

Volunteers at WWT
Stearth Marshes.

Photo: WWT





THE *FEEL*- *GOOD* FACTOR

From gardening and conservation to driving a steam train, whatever your passion, there's a volunteering role to suit. CATHERINE WELTON speaks to volunteers about why they give up their time for free – and the organisations who depend on them

Anyone who has lived in or visited Somerset will be familiar with its warm welcome and strong community spirit. It's the sort of place where there's always someone willing to lend a hand. So, it's perhaps no surprise that Somerset has a thriving volunteering sector, with 87 per cent of the 'workforce' of the county's charities and community groups giving their time for free.

Nicole Turnbull is engagement and learning manager at WWT Steart Marshes. 'We have a core staff team of five, and 80 volunteers,' she says. 'We couldn't do what we do without them.' She first joined Steart as a volunteer herself. 'I lived locally, enjoyed visiting and I wanted to give back.'

The volunteers at Steart can be either younger and looking for work experience to help their careers, or older and motivated by the social side. 'Either way they're usually interested in conservation and also the huge mental and physical wellbeing aspect of volunteering in nature. Some people even use it as a "green gym",' explains Nicole.

There are certainly plenty of roles that will give you a good workout at Steart, including building fences, hedge laying and ditch maintenance. For those who prefer something gentler there are also roles monitoring wildlife numbers and engagement roles, which involve chatting to the visitors. Mandy Canning has been

volunteering at Steart for 10 years. 'At the time I was working part time, and I saw a poster asking for volunteers and thought, as a lifelong nature lover, why not?'

Mandy works across a variety of roles, including monitoring populations, conservation tasks, engagement, and she also leads walks and activities. 'I love helping people find the unexpected such as water scorpions and dragonfly nymphs. And supporting them to realise how blue and green spaces can benefit their physical and emotional health.'

She says the benefits of volunteering have been many. 'I have made lots of friends, I love working in the open air, and there are always new skills to learn. It is immensely satisfying to help others and realise you can make a difference, however small.'

Mark Berry has been making a difference as a volunteer for most of his life, for a range of organisations. One of his first – and proudest – experiences was helping with a programme called Never Seen the Sea, in which children from inner city Birmingham were brought to Somerset for a weekend to stay on a farm and visit the beach.

For the past two years, he's organised a walking cricket league. 'If I'm doing something I enjoy and I can put something back into the group or community, that's the reward,' he explains. 'It keeps me active, keeps the brain cells ticking over. It's brought >



Volunteers at East Somerset Railway.

Photo: East Somerset Railway



Dick Bellchambers has been volunteering at East Somerset Railway for 50 years.

Photo: East Somerset Railway

me friends from all walks of life – and a wife of 38 years.’

Volunteering can also be a great way to pursue a personal passion. Dick Bellchambers has been giving his time and expertise to the East Somerset Railway for an incredible 50 years, and loves it so much that he continued his weekly visits even after moving to Maidenhead in 1987.

He still remembers his first day as a volunteer: ‘The manager gave me one of those old bus conductor leather pouches and I had to sell tickets for a ride on the footplate, which was 50p.’

Dick’s background was in engineering, and after starting in the workshop, he was asked if he’d like to become a member of the footplate staff. ‘You start as a “cleaner” or a “steam raiser”, who lights the fire. I slowly worked my way up from junior fireman, eventually after several years becoming a driver.’

Over the years, Dick has driven almost all the trains that came to East Somerset. ‘I don’t think I’ve got a favourite, they’re all different. Although I did love the 150 tonne *Black Prince*.’

He’s now stepped down from the footplate but still enjoys the camaraderie of the workshop. ‘Us Wednesday guys, because we’re mainly pensioners, we’re sometimes nicknamed the Old Codgers. We have a nice cup of tea in the morning, then again at lunch and mid-afternoon, and we try to put the world to rights. Really the enjoyment is meeting up with the guys once a week.’

From spectacular wetlands to powerful steam engines, volunteering can be a privileged backstage pass to some of Somerset’s most iconic landmarks and institutions, as well as a way to learn new skills.



How to get into volunteering

Laura Bazley, volunteering development manager at Spark Somerset, says the key to getting started is not to be overwhelmed. ‘My advice is not to overthink it, and to start with something that genuinely interests you. Volunteering doesn’t have to be a long-term commitment straight away, and many people find it helpful to try a few different roles before settling on what suits them. Most importantly, people shouldn’t feel they need special experience, many organisations are very used to welcoming first time volunteers and will guide you through it.’

For more information about volunteering opportunities across Somerset visit: sparksomerset.org.uk



Volunteer Mandy Canning monitoring for great crested newts at Steart Marshes. Photo: WWT



Volunteers on a saltmarsh walk at WWT Steart Marshes. Photo: WWT



There's always time for a cuppa and a chat when volunteering. Photo: East Somerset Railway

Bev Neilson started volunteering in Dunster Castle's magnificent gardens two years ago, and says it's taught her a lot. 'I didn't know very much about gardening when I started and I was very keen to learn,' she says. 'We weed, plant beds and containers, dig new beds, clear the rivers within the gardens, dead head flowers and cut back in the autumn/spring ready for new growth the following year. I pick up lots of tips about gardening which helps me in my own garden. One of my favourite times of year is at Christmas, when we make the huge garlands to be put up in the castle, from flowers and foliage grown in the grounds throughout the year.'

'Through volunteering, I have met a very caring and thoughtful bunch of people, professional gardeners and other volunteers,' she concludes.

As volunteering development manager at Spark Somerset, a countywide organisation supporting and strengthening the voluntary and community sector, Laura Bazley

understands the benefits to both individuals and organisations.

'Volunteers are central to how many charities and community organisations operate. In many cases, they are not just an added bonus but a fundamental part of whether services can run at all. Beyond the practical side, volunteers also bring energy, local knowledge and a direct connection to the communities being supported, which can make organisations more responsive and trusted.'

'Volunteering is good for you because it gives people a sense of purpose and connection. It can also be a way of building confidence, especially when someone is learning new skills or stepping into an unfamiliar environment,' she continues. 'For many, it reduces feelings of isolation and creates regular social contact, which has a real impact on mental health. There's also the simple but important feeling of being useful, knowing that your time is genuinely making a difference.' ●