

Newsletter Spring 2007

CHAIRMAN'S COLUMN

The Society has only reached this landmark thanks to the loyalty of you, the members, who continue to support the idea of a nature reserve discreetly maintained as a place of beauty which you may freely visit at any time.

Much water has flowed over the weir since the WGC Development Corporation first voiced concern over the future of Digswell Lake, in 1956. The Lake was part of the grounds of Digswell House, but Bessemer Road was being built and would separate them. Open access from Bessemer Road towards Digswell House was considered OK (as it still is today, but the Development Corporation feared that similar open access from Bessemer Road to the Lake would cause the Lake to become a rubbish dump. The Corporation didn't want to look after the area itself, nor did it think that local authority ownership would be appropriate. Consequently, a group of concerned residents formed a committee, which later became this Society. Our records don't show it, but my guess is that the Development Corporation would have firmly helped to nudge that committee into existence. The Corporation fenced Bessemer Road alongside the Lake area, and granted the Society a lease of the Lake in 1957. Within its first year from then, 75 members had joined the Society, and it held its first AGM at Digswell House on the afternoon of Saturday 28 June 1958.

Now, of course, the Society holds the Lake freehold, and is a Registered Charity and a (public-benefit non-profit) Company Limited by Guarantee. It continues to retain its original purposes and ideals.

Through all the distractions of modern life, and with all the changes in society over the last fifty years, we see how the voluntary ethos can still shine through. Membership of the Society is flourishing. Also, although it is becoming uncomfortably touch-and-go, the volunteers who maintain the Lake have so far been able to keep it clear and in fair order. Not a bad record for the first fifty years!

Peter Neville

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY'S REVIEW When I took on Mary Clements mantle a year ago, I did wonder, after one of our handing over sessions, if I had made a terrible mistake. Mary's famous memory was always going to be an attribute I could never aspire to, so it is with some relief that I have got to the end of my first year, without wiping the data base or making a muddle of the accounts.

It has given me great pleasure to make contact with both old and new members of the Society during the year and without exception people have been warm and supportive. It must be something to do with the beneficial humours at work in Digswell and the Lake area.

New membership has been steady over the year and has included a good spread over the age range.

The annual subscription form is slightly changed and I have asked members to supply me with a means of contact other than post. There have been occasions during the year when little problems could have been dealt with more quickly, efficiently and cheaply with an e-mail or telephone call and I hope members will not mind giving this additional information.

Carole Dale

WHY BE A TREE WARDEN?

Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council (WHBC) held the launch of the Tree Warden Scheme at Campus West in 2006. Attending this meeting was not the beginning of something new and life-changing but the receiving of the permission and authority to do what I've been doing all my adult life, 'to care' for trees. In my case it amounts to counting a line of 15 Amelanchiers (opposite) - my choice, to do these and only these, as it would be yours 'to care' for one tree outside your house or more.

I gave in my name and address. I was advised quite quickly of the new (under 3 years old) trees in my area. We concentrated on these because they are especially vulnerable. We have all now received exceptionally good information and maps regarding the location of all the street trees in our respective areas and the encouragement to monitor them. We are encouraged to record our efforts of:

Mulching - the covering of the soil with composted wood chips, Watering, Loosening ties, Adding supports, Noting any fungi or disease, Reporting any growth obstructions or damage. We can also measure the trees, normally the girth (unless you wish to show off your geometry skills to get an accurate height).

I am not aiming to do all of the above on my trees but I did request watering to be carried out last summer when I felt they needed it. The contractors brought the bowsers, albeit at 2 pm on a typical day when it was 30 degrees plus! I am pleased to report that they have all blossomed this spring.

This was probably due to the care taken by planting the trees deep, with well-composted soil and by adding plenty of mulch around each tree. With mulch no grass or weeds are able to intrude and suck up surface moisture and the help I gave in the heat of 2006 now allows me to see the benefits each morning I walk to work.

We are, as wardens, asked to be on the lookout for trees to nominate as 'Green Monuments'. A tree that is striking in appearance due to its enormity, stature and consequently its age. I will tell you more on this another time.

Finally, contractors come and go and with each one they endeavour to improve upon the previous. We really are the eyes and ears for our very well respected tree officers on the WHBC and are now in a position to prevent losses of time, money and the trees themselves just because, ultimately, quite a few of us do care a great deal.

Shirley Henderson

THE CAPE PENINSULAR, SOUTH AFRICA

My wife and I have been away again, this time to the Western Cape Region of South Africa and whilst there we did a tour of the Cape Peninsular. This piece of land is a 'tear drop' shaped projection on the western side of the southern tip of the African continent, stretching from Cape Town in the north to the Cape of Good Hope and Cape Point in the south.

Our Peninsular Tour started in Cape Town below the 1,025 metre Table Mountain. We took the coast road south past the Twelve Apostles mountain range to the fishing harbour at Hout Bay where there were fur seals sunbathing on the sea walls. Next came Chapman's Peak Drive, a hair-raising coast road cut into the near vertical rock face some 100 metres above the sea. We passed through several re-settlement areas, another fishing town called Scarborough and on down to the Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve.

Established in 1938 this reserve encompasses 7,750 hectares and 40 kilometres of coastline. It is home to at least 250 species of birds and over 1,000 indigenous plants. When flowering, the protea and Erica plants attract sunbirds, sugarbirds and other species in search of nectar. There are a wealth of small creatures such as lizards, snakes, tortoise and insects.

At a distance the landscape looks very much like Scotland but is covered in milkwood trees and fynbos (a gorse like bush) from which, surprisingly, plants like pelargoniums, freesias and irises have evolved. There are numerous picnic spots and scenic walking trails

Weather here is very changeable, for us cloudy with bright spells, as it is affected by the warm currents from the Indian Ocean, the cold currents from the Atlantic as well as the icy water and winds from the Antarctic.

At the southern extremity is the Cape of Good Hope (latitude 34° 21m south/ longitude 18° 29m east), with Cape Point a little further east. . This latter Cape has a funicular railway and a very steep walk up to the old lighthouse and viewpoint 300m above the sea, a wild and windy place. A replacement lighthouse was built nearer to sea level as the upper one was constantly in fog. This coast, like Cornwall, is notorious for shipwrecks.

In terms of larger animals, antelope such as eland, bontebok, grey rhebok and grysbols are found. We saw a small herd of eland at a distance. Troops of chacma baboons cause a lot of trouble due to unlawful feeding by visitors. The baboons normally feed on fruit, roots and honey but sometimes can be seen on beaches foraging for sandhopper and shellfish. We saw two baboons feeding by the side of the road and they were quite large. To our astonishment we also saw several ostriches grazing along the beach with their plumage blowing in the wind.

Between June and November whale viewing of southern right and humpbacks is possible in False Bay to the east. Interestingly, this piece of water is called False Bay because early explorers sailing down the west coast of Africa rounded the Cape of Good Hope and Cape Point in what was normally poor visibility, turned north, thinking they would go up the east coast of Africa, only to find they were in a huge bay with a further 160 kilometres before they rounded the southern most tip of Africa at Cape Agulhas.

On the way back we stopped at Boulders Beach, a residential area which is world famous for a thriving colony of African penguins (formerly known as Jackass because of their braying call) and boasts a wind-sheltered safe beach. From just a couple of breeding pairs in 1982 the colony has grown to about 3,000. The area is bordered by indigenous bush above high water mark, partially enclosed by granite boulders and open to the sea. At one time the penguins were causing a nuisance by getting into people's properties and conflicting with human use of the beach, so it was ordained that humans should keep off the beach and the penguins fenced into a generous area with elevated boardwalk access for humans to view. This works well and the penguins flourish in a protected natural environment, taking no notice of visitors like ourselves in close proximity.

Almost at the end of the tour, close to Cape Town, we walked through the Kistenbosch Botanical Gardens (Cape Town's Kew Gardens), which are set on the south-eastern slopes of Table Mountain. The gardens contain almost 7,000 species of native wild plants and each one is catalogued with name and date of planting. They are laid out amongst interesting small paths meandering up and down the slopes with frequent pools and waterfalls.

In all, we had covered approximately 160 kilometres in About 10 hours and gleaned a great deal about a

small part of this huge continent, where you face north to catch the sun.

Don Fisher February 2007

HISTORY OF DIGSWELL LAKE

From the early Middle Ages to the days of Welwyn Garden City, the Digswell Lake area has formed part of the Manor or Estate of Digswell House. For centuries the River Mimram ran in two channels through the valley, but there was no lake. In 1771 osier beds covered the area between the two river banks providing reeds for basket making and fencing. A spring-fed meadow, "Fish Pond Meadow", lay close by. In the early 1800's the medieval Digswell House was demolished and Samuel Wyatt designed a new one for Earl Cowper. This was completed in 1807. Edward Spencer Cowper MP (the younger brother of the Earl,) lived there with his wife Katherine for many years. His diary for 21st June 1810 records making Digswell Lake:

'Rode with Luttrell to Panshanger etc., My brother and Lady C dined with us. The piece of water quite finished today. 1 floodgate put down, about One o'clock. Remarkably delightful day. Wind SW'

Records show that in the early part of the 19th Century the field next to the lake was rough grass; others nearby were cropped in rotation with oats, wheat or clover or were left fallow. The game book for Digswell House Estate in the period 1827/1844 shows that hares, rabbits, woodcock, pheasants and partridges were shot. In 1857 the viaduct, carrying the Great Northern Railway, arched across the valley; this now forms the eastern boundary of the lake area.

By 1898 several trees had been planted on the 'island' between the lake and the river. This area was also renowned for its fungi - recorded by an expert from Kew on the annual fungus foray of the Hertfordshire Natural History Society in October 1893. The 'island' was reached by one of three footbridges over the river and there was a boat house by the lake. Holly Walk led up from here to Digswell House.

The 7th Earl Cowper died in 1905 without an heir, so in 1919 the Trustees sold the Digswell Estate, including the lake, to Ebenezer Howard, the founder of Welwyn Garden City. Between the wars the lake was rented out to the local fishing bailiff. He bred trout and let out rods for fly fishing. Digswell House still stood in open countryside, next to St. John's Church. The fields around were full of flowers; spotted woodpeckers, wrynecks and barn owls could be seen among the trees; cattle and horses browsed amid the cowslips; and mushrooms and primroses grew under the hedgerows.

PROFUSE AND SINCERE APOLOGIES to both you the reader and to Colin Hull who kindly compiles our regular "bird reports".

The following article should have been included in the October 2006 issue but instead I, inexcusably, reprinted May 06

Digswell Bird News

I will give a full report of all the highlights and species in the next news letter. Tom and Janet Gladwin have been visiting the lake and making regular counts and have forwarded to me some very useful information that I have noted below.

Tom writes:

1. The early part of the breeding season was poor due to poor weather in May.
2. The importance of the lake to hole nesting birds, e.g. Stock Doves, Nuthatches, Treecreepers, tits and

woodpeckers.

3. Siskins were present until mid-March
4. Little Grebe and Gadwall nested successfully.
5. An injured near flightless female Merlin was present, in what is an atypical habitat, on 22nd December last year.
6. Unlike the local urban populations which start breeding in February, Woodpigeons at the lake follow the rural pattern and do not generally start nesting until June. This may be related to the importance of Ash buds as a principal food source in spring.
7. Hawfinch, a male on 14th April.
8. Chiffchaff; 4 pairs nested but only two were successful.
9. Blackcap; 5 singing males all paired. Three nests in April/May. Second broods in June more successful
10. Garden Warbler; 2 pairs nested but no young seen.

For my part in this report I want to concentrate on a few species that Tom mentions and give some additional facts about their lives. Some of the data presented is from the British Trust for Ornithology national surveys (bto.org.uk) and publications.

Little Grebe

I have noticed one pair on the river in the last few years with some evidence of raising young. This year I noted a nest in May on the river hidden under a banks-side bush. The female was sitting. Unfortunately on subsequent visits there was no sign of the pair and I do not know what happened to the nest. I saw no sign of young. males are also present. They occur in small numbers (normally less than 10) at the lake throughout much of the year but I have noted they are normally absent April-June but Tom's observation of breeding was missed by me and I think exceptional. Maybe I had failed to notice that what appeared to be Mallard with ducklings was not really a Mallard! The Breeding Birds of Hertfordshire (Smith et al, 1993) had shown that there were increased instances of Gadwall breeding in Herts between 1967 and 1992. However this species is of Medium Conservation Concern (Amber List) because of wider declines in Europe. I will need to look more carefully next year.

Siskin

Since my discovery of small flocks feeding in the Alders by the river a few years ago I have looked out for this small winter visitor ever since. Normally present November-February and Tom's observation of flocks still present in March was a little less usual. I can only assume that some aspect of the weather was responsible. After several years of early springs, March this year was the exception and more like an extended winter than an early spring. High pressure predominated and kept the temperatures down. The BTO Bird Track project actually monitored a record number of Siskins in the South-East in March and April compared to 2004 and 2005.

Hawfinch

Small bird with big beak. Tom was very fortunate to see Hawfinch. They are scarce to say the least and I have never seen one. They have undergone a severe decline in the last 10 years and are only recorded at a few localities in Herts each year. It is mainly a bird of woodland and along with several other woodland species is the subject of ongoing investigations. However it is a shy and illusive species and may often go unrecorded. Perhaps they have often been present and I missed them!

Green Woodpecker Resident. 1-2 seen in most months
Great Spotted Woodpecker. Resident. 1-2 seen on most visits but 4 were observed in April and May.
Kingfisher. **Amber list**. 1 on a few dates in the autumn.
Swift. Summer visitor, usually flying overhead. 2 on 25th May.
Grey Wagtail. Irregular. **Amber List**. 1 on 22nd Jan and 12th Dec.
Pied Wagtail. Irregular. 1 on 22nd Nov was the only record for the year.
Wren. Resident. Up to 22 seen or heard in April-May when they were most vocal. 1-8 in other months.

Robin. Resident. 34 on 29th March was the highest for the year. Other counts 16-20 in spring months. 7-13 in the autumn and winter.

Blackbird. Common breeding species and resident. Counts of 12-14 in April show the abundance around the site.

Song Thrush.

Red List. 2-3 singing males. Up to 2 also seen in the autumn.

Mistle Thrush.

Amber List. 2 singing males. 1-2 also seen throughout the year.

Redwing. Irregular

Winter visitor. 3 on

12th Oct was a very early record for the season but the only winter record.

Dunnock. **Amber list**. 4 on 29th April was the highest count. 1 seen on several other occasions.

Swallow. Summer visitor. 1 in Oct was probably a migrant on passage.

House Martin. Summer visitor. 1-4 on a few dates Sept-Oct were probably migrants.

Chiff-chaff. Common Summer visitor. Up to 8 recorded in spring months.

Blackcap. Common summer visitor. I noted a few singing but Tom recorded 8-10.

Garden Warbler. Summer visitor. 2-3 recorded by Tom.

Goldcrest. Resident. Up to 2 on most visits. 4 or 5 on some visits in the autumn.

Long Tailed Tit. Resident. Flocks of up to 13 in winter months. In the spring period 2-4 was more usual.

Blue Tit. Resident. Counts of 20-38 in the early part of the year. A count of 60 on 8th Nov was the highest for later part of the year. 15-20 was more typical of the spring and summer months.

Great Tit. Resident. Counts of up to 18 in the early part of the year. 10-15 was more usual for spring and summer months, rising to 40 in early winter flocks.

Coal Tit. Resident. 1-2 on several visits.

Nuthatch. Resident. 8 on 22nd Jan may well have been roving migrants. Up to 2 on other visits during the year is more typical.

Treecreeper. Resident. 1-3 seen throughout the year.

Magpie. Resident. 5 on 22nd Jan. More typically 2-3 in other months.

Jackdaw. Resident. 19-34 in Jan-Mar. 8-15 was more typical in other months.

Carrion Crow. Resident. Up to 2 on most visits.

Rook. Common but irregular visitor to the site. 2 in Feb and 4-5 in Oct.

Jay. Resident. 2-3 seen throughout the year.

Starling. **Red List**. 1 in March and 1-2 in autumn months.

Chaffinch. Resident. 6 in May was the highest count. 1-3 in other months.

Goldfinch. 3 on 12th Oct was the only record for the year.

Bullfinch. **Red List** and Scarce. 1-2 in late autumn.

Siskin. Winter visitor. Up to 95 seen in the early part of the year. A few stayed to the early part of April.

None seen in
later part of year.
Hawfinch. Very
scarce and unusual
visitor. 1 on 14th April
and 12th May.

Colin Hull

WORK PARTY REPORT

OCTOBER 2006 Work party day started off a warm 13 degrees with cloud and showers. Sadly we were presented with a vandalized information board which had been pushed over breaking both the upright posts; a repair for a future work party. A regular number of 6 volunteers turned up and one of the main jobs for the morning was to fit some heavy duty mesh to the scaffold boards across the weir, this was a general repair to replace the worn mesh. While working at the weir the area was cleared off all floating debris. A large tree had fallen on the island path; fortunately, rather than falling across the path, this kindly fell parallel to the path and caused only damage where the roots had been. This area was filled in with available stones and soil and the top foliage of the tree including ivy was removed to reinstate a clear path. After an unknown period of use, but estimated to be around 20 years, the main pedestrian gate lock was replaced. New keys, with specially printed Digswell Lake Key fobs, were distributed with the October newsletter and seem to have been used successfully since (with only the odd call on the previous day enquiring when the new key would work). Average levels of rubbish were collected (4 bags) but we also had an additional 3 shopping trolleys. We would like to thank Waitrose, who subsequently retrieved 2 of these trolleys, and for our inconvenience, donated to the Society some coffee and biscuits to be used at our regular talks.

NOVEMBER Work party again saw 6 volunteers turn up on a morning with temperatures changing with the weather, sunny spells, heavy showers and thunder and lightning. Further stones were placed in the hole left by the root ball of the fallen tree on the island path and again the weir was cleared of leaves etc. The two main tasks of the day were to plant a number of new trees and hedging, these included Hawthorne, Blackthorn and Field Maple, and to cut back some dead lower branches of a number of more mature trees adjacent to Bessemer Road boundary. The seat opposite the main Horse Chestnuts, which now bears a dedication plaque to Jackie Carpenter, was further cleaned and restored and the overhanging Oak trimmed back. We would like to thank Jackie's partner Paul and family for their kind donation which enabled us to purchase the new trees and hedging. A number of the Field Maple trees were spaced out in an area to the left of the path by the main gate. Sections of Rhododendron were removed to allow more room and it is hoped that this largely barren area will in time be much enhanced. A large damaged Hazel limb was removed and along with all the fallen timber in the area a substantial wood pile was generated. 5 bags of litter this month, no more trolleys but a wheel and tyre instead!

DECEMBER saw the introduction of Saturday work parties. Ever since the inception of Digswell Lake Society it can only ever be recalled that work parties were held on the 4th Sunday of each month. This tradition went back to the days before Sunday trading but with limited numbers of volunteers and the 4th Sunday falling on Christmas Eve it was an ideal opportunity to introduce this change. Although only 5 attended 3 of these were new and I had received a number of calls to say Saturday generally was more suitable for a number of people. The weather was dry at 2 degrees and high pressure was prevailing. With no under-growth extra litter was obvious and 9 bags were collected from around the site and river.

The island path had 2 medium trees that had fallen, they were both moved aside. Re-moving further dead wood from lower limbs of maturing trees created some new wood plies. Some undergrowth and brambles were removed from around the site where they had started to encroach on the grass areas.

JANUARY 2007 Work party was attended by 7 on a cloudy 6deg Sunday morning. Again, a couple of extra helpers following requests of additional assistance from the membership. In addition Bob Leys came to site to take some photographs of the work party and a large fallen Beech. The Beech was cleared away from the grass area as best as possible to give free access past it. All the top foliage and branches were removed and stacked so as to allow clear access for the chain saw operator to cut the main trunk into more manageable sizes. The tree had been blown over in recent high winds and apart from 2 others on the island that we retrieved from the island pond area, there seemed to be little other damage due to the size of the beech a number of wood piles were required and still further chain saw work would be required the following month. Another 5 bags of rubbish were taken away from site and the new Yale pedestrian lock was re-secured after it had obviously been tampered with and a bolt lost.

FEBRUARY On to our second Saturday work party (which we are trialling on an alternative month basis) and with 9 attending on this sunny 9 deg morning I think we will be continuing with the experiment. Two trees had fallen into the river down stream of the weir one was completely winched clear and a large amount of debris and rubbish that had accumulated behind it was also removed, the second was covered in ivy which was partly removed to provide better access with the hand saw for future winching. The damaged information board was cleaned up ready for reinstatement but due to the recent high winds there seemed to be a national shortage of concrete repair posts which prevented the job from being completed. A section of the large horse chestnut tree had fallen into the main lake area, this was removed and the broken branches on the tree cleaned up to help prevent any disease. With the assistance of a chain saw operator a substantial amount of the previously fallen Beech was cut up and removed from the grass area.

MARCH The clocks went forward and Sunday March 25th saw 5 volunteers turn up on a cloudy 7 deg morning. The remaining fallen tree from the river was winched to dry land, the weir was again cleared of all debris and further sections of the fallen Beech were chained sawed into smaller pieces. One large log was placed into a trench and can now be used as a natural seat, the plan is to remove the bark once worn and cut a flat sloping surface to provide an ongoing evolving seating area. Sections of the Bessemer Road boundary had been broken down, these were reinforced by weaving in new hawthorn growth and old timber to fill the obvious gaps and prevent entry via this route. The now regular 5 bags of rubbish were removed from site and with the potential early onset of spring it was anticipated that the grass cutting would commence in the next week or so. Again this will be carried out by Stephen Jupp who completes this regular task at a very reasonable price. I would like to thank Stephen for all his hard work and also to remind members to leave access to the main gates clear as regular entry of the tractor unit is required specifically between March and November.

James Godbold

**Vice Chairman &
Maintenance Convenor**