Helford River from time immemorial and forms an integral part of the River and its history. It also is covered by the aims of our conservation group, "Community, Commerce and Conservation working together". The HVMCA supports the construction of a jetty.

The Membership section of the Helford Marine Conservation Group was formed in March 2002 to enable the public to support the work of the Helford Voluntary Marine Conservation Area working group whilst at the same time able to feel more closely linked with the River and be actively helping to conserve this beautiful estuary.

The first chairman was Leslie Collins (who was also vice-chairman and previous chairman of the HVMCA working group). I succeeded him in March 2003. By our next AGM during March 2009 I will have held this position for 6 years and be a month off my 80th birthday. It is time for a younger person to take over the position of chairman for I have reached my "use by" date and will therefore not be offering to stand for election in March 2009 at our AGM.

I would like to thank members of the membership committee, past and present, for their help and contribution to the running of the membership section. We have endeavoured, not only to help with the financing of the work of the HVMCA, but also to involve and interest many people in the Helford area and beyond in what is our very special heritage.

**David Nightingale**

## Rocky shores and Snorkelling Safaris

One of the joys of being the new co-ordinator to the HVMCA is the excuse to go to the seaside to take part in the events, all under the pretence of being a mature supervising adult. The truth is that I find these events just as fun as the children and love an excuse to go and snoop at the anemones and crabs! This summer the HVMCA has hosted two shore events and one snorkelling safari to great success, with the help of the expertise of the Cornwall Wildlife Trust officers and Silver Dolphin Conservation Diving Marine Centre. Attendance at the last 'Explore the Shore' brought over 20 people to the rocky crevices of Durgan, where we were introduced to broad clawed porcelain crabs, strawberry anemones, and blennies, whilst avoiding the occasional nip of an over-enthusiastic velvet swimming crab! I write this now, having today just taken part in the snorkelling safari, where we have had a rare break in the weather allowing excellent visibility off the shores of Durgan. Here we enjoyed views of thriving eelgrass beds and kelp forests, with darting fish and sedentary molluscs. I am continually

amazed by these underwater treasures that lay on our doorsteps waiting to be explored. The only downside I can report for the day was the 15 minute wrestling match I had with an undersized wet suit, much to the joy of passers by! The sights that lay under the glistening surface of the Helford River however are well worth this small fee.

**Rhiannon Pipkin**



*Participants eagerly explore Durgan's rocky crevices.  
Photo: David Nightingale*

## Congratulations to our Chairman, David Muirhead, for his deserving M.B.E!

I am sure that all those associated with the HVMCA group would wish to join in congratulating David, our Chairman, on his being awarded the M.B.E. in the Queens Birthday Honours list.

David's interests are many and varied as reflected in his career which has encompassed 15 years professional fishing, practicing law, and representing the Community as Chairman of a Fisherman Association, Chairman of Cornwall Sea Fisheries Committee, and of

the National Association of Committees. He has also been a member of the Devon & Cornwall Regional Committee of the National Trust and, of course, has been an important member of our own Marine Conservation Group.

In all these activities, not to mention his enthusiasm for Rugby and his leading role in performing traditional Cornish songs, David has been indefatigable in supporting the local Community and richly deserves this Honour.



## New co-ordinator enjoys wedded bliss!

On the 26th July this year, Simon (my partner of 9 years!) and I tied the knot! The day was absolutely perfect, and we were lucky enough to have brilliant weather. Several friends even began to resemble lobsters by the end of it! We had a local wedding with the service taking place at Mawgan church, followed by photographs at Church Cove, and the reception in a marquee in our family field in the village. Simon and I are originally from Cornwall and returned to the area in May of this year, and are thrilled to be back home. Two days following the wedding, Simon and I embarked on our honeymoon, enjoying 3 amazing weeks in New Zealand, a place that we have been dreaming of visiting for the last 5 years. Our plans now involve finding a home to settle into and getting a puppy (no babies just yet!).

I look forward to writing many reports now as Mrs. Rhiannon Pipkin!

**Rhiannon Pipkin**



*Simon and Rhiannon leave Mawgan Church as Mr and Mrs Pipkin!*

## Discovering the Wonders of Looe's Marine Heritage

There is nothing better than rock pooling with an excited, enthusiastic group of school children; children that find green slimy sea slugs as beautiful and fascinating as I do! This year I have been lucky enough to lead not one, not two, but 40 of these eager school groups out into the marine environment within the Looe Voluntary Marine Conservation Area (VMCA) through the 'Discovering the Wonders of Looe's Marine Heritage' project. In doing so I have reached nearly 1000 children, not to forget all the teachers and parents that accompanied them. From rockpools to mud flats, sea birds to starfish, children have visited and explored the fantastic habitats of the Looe VMCA including 15 trips over to St Georges Island which lies within the 5km of defined area.

But school groups have been only a part of this project, and certainly not just the most enjoyable. The project aimed to reach all levels of the community, of all ages and abilities. The VMCA in Looe, established in 1995 by Caradon District Council, provides the perfect opportunity for this, through its variety of habitats and the amazing access to it all. Although the weather has been more than disappointing this season, many of the 30 events organised have gone ahead wind or shine such as snorkel safaris, rockpool rambles, guided walks, arts and crafts sessions and evening talks. Being based in Looe, I have also been able to represent the Trust in local community events such as the Festival of the Sea and this year's Dehwelans Festival. There has definitely been a demand for such events, with local faces as well as tourists and visitors to the area appearing repeatedly. One rockpool ramble last July was attended by over 60 people!

There is hope that these events will continue, perhaps not on such an intense level, but certainly fairly regularly over the years to come. But how could we provide the manpower for these events if Trust education efforts must start to focus elsewhere? The answer is that they will continue through the community support I have built up through the Looe

VMCA volunteer group. To date, over 25 local Looe volunteers are actively helping and assisting with the work of the project. In the winter months I organised training days in rocky shore ecology, estuarine ecology, dive survey and snorkel survey techniques. I even managed to get 16 volunteers to come and learn about seaweed for a whole day! The result of this training is that the volunteers are more clued up about their local environment, and are able now to carry out survey work to monitor and track changes in the future. This knowledge also means that some feel confident enough to go out and lead events, talking to the public about our marine environment and how much it deserves protecting. So next year it could be a Looe primary teacher running February's rockpool ramble, or a local councillor digging in the estuarine mud looking for lug worms!

The volunteer group is just one area of the project that hopes to make it sustainable, so work achieved is not lost after a year when the project finishes. We have been attempting to establish a Looe VMCA steering group; a management group made up of representatives from local organisations and authorities who have an active interest in the VMCA and everything that goes on within it. The marine environment in Looe is incredibly important both economically and environmentally, and it is essential that the related groups in the area start working together towards it having a successful and healthy future. After the community launch back in November 2007, the Trust has chaired 2 community consultation meetings. This October we will hold the 3rd, now titled the Looe VMCA Group meeting. We have had huge support from the local community for the education and awareness work we have carried out over the past year and slowly but surely local groups are seeing that we mean business and are starting to commit to the idea of a Looe VMCA Group.

The future of the Looe VMCA is looking bright, even if the weather report isn't!



*Abby and volunteers of Looe VMCA*

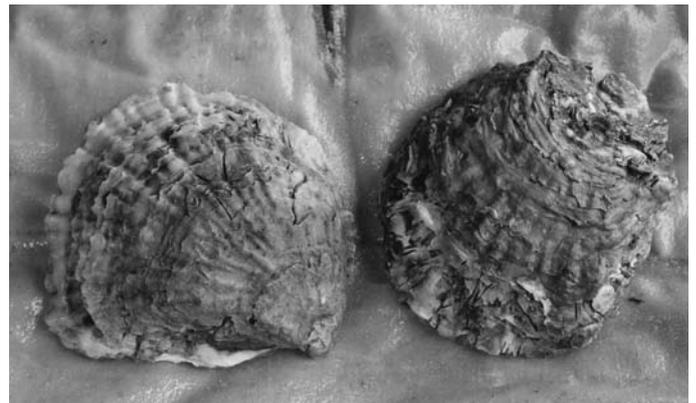
# Duchy Oyster Farm Update

Over the last two years the Duchy Oyster Farm has farmed the non-native Pacific oyster on the beds of the Helford. Pacific oysters were introduced to the UK under licence in the 1970s and introduced to the Helford and Percuil rivers in 1974 in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. Pacific oysters are classed as a “non-susceptible” species, which means that they do not carry and are immune to the diseases and risks, which affect native species. In light of increasing sea temperatures, there has been growing concern that Pacific oysters will continue to spawn in UK waters in increasing numbers. The Duchy of Cornwall is now one of the first UK operators to adopt the cultivation of non-spawning triploid Pacific oysters on a large scale, therefore preventing any spread of the non-native species. The Duchy Oyster Farm has additionally spent time relaying native oysters onto the Helford beds, and if growth and results are as hoped, 2008 will be the first year that real Helford native oysters once again will be able to be sold to the country’s leading restaurants and hotels – albeit in a limited number!

Further plans of the Duchy Oyster Farm include a proposed demarcation zone for cage cultivation and fishermen’s store pots. Cages act to hold bags of oysters that are deployed sub-tidally. The proposed demarcation zone lies between Bosahan Point and The Voose. This is an area that has traditionally been used by local fishermen for their store-pots. The proposed zone is intended to accommodate oyster cages as well as the fishermen’s store-pots. The Duchy Oyster Farm for this purpose has liaised with David Muirhead, as chairman of the Cadgwith Helford and District Fishermen’s Society, in order to get feedback

from the local fishermen. The Oyster Farm will additionally liaise with individual fishing boats, and has undergone a voluntary consultation with users of the river. It will still be possible for boats to navigate within the zone, and for it to be accessed by all other river users at all time. By demarcating the area with navigation markers and on charts, the Duchy Oyster Farm hopes to be able to use smaller pick-up buoys which can be camouflaged in a dark grey or green colour as opposed to having to use large fluorescent marker buoys, designed primarily to be seen by river-users by way of their size and colour. The ultimate objective is to do away with surface markers altogether. With this in mind, the Duchy Oyster Farm are actively researching options such as the use of GPS and divers to locate and help retrieve cages as well as techniques and hardware for sub-surface marker and recovery systems, thereby reducing the visual impact on the river. It is hoped that this demarcation will help with safety and navigation within the Helford River.

**Ben Wright & Rhiannon Pipkin**



## ODE TO SABELLA FOR PAMELA FROM STELLA

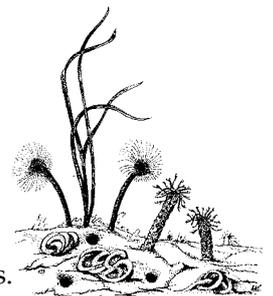
My subject is the Peacock Worm,  
Though not a worm to make you squirm  
And not a species of the land  
But one born in sea and sand.

With tentacles in a perfect fan  
It captures all the food it can.

The tube, in which it lives, is built  
With sticky mucus, sand and silt  
In some a sheltered saline place  
That forms a final settling base.

At collar edge are tiny eyes  
With which, we hope in time, it spies  
Any threatened ‘smash and grab’  
Undertaken by a hungry crab.

Males and females, at the time  
When sperm and ova reach  
their prime,  
Shed their gametes in the  
waters,  
Each zygote seeking final quarters.



As Pamela watches these worms grow  
She finds there is much more to know.

*Sabella pavonina*, literally the ‘sand peacock’, became know as ‘Pam’s Worm’ when it was the subject of Pamela Tompsett’s Doctoral Thesis. It is a sedentary polychaete tubeworm with a beautiful crown of patterned tentacles, shaped as a double fan. It lives in sheltered but fully saline conditions. The Helford River probably has the largest Cornish colony although numbers do fluctuate.

## The Helford Marine Conservation Group takes to the water!

The popular Helford Conservation Cruise (the 18th since 1993!) was fully booked and, despite the occasional grey cloud and stiff breeze, the waters sparkled in glorious sunshine. The "Enterprise" boat skipper, with his intimate knowledge of the channels and mud banks, took us high up into the creeks, the haunt of shelduck, curlew and redshank and with buzzards soaring overhead. The brilliant



*Enterprise boat ready to embark on HVMCA conservation cruise. Photo: Pamela Tompsett*

white plumage of the Little Egrets flashed amongst Grey Herons in the trees along the wooded shores confirming their resident status. On board, children and grownups alike came face to face with sea anemones, crabs, worms and sea snails with the help of National Trust volunteers and their carefully prepared sea water tanks.

Spectacular views across Fal Bay at the mouth of the Helford River on the way to the sheltered Gillan inlet contrasted with gleaming sinuous creeks upstream. The 95 passengers could appreciate the timeless beauty of the rippling waters, the woodland tapestry, the rocky shores and the importance of protection for this vulnerable, sheltered arm of the sea. Whilst enjoying a welcome cup of tea or coffee, they learnt more about the marine wildlife, the birds, the fish and fishing, management of the land and woods, local history and industries and, most importantly, the whole marine web of life.

**Pamela E Tompsett**  
July 2008

## Up all night (but not partying): Students undertake UK's first marine BioBlitz

Already cold and wet, zipping up my wetsuit for the third time that day at three am was not quite what I envisaged when my colleague Jason Birt suggested we hold a marine Bioblitz. However, the underwater sights that we encountered during the subsequent dive more than made up for such inconveniences.

A popular way of involving the public in scientific activities, the Bioblitz came to life in New York in 1996, the general idea being that scientists, students and the public would come together for twenty four hours to map the biodiversity of a set area, commonly parks. In recent years the idea has gained in popularity and spread across the globe, however until now no one in the UK has been inspired enough (some might say crazy) to organise an overnight marine event. Jason's inspiration came from reading the book *The Highest Tide* by Jim Lynch and I was coerced into helping make his dream a reality.

After many months of planning Maenporth was chosen and a date set. Holding an event that includes a Friday the 13th may seem a little inauspicious for some but the day was well enjoyed by all involved. Activities ranged from SeaSearch dives to acoustic recording of bats and birds along with rock pooling, insect netting and much much more. Starting on the sunny afternoon of the 12th of June, staff and students from Falmouth Marine School and Seafans Scuba School worked round the clock to catalogue and photograph as many living organisms

found as possible. Work to identify all the species photographed is ongoing with initial estimates suggesting that over 200 species were found, some of the images of which can be found at [www.bioblitz.org.uk](http://www.bioblitz.org.uk), along with further details of the event.

This year's event was held as a trial run with carefully limited numbers of participants, however following the event's success planning for a bigger summer 2009 event is just beginning. The aim for this next event is to involve a much wider audience, especially members of the public and students from a range of colleges and universities in Cornwall, along with as many local experts as possible. Our ideal would be to find a site within the Helford where there is a wide range of habitats with access suitable for both students and the public. We envisage the event to be held during June. If you know of any such site, have any identification skills to offer or would like to be involved in any way feel free to contact me on 01326 310310 or [trudy.russell@falmouthmarineschool.ac.uk](mailto:trudy.russell@falmouthmarineschool.ac.uk).



**Trudy Russell**  
**Technician and**  
**Lecturer at Falmouth**  
**Marine School**

*Falmouth Marine School*  
*students surveying the waters*  
*of Maenporth.*

# The history of Cornish seaweed observers

One of the delights of dabbling in rock pools is to meet scuttling crabs, glistening anemones, darting fish and a whole range of amazing shells. All of these are set amongst a colourful array of seaweeds, red, green and brown, which provide shelter and food for so much of our marine fauna both on rocks and fringing our creeks.

Over 640 British seaweed species have been identified; some 400+ occur in Cornish waters and nearly 300 different species have been found within the Helford VMCA. Who are the people that have made these discoveries?

The very first published work on British seaweed was prepared in Cornwall. This is not so surprising when the geographical position of Cornwall is considered, together with its rias, different aspects and varied geology, offering a multitude of rock pools. Indeed experts on the study of marine Algae, such as Dr Juliet Brodie in the Natural History Museum have recently extolled the richness of the far South West of Britain. It follows that Cornwall has attracted national specialists for many of the faunal, floral and fungal groups. However, John Stackhouse went a step further and adopted a small west-facing cove in Mounts Bay and built Acton Castle so that he could have easy access to what has become known as Stackhouse Cove (SW5428). His illustrated work on *Nereis Britannica* was first published in 1797.

In the 19th century, extensive, annotated collections were formed by R. W. Smitham and R. V. Tellam, and two large albums of pressed specimens are in the Royal Cornwall Museum, Truro. Some years ago these were loaned to J. H. Price, then in the Botany Dept of the Natural History Museum. R. V. Tellam published a list for East Cornwall in the Penzance Natural History and Antiquarian Society and in the same year (1884) and in the same publication John Ralfs included a list for West Cornwall.

The published compilation taking account of all previous sources for the 19th and 20th centuries,

including the compilation by E. M. Holmes is in *The Victoria History of the Counties of England* (1906). J.H. Price himself made extensive lists and collections from many Cornish shores. He undertook extensive recording on the shores of the Lizard peninsula and published this in two parts in *Cornish Studies* No 7 (for 1979) and No. 8 (for 1980). One co-author was a Museum colleague, S. Honey and the other was C. E. Hepton who made previous records available as well as taking part in fresh field work. Also included are the Helford surveys initiated by the Helford VMCA by Pamela Tompsett and the Cornish Biological Records Unit arranged by Stella Turk.

2003 saw the publication of a national Atlas and Seaweed Checklist for Britain and Ireland by Gavin Hardy and Michael Guiry but this unfortunately missed many records from Cornwall and as is the way of published checklists there are many more additions needed immediately.

In 2006 the HVMCA Group published *The Marine Algae of the HVMCA*, a checklist with records of the date and place of seaweeds found. Geographically the Helford River fits comfortably within a single kilometre square on the Ordnance Survey map. So this is assuredly the place to state that this square arguably has more species of seaweed than any other British square.

If you have a beginners interest in seaweeds, the various and readily available Pocket Guides are helpful. More precise identification information can be found on-line and in detailed publications from the Natural History Museum and Field Studies Council.

Dr Juliet Brodie will be visiting Cornwall again at the lowest tidal cycle in June 2009 and there will be opportunities to join her workshops. Please email Pamela [petomp@bioscope.demon.co.uk](mailto:petomp@bioscope.demon.co.uk) if you are interested and wish to book a place.

**Stella M Turk & Pamela E Tompsett**

## Cornwall AONB Support Greatly Appreciated

Areas of outstanding natural beauty, along with National Parks, are considered to be the most special landscapes in the country, and belong to an international family of protected areas. The Cornwall AONB consists of 12 separate geographical areas, including 10 stretches of coastline, the Camel Estuary and Bodmin Moor. The Helford River lies within the south coast, western stretch of the AONB, acknowledged for its landscape character and built heritage.

The Cornwall AONB Partnership runs an annual grants programme for projects within or that benefit the AONB, funding for which is provided by Natural England. The Cornwall AONB unit recently awarded a grant to the Helford VMCA Conservation Group, ensuring the running of next years events, newsletters, and information leaflets. The Helford VMCA Group would like to thank the Cornwall AONB unit for their invaluable support!

**Rhiannon Pipkin**

# Helford VMCA launch 28 July 1988

We are very pleased to report that the winner of the 1988 Marine Conservation Poster competition for local school children, Robin Sims, sends his best wishes to the HVMCA Group on the 20th Anniversary Celebration of the launch of the Helford VMCA in Gweek Village Hall.

Some 20 years after this photo was taken Dr Robin Sims has become Lecturer in English at the University of Derby and the HVMCA members wish him well and hope that he has happy memories of the occasion.



## PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPETITION – ‘Celebrating 20 years of the Helford VMCA’

The Helford VMCA 20 years celebration will be taking place on Saturday 18th October 2008 at Gweek Village Hall. As part of the celebrations the Group will be hosting a photographic competition. Entries are to be brought to the Gweek Village Hall (by the Seal Sanctuary), between 10am and 12.00 noon on Saturday 18th October 2008, where they will be judged in the afternoon.

**There is no entry fee.**

**There are four classes of entry:**

- 1 Physical features – which may include cliffs, beaches, mud flats, creeks.
- 2 Biological features – marine and shore plants, fish, shore life, birds etc.
- 3 Human activities – either commercial or recreational such as fishing, sailing, rowing, holiday pursuits and also the damaging impact associated with pollution, over-use of an area, etc.
- 4 Children’s section Open to children under the age of eleven on 18th October 2008; their view/ interpretation of the Helford River.

The best pictures will be added to the HVMCA Website and an exhibition of all the works will be on show at the “Celebrating 20 years of the HVMCA” meeting.

Prizes will also be forthcoming!

Please identify your work clearly with your name and address on the back of photos, and all relevant information about the picture on front or separate (attached) label.

**Photos to be brought to the hall on the day**, but it would be most helpful if you could return the entry form, so the organisers can have an approximate idea of how many photos are coming.

Entry forms and details available from:

Jenna Oakes Photographic Competition, Boskenwyn Chapel, Gweek, Helston TR12 7AB

Contacts: Jenna 01326 572 995 or Prue 01326 281 230

alternatively, please visit the website at: <http://www.helfordmarineconservation.co.uk/competition.htm>

