

The Society maintains Digswell Lake and the surrounding wooded parkland as a nature reserve and place of tranquil beauty



The state of our river?

Simon Stebbings, Chairman

A lot has been written recently about the (woeful) state of British rivers with much of the blame being placed on the water companies responsible for the treatment and disposal of waste water. The essence of the problem is that in many places we have what are known as “combined sewers” where (i) foul water from our homes and businesses and (ii) clean rainwater are fed into the same system of pipes.

While this was a convenient way of constructing a sewerage system, it has a fundamental flaw – that at times of heavy rainfall large amounts of clean water are mixed with the foul and may exceed the capacity of the treatment works to process the mixture. Since this additional volume can normally not be stored and cannot be allowed to back up into people’s homes, untreated sewage is often discharged into our rivers. Ideally the problem can be resolved by preventing rainwater from being added to foul sewers in the first place, which is the preferred option for new developments. Where this cannot be done, the provision of storm storage or increased capacity at the treatment plants are possible (but expensive) solutions.

So how does this affect “our” Mimram? As you probably know, while our drinking water is supplied by Affinity Water, our waste water is (by and large) taken away and treated by Thames Water. Locally, most is transferred by pipe to Rye Meads for treatment and, ultimately, discharge into the River Lea. However, in addition to possible discharges from septic tanks, the River Mimram has its own (smaller) water treatment plants, such as the one owned by Thames Water at Whitwell (see map on page 4 for more information).

The better news is that discharges into the river at Whitwell seem relatively rare. The Campaign to Protect Rural England’s data on the frequency of discharges into Hertfordshire rivers for 2023 identified nearly 30 sites where discharges had taken place. Whitwell was the fourth least polluting, with the most recent discharges being after heavy rain on 22 May and 15/16 July this year.

With groundwater levels at a high for this time of year, it seems likely that the Mimram will flow strongly for the rest of the year - and hopefully largely free of sewage.

Digswell Lake Bird Report (Apr 2023 - Feb 2024)

Colin Hull

Readers may like to know that I carry out my birdwatching observations in conjunction with the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) as a volunteer bird recorder. I use an app on my phone called "BirdTrack" that records what I see, the species I see and their numbers. The national BirdTrack data, along with other surveys, is used to track and estimate the numbers of each bird species in the country. (See British Trust for Ornithology: website <https://www.bto.org/>).



Gadwall & chicks

Redwing are much more abundant as visitors compared to small breeding populations in the north of the UK. In November/December I saw flocks of 30-60 Siskin feeding in the alders at the east end of the Lake near the weir. A few flocks of about 10 Redwing were also seen on some dates in the same period and another small flock was sighted on 3 January 2024. The other regular species - **Fieldfare** - was not seen this winter.

Three **Green Sandpiper** deserve a special mention as I have not noted them at the Lake before. They are migrant winter visitors to coasts and inland waters. In November (I forget which date) I saw three at the edge of the Lake for a short while before they flew off.

Birds of Conservation Concern

The long running counts from BTO volunteers are used to track bird populations and this has shown how very precarious our wildlife is to changes in climate and environment. From the mid 1970s many species have declined and are now included in the Amber List (meaning a decline of 25-50%) or Red List (a loss of more than 50%).

A recent addition to the Amber List is the Chaffinch, a common woodland and garden species. Long-term trends since 2010 show not only that Chaffinch numbers are in steep decline (about 30%) but also that there is disparity in the timings and rates of decrease between the individual counties in the UK. It may mean Chaffinches are facing different pressures in different places. One of the factors is thought to be disease. During 2023-2024 I saw only one or two Chaffinches, a few less than in previous years.

Other Red and Amber List species that occurred at the Lake are highlighted in the Systematic List on page 3.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the people who have sent me reports during the year especially Simon and to all who take an interest in the bird life of the Lake. I am always happy to hear from people who may also note the birds they see during visits as it helps to supplement my own data. Even reports of common birds are of interest, especially any counts. If you have any interesting sightings or information in connection with birds at the Lake please contact me by phone or email.

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Highlights

Spring - Summer season

I followed the **Coot** breeding attempts for the BTO Nest Record Scheme. I did not see any clear nesting attempts until late May. A pair at the west end of the Lake was later observed with three chicks. For the other pair in the mid-east of the Lake, a nest was observed but did not appear to be successful.

After several years of nesting there were no **Mute Swans** nesting in 2023.

The two regular summer migrants, **Chiffchaff** and **Blackcap**, were heard and sighted on a number of visits. The first sighting of a Chiffchaff occurred on 8 April and the last was seen on 22 September. Usually one or two are present. The first Blackcap was not seen or heard until 19 May and the last was seen on 11 August as part of a family group.

Winter season

Various duck species winter in the UK from Europe although often not distinguishable from the native UK population. On the other hand, two species, **Siskin** and

Systematic List of Birds at Digswell Lake

Little Grebe Regular visitor and breeding.

Grey Heron Occasional visitor. One in September and November.

Little Egret Occasional visitor. Not seen this period.

Mute Swan Previous regular breeding. Single adults on some dates but no breeding. (Ed. - one of our former breeding pair was recently seen at Stanborough Lakes).

Mallard Common resident and migrant.

Gadwall Common and regular visitor. Flocks of up to 10 throughout the year. Also one brood of young observed.

Tufted Duck Frequent visitor with pairs on occasions.

Mandarin Duck Occasional visitor. One on 1 Sept.

Teal Migrant visitor. None this winter.

Canada Goose Common Herts resident.

Common Buzzard Now a common Herts resident.

Kestrel Amber list. Common Herts resident.

Red Kite Increasingly common breeding resident in Herts. Occasional visitor to the Lake.

Moorhen Common breeding resident.

Coot Breeding resident. See Highlights.

Wood Pigeon One of the UK's most abundant species.

Stock Dove Resident. Singles heard calling on some visits.

Lesser Black-backed Gull Occasional winter visitor to the area but also some summer records. One or two seen at the Lake this summer.



Bird box in use

Black-headed Gull Autumn-winter visitor to the Lake and on the Mimram.

Green Woodpecker Breeding resident.

Great Spotted Woodpecker Breeding resident.

Swift (SV). Occasional flocks seen overhead.

Grey Wagtail Occasional visits. One on 2 June and again on 16 September.

Wren Common resident.

Dunnock Amber List. A few singing in April-May.

Robin Common resident.

Blackbird Common resident.

Song Thrush Red List. Resident and breeding. One singing on a few dates in the summer.

Redwing (WV). Normally regular winter visitor. Small flocks in November-December.

Fieldfare (WV). Normal regular winter visitor.

Blackcap (SV). Common breeding species. First seen or heard on 19 May with the last seen 11 Aug.

Chiffchaff (SV). Common breeding species. First occurred on 8 April and last seen on 22 September. Usually one or two seen.

Goldcrest Common resident. One heard singing 17 April.

Long-tailed Tit Common breeding resident.

Blue Tit Common breeding resident.

Great Tit Common resident.

Coal Tit Common resident.

Tree creeper Reasonably common woodland species. Not seen or heard this year.

Nuthatch Common woodland species. One recorded in April and September.

Jay Common resident.

Magpie Common resident.

Jackdaw Resident breeding community.

Carrion Crow Common resident.

Chaffinch Common but declining resident. Only one or two seen this year - a few less than in previous years.

Bullfinch Red List. Not seen in 2023.

Siskin (WV). A few flocks of 30-60.

Key:

SV summer visitor / WV winter visitor

Birds of national conservation concern:

Red list >50% decline

Amber list 25-50% decline

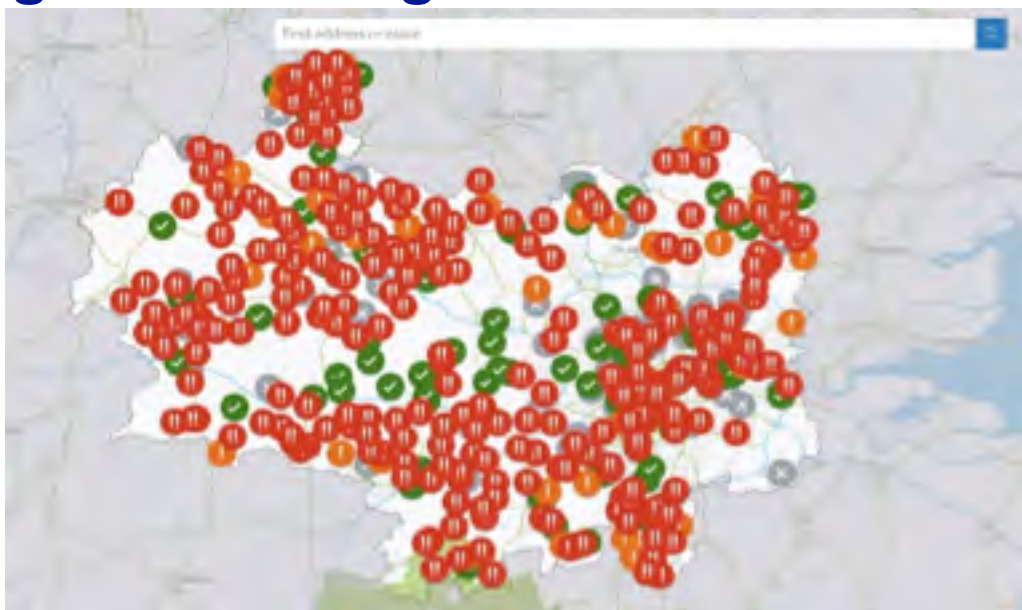
Water discharge monitoring

As mentioned on the front page, discharge into our rivers and waterways can be a real issue.

Near real time information about possible discharges from water treatment plants can be found at:

<https://www.thameswater.co.uk/edm-map>

This screenshot of 4 Jan 2024) shows that, on a really bad day, the picture is universally dire.



Do you know your pigeons?

As you can see from Colin's bird report on page 2, Stock Doves have been recorded at the Lake. Have you seen one? Would you give it a second thought if you had?

Probably the most common and easily recognisable member of the pigeon/dove family is the Wood Pigeon. Large, fat, social and regarded as a pest by many farmers, they can be seen waddling around with a distinctive white patch on their necks and visible broad white wing bars in flight. It was the fourth most common bird recorded in the Big Garden Birdwatch 2024.

Then there are Collared Doves. Smaller and slimmer than the Wood Pigeon, they are uniform pinkish brown with a distinctive black half collar. In theory you might, if you are very lucky indeed, also see the rare Turtle Dove. These are even smaller than the Collared Dove, with chestnut and black upperparts. And, of course, there are feral pigeons commonly seen in towns and cities, often in large numbers.

But what of the Stock Dove? This — one of a pair nesting in an owl box near The Horns pub in Bull's Green — is what they look like.



They are rather smaller than the Wood Pigeon and similar in overall colour with an iridescent green neck patch but without the Wood Pigeon's white neck and wing patches. While only a little smaller than the average feral pigeon they lack their multi-colours and patterns. Stock Doves are easily and commonly overlooked. If seen close up, two short black wing bars may be visible and the eye seen to be dark.

So, have you seen one? Are you sure?

Work Parties

James Godbold

These are held monthly on the fourth Saturday morning of each month with many and varied tasks being undertaken. Recent months have seen the planting of new trees, removal of excessive ivy growth on mature trees, removal of fallen trees from the Lake along with litter collection and debris removal from the river. The higher water levels and flow rates have limited access to some areas, but we continue to maintain areas that can be safely accessed.

Many thanks to all who have helped over the last year. We extend the offer to come and help to anyone who would like to join us, even for a short while. There are jobs of all sizes that you can do to help. Just turn up at the main entrance suitably clothed and with appropriate footwear. Everyone is very welcome.

Refreshments are normally available mid-morning, ranging from biscuits to a range of home made cakes if we are really lucky. You never know what's in store!!



Mare's Tail removal Sept 2023

And do you know your beetles?

This small, blue beetle was spotted at the Lake last year. Does anyone know if this is an **Alder Leaf Beetle** (*Agelastica alni*)?

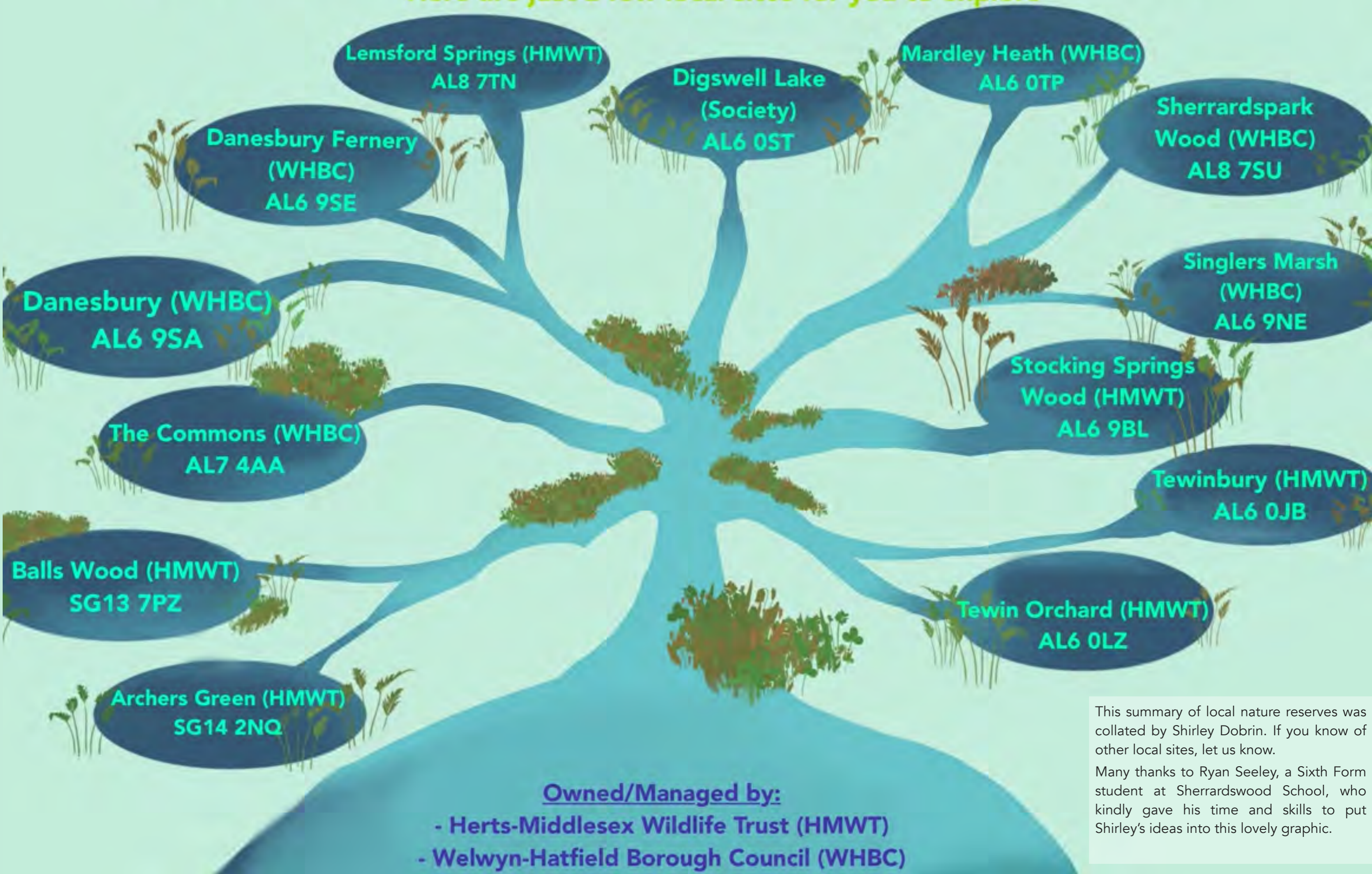
The Alder Leaf Beetle is a 7-8mm long, dark metallic blue beetle that feeds on alder and some other deciduous trees.

According to the RHS, the Alder Leaf Beetle was considered extinct in Britain, with no records of it between 1946 and 2003. It is now widespread in northern England and north Wales, and is gradually becoming widespread across the rest of England and Wales as well.

Although it is still officially classified as rare, it seems likely soon to be downgraded and we may not wish to celebrate its arrival at Digswell Lake. If it becomes too abundant, it can be impossible to control, especially on tall trees, such as those at the Lake, and may cause significant unsightly defoliation. Thankfully, susceptible trees generally survive infestation with no long term effects on health.

Do You Know Your Nature Reserves?

Here are just a few local sites for you to explore



This summary of local nature reserves was collated by Shirley Dobrin. If you know of other local sites, let us know.

Many thanks to Ryan Seeley, a Sixth Form student at Sherrardspark School, who kindly gave his time and skills to put Shirley's ideas into this lovely graphic.

Monitoring the Mimram (and more)

As you probably know, a bunch of volunteers regularly monitors the insect life in the Mimram at a number of sites up and down the river, from Whitwell to Panshanger. The purpose is to identify any changes in the diversity of insects found in the river and their number. Any drop in either would point to a problem affecting the whole river.

One of these monitors is Nina Mayes who, in addition to her volunteer work on the river, turns out to be a very talented artist. So talented, in fact, that she was awarded a gold medal by the Royal Horticultural Society for her exhibit *Macrophytes in the Emergent Zone of Britain's Fresh Waters*.

While that is a bit of a mouthful, it translates into a series of beautiful drawings of the sorts of plants you find growing alongside rivers, including our own Mimram. Her exhibit was displayed at the Saatchi Gallery off the King's Road in London in June of last year. One of these drawings (see right) is of the *Iris pseudacorus*, perhaps better known as Yellow Flag, a common plant found at the Lake and river.



Image copyright owner Nina Mayes (ninamayes.com)

Spotted-orchid spotted

The **Common Spotted-orchid** (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*) has been recorded at the Lake for the first time (that we know of!)

This is the most common of all UK orchids and grows in many different habitats, including woodland, hedgerows, sand dunes and, of course, marshes. When many flowers appear together, it can be a veritable carpet of delicate pink.

Getting its name from its leaves, which are green with many purple, oval spots, the plant grows up to 60cm tall. The plant forms a rosette of ground-level leaves before the flower spike appears. The densely packed clusters of flowers range in colour from white through to purple and have distinctive darker pink spots and stripes. They are most likely to be seen between June and August, so look out for them now.



Did you know?

The highly perfumed flowers of the Common Spotted-orchid are particularly attractive to day-flying moths

General updates

James Godbold

Grass cutting

We have been pleased with the new grass cutting contractor. They have been used on an ad hoc basis and, as previously observed, the grass cutting season has become nearly an all year-round event. Certainly, I have seen council and local residents out cutting grass in November and then again in February.

We are constrained at the Lake by the ability to sensibly and safely get equipment on site while not causing damage or an unsightly mess over the winter months. The wildlife helps out although we are not keen on the Canada Geese for obvious reasons.

Settlement tank

While we firmly believe Thames Water is responsible for the maintenance of the settlement tank on our site, they have indicated that the structure is potentially obsolete and not their responsibility. Historic documents are difficult to track, especially through organisations that no longer exist. We will continue to explore a solution around the structure.



High water at the weir

Water levels

Affinity Water continues to measure both the water you can see and that which you can't see underground. The bore hole monitoring station measures the water height in the chalk aquifer at two different depths. Abstraction has been reduced from local boreholes, resulting in higher water levels in the river and healthier, more productive springs. Anyone visiting the Lake will also have seen the higher river level lapping the island footpath bank and nearly covering the pipes flowing under the crossing at the weir.

Benches

We often have enquiries from members for commemorative benches and we are actively pursuing the replacement of two seats. Our biggest obstacle has been around the design and finding a contractor specialised in fitting such equipment.

Trees

The trees on site have been surveyed and a number are due to have work done on them. There will always be a need to monitor the condition of the trees but, with recent storms, wet weather, age, and disease to contend with, further tree surgery is expected to be undertaken over the next few months.

Himalayan Balsam

We have again been tackling the patches of Himalayan Balsam with the assistance of Maydencroft (funded by Affinity Water) and a dedicated 'balsam bashing' day supported by our members. Left to its own devices, this non-native species will become invasive and out-shade our native flora.

Sincere thanks to

**Triographics
Printers Limited**

121 London Road, Knebworth, Hertfordshire SG3 6EX

Digital Printers

Tel: Stevenage (01438) 811905

Email: alantriog@aol.com

**who partly sponsored
this issue**



Would you like to take the Lake home?

This beautiful original work of art is by Hertfordshire artist, John Michael Akers (1936-2009). It has been donated to the Digs Well Lake Society to raise funds for the charity through sale by auction.

The scene is of the Digs Well Lake reserve, viewed with the iconic Digs Well Viaduct in the background.

Akers was fascinated with the colour, light and patterns of landscape in all seasons, and his paintings were commended for the way they convey light and the natural beauty and characteristics of our Hertfordshire countryside. Several other pieces of his work remain on display as part of the Hertfordshire County Council's HCC Art Collection.

This painting, 112 x 80 cm, is mounted and framed. It was on display at a posthumous exhibition in 2010 in Stevenage, where it was bought for private display. The last owner has now generously donated the painting to the Digs Well Lake Society for sale to raise funds for the charity.

Sale will be by closed bid auction with a reserve of £80. The last date to arrange a viewing will be Sunday 1 September 2024. The closing date for bids will be Friday 6 September 2024, with the winning bid announced immediately afterwards.

The original painting can be viewed by anyone interested in purchasing it.

Requests to view the painting and submission of bids should be made by email to the Society at info@digs-well-lake.org.uk.

Historical Note

Simon Stebbings

The first Annual General Meeting of the Society was held at Digswell House on 28 June 1958. The President (the Hon. David Bowes Lyon – Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire and the Queen Mother's younger brother) was unable to be present, with the meeting chaired by its Chairman, Alderman Maynard. This meeting had come about as a result of the Welwyn Garden City Development Corporation's concern to keep the area around the Lake in a pristine condition (which it felt could best be done by the area's local residents).

To achieve this objective a 21 year lease of the Lake and its surrounding woods and grassland had been granted to the Society on 30 May 1957. Now, a year later, it was obvious that the Society had been busy. The minutes record that the Society's 75 members had planted some 3,000 daffodils, 1,000 bluebells, 1,000 crocuses and several hundred primroses and foxgloves as well (somewhat alarmingly) as some "Balsam."

However, trespassers, it seemed, were a problem with no immediate solution in mind other than to enlist the aid of the Society's members in policing the Lake. Proposals were also made to improve the fencing along the boundary with the railway viaduct and to plant a hedge along the "new highway" (i.e. Bessemer Road).

Income was reported as £101.15.0d (£101.75) which included key deposits of £8.75 and a donation of £20 from the Danish Bacon Co. which, after expenses incurred, left the Society with the princely sum of £73.8s.4d.

2023 Treasurer's Report

David White

The financial report and accounts for the year ended 30 September 2023 show an overall operating loss of almost £4,000.

Operating expenditure increased by around £2,500 compared to the previous financial year, with the most significant increase being maintenance costs. Major expenses have included works to trees and we anticipate further substantial costs in future years. We continue to look for ways to minimise costs of maintaining the Lake.

Fortunately there is still a strong reserve, which increased from £95,000 to £130,000 during the year, in large part thanks to a legacy payment received from Iris Oakes. Extra donations, legacies or gifts (such as the painting for auction) are always greatly appreciated.

Opportunities to help

If you can spare time on a Saturday, help with work parties is always appreciated.

If that's not an option for you, would you consider joining the committee? We meet quarterly and this would be an opportunity to contribute to the management of our nature reserve.

Encouraging membership is also important for the long-term survival of the Society. Although we currently have around 450 member households, the number of new memberships has decreased year on year for the last 5 years. You can help by spreading the word locally to friends and neighbours, many of whom may not be aware of the Lake's existence, or that they could have access to it for only £10 a year.

Finally, if you don't get the newsletter by email, please consider doing so to save print & distribution costs.

Dates for your diary

Saturday work parties

Work parties are held on the 4th Saturday of each month. Just show up from 9:00am onwards - you'll be very welcome.

Work party dates coming up

- 24 August
- 28 September
- 26 October
- 23 November
- 28 December

Dates continue into 2025. Do put the dates into your diary and try to come along.

AGM

This year's AGM organised for 26 July was, sadly, not quorate and had to be adjourned. Members will be notified of the adjourned date so that the business required to be conducted at the AGM can be done. The AGM is your chance to meet and put your views to the Society's Council as well as getting to know some of your fellow Members. Please do come along.

Contact information

Digswell Lake Society

0845 003 5253

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Note, calls to 0845 numbers are not included in most telephone call packages. Calls cost **approximately 10p per minute**, but additional charges may apply.

If you prefer to call one of the numbers below, please remember they are personal phone numbers. Be prepared to leave a message. **And please only call during sociable hours!**

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