

Newsletter - October 2005

Chairman's Column

A warm welcome to new readers of this newsletter. At the Open Day on 17th July, we were able to welcome many who had never visited the Lake before, and twelve of you decided to join then or immediately afterwards. We wish you a long and enjoyable membership of the Society.

Harking back slightly, to our Annual General Meeting on 10th June, you elected a new Director, Piers Treacher, who has been a regular volunteer at our monthly maintenance work parties. He has already made several valuable suggestions in the Committee, such as how to encourage more schools to use the Lake as a teaching resource, and on improving safety procedures (particularly relevant to the volunteers who keep the place in good shape for us to enjoy). Our constitution allows us up to three more Directors, and if you would like to be considered, please get in touch (for contacts, see the bottom of page one). We all benefit from a flow of new ideas and attitudes into the Committee.

One of your main issues at the Annual General Meeting was the poor state of the main entrance gates, and these are being refurbished with added bracing and stout mesh. A new lock is being fitted which will accept your existing keys more reliably. Our earlier plan to install all-new gates has been scuppered by the rocketing price of all steelwork. Even gully-covers are being stolen, I read...

Walking on the green sward by the Lake, you will have been unpleasantly aware of the Canada geese (or at least their "visiting cards"). Introduced to England (over 200 years ago) as an ornamental species, their numbers have exploded in recent years. Temporarily, they seem to have left the Lake, and to discourage their return, we are removing the ramps they use to waddle on and off dry land. We are seeking ornithological advice on how else we can discourage them.

Elsewhere in this newsletter we announce our outline plans for our forthcoming evening talks at Digswell Village Hall. Our guest speakers have a wide variety of backgrounds and styles and always have something interesting to tell us. On 7th October, for example, we heard from a retired member of the Essex Constabulary who had specialised in wildlife policing: he had some amazing stories to tell. He had dealt with human neglect and cruelty to animals of course, but also with smuggling of rare species, which earns comparable amounts to the drugs trade. If you haven't been to any of our evening talks, do give them a try. Your £1 admission includes coffee and biscuits; see how far £1 gets you in a city-centre coffee house!

Also in this newsletter, you will see that we are seeking a Treasurer/Membership Secretary. Mary Clements has done this job for the Society for many decades with quiet efficiency, and understandably now wishes to step down. This is a crucial job for the Society, and unless one of you kind members is good enough to come forward, it is hard to see how we can continue as a flourishing Society. It really is as serious as that, and

we would be delighted to discuss what is involved, with you!

Peter Neville

Treasurer and Membership Secretary

Fancy the title?

Like the job?

Read on.

Mary Clements, who has served the Society so well as Treasurer and Membership Secretary for the last twenty-five years or so has expressed her wish to be released from these responsibilities as from the next A.G.M.

As Treasurer and Membership Secretary Mary has been a 'linch-pin' in the operation and growth of the Society and it is imperative that someone, with the same dedication and enthusiasm, is found to take over these tasks by next June.

Mary has provided a list of the various jobs carried out in the course of a year and these are itemised below :-

Deal with enquiries for membership, send out literature and application forms, and provide subsequent applicants with key.

Maintain membership list on Society's laptop computer, including details of subscription payments, changes of address etc. (current membership stands at 465).

Collect cash at social meetings.

Bank cheques and cash.

Pay purchase invoices, speakers, hall hire, etc.

Record income and expenditure in cash book.

Supply cash book, receipts, bank statements etc. to auditor, who prepares accounts.

Purchase envelopes and labels for newsletter, and label envelopes.

If you are interested in taking on such a post but would like to discuss the work involved in a little more detail Mary or Peter Neville, our Chairman, would be pleased to hear from you.

DIGSWELL LAKE BIRD REPORT

Spring and Summer Bulletin

COMPILED AND SUBMITTED BY COLIN HULL

Visits were made every two-three weeks March to Sept to record breeding attempts of **MOORHEN** and **COOTS**. During these visits notes were kept of other incidental observations of interest.

BREEDING NOTES

LITTLE GREBE. For the third year running a nest was observed on the river. However no young were observed and it is uncertain if any other nesting attempts were made.

COOTS. This year there were two pairs regularly observed on the lake and a third pair at the east end of the site beyond the dam. One pair made use of the "duck house" on the lake. Each raised one successful brood and the pair at the west end had two broods.

MOORHEN. Only 3 pairs were located on the river and around the edges of the lake. Despite extensive searching there was only evidence of one chick on the river and one other chick at the lake edge.

Tufted Duck. 1-2 pairs were present throughout most of the season. A female was seen with a single chick in August and another with 3 young on the lake in August.

CANADA GEESE. A single gosling was seen with adults on 18th June. It was young enough to have been raised on site or nearby.

OTHER HIGHLIGHTS

GARDEN WARBLER

A male was seen and heard three times May-July. Although this is a reasonably common summer visitor it is not always detected at the site.

CHIFF CHAFF (2 pairs) and **BLACKCAP** (3 pairs) were present throughout the summer.

TREE CREEPER. Another common species not often seen, but one seen and heard on 9th April.

Among the species of conservation concern there were 3 **SONG THRUSH** males heard singing, 2 **DUNNOCK** and 1 **MISTLE THRUSH**.

CHANGING HABITAT

Bob Leys had some comments relayed back to him about the past occurrence of **SAND MARTINS** flying over the lake. I have consulted some past records given to me by **Tom Gladwin (TG)** and results of some survey work carried out by **R. Knightbridge (RK)** covering 1974-1978. There were clearly some species that formerly occurred at the lake and no longer do so. As far as **SAND MARTINS** are concerned **RK** does not list them. Although, in general, **MARTINS** and **SWALLOWS** may feed over water areas they prefer to feed over open water. I suspect that over the years the tree growth around the lake has made it unsuitable for this type of foraging.

Among other changes noted in the records **TG** mentions **TEAL** (a small duck), **SNIFE** and **LAPWING**. Although **LAPWING** was observed by **RK** the other two were not. **RK** also lists **REED BUNTING**, **REED WARBLER** and **SEDGE WARBLER** having all been present as past breeding species but no longer occurring on the site. On the other hand **RK** does not mention **SISKIN** but I now find them as regular winter visitors.

Some of the bird species changes may be down to changes in the Herts populations but other local habitat changes are probably also factors. Bird ecology is a complicated set of relationships between birds, their food sources and plant communities. If the plant communities change then so does the range of insects and habitat characteristics and this has an affect on the bird species that have particular food sources and preferences.

Colin Hull would be pleased to hear of your 'sightings' at the Lake.

Colin's telephone number is as follows:- **01707 390424**

THE JOHN WESTON RESERVE (GR:TM 266245) **Report by Don Fisher**

Over the past few years my wife and I have made several visits to this nature reserve which is located a mile north of the town centre of Walton-on-the-Naze, Essex, just less than two hours drive from Welwyn Garden City.

It is a world away from the nearby holiday resort atmosphere and lies within The Naze public open space overlooking the sea. It consists of blackthorn and bramble thickets and rough grassland and beyond is a 1.5 mile shingle beach ending at Stone Point. The reserve is named after the late John Weston, leading Essex naturalist who was warden until his death in 1984.

Nesting birds include little terns, lapwing, redshank, and sedge and reed warblers. It is an important landfall for migrant birds and also attracts a good variety of winter visitors. Being close to the shore, it attracts shore-loving insects including the emperor moth and cream spot tiger moth.

Unfortunately coastal erosion on this part of the east coast is particularly serious and the cliffs are retreating at a relatively fast rate.

Another point of interest at the location is an 18th century brick tower, the equivalent of six storeys high, which was previously used by Trinity House to assist maritime navigation. The tower, now in private ownership, has been restored and opened to the public and from the top, using binoculars, one can have very good views of the extensive reed marshes and inlets behind The Naze, sometimes frequented by seals. One can also see the interesting shipping traffic passing in and out of the ports of Harwich and Felixstowe and, on a really clear day, the outline of the Kent coast some 40 miles away.

Don Fisher

Diary of a Digswell Lake Member

September 8th 2005

“Meet behind the Police Station 5.30pm” he said. So I went, not with trepidation but with approximately 20 other people to meet the Chairman of the Herts Branch of the International Tree Foundation, Adrian Toole. We all had an interest in seeing some of the outstanding trees in Welwyn Garden City. Our very knowledgeable guide for the next two hours was Claire Lilley from Welwyn Hatfield Council. It turned out to be quite a distinguished group who shared this common interest of our local trees, 3 local councillors not to mention Tom Davidson, the chairman of the Welwyn Hatfield Environmental Network group and Dr. Edward Eastwood who is the Bayfordbury Pinetum Curator.

1st Stop – Campus West

Wild Service Tree (*Sorbus torminalis*) -Quite a rare tree and a sign of ancient woodland, it has small leaves and brown edible berries which were used in ancient times for making an alcoholic beverage called Chequers. One of the party said the trip had been worth it already. I was quite pleased that we should have at least one here in the Garden City.

2nd Stop- Walden Place

Maple set (*Acer pseudoplatanus* ‘Brilliantissimum’) Slow growing Sycamore variety. A beautiful sight apparently in the spring when the leaves are pink. I’ve made a mental note to return in 2006 with my camera.

3rd Stop – Knightsfield Cricket Club

Standing Stem **Oak**- Completely dead trunk with a wide girth at the base that was left for the bio-diversity value. Specifically it is home to a family of Jewel Beetles (*Agrilus*

panonicus) we were told. A creature that is more famous in Australia for its attraction to burnt timber. It leaves a D shape hole -no time to look closer unfortunately. This trunk maybe reduced to lessen the risk of breakage.

4th Stop - Fern Grove, nr Digswell House

Sweet Chestnuts (*Castanea sativa*) – A grove of sweet chestnuts, which have the distinctive attractive twisted stem.

Cedar- (*Cedrus libanii* ‘*Stenochoma*’)- ‘A beautiful and majestic tree’ I thought.

5th Stop – Blythway

Pollarded **English Oak** (*Quercus robur*) - Claire only lets a few specialists cut this one! Probably due to the fact that it was planned on the OS map 200 years ago and was undoubtedly bigger then. Reducing the weight by cutting the re-growth is essential to the health of the central stem, but more importantly it was done so that cattle could eat the new growth. (This tree was a personal surprise to me; I live very close and have never noticed it! This maybe true for other locals and the reason it is still with us thank goodness.)

6th Stop – Daniells

Concrete filled hollow **Oak** (*Quercus robur*) - This means of supporting a hollow oak is no longer used. Since seeing this one I have spotted others in the town centre. Concrete seals the area potentially allowing conditions for decay to grow, whilst reducing the flexibility of the tree weakening the sides. This one is due for pruning to relieve the weight.

We (in the car behind the coach) then missed the next stop, a slight misunderstanding of where the coach was going. Not guilty, but the **Judas Tree-** (*Cercis siliquastrum*) on Howlands was the subject, which has crimson flowers in May that cover the twigs before the leaves come. Then on Beehive Lane, a **Roble Beech** (*Nothofagus oblique*)- A native of Chile which can grow up to 1.5 metres each year and unusual in the district.

7th Stop – Raymonds Plain

Another Hollow **Oak**, which had a significant split in the stem. Back on the road we passed the **Swamp Cypress** (*Taxodium distichum*) in Stanborough Park, which is a deciduous conifer that likes to have its feet wet and is foxy brown in Autumn.

Then up Valley Road we saw newly planted **Acer ‘Autumn Blaze’** and the **Indian Bean Trees** (*Catalpa*) on our way to the final tree in the Quadrangle.

8th Stop – Decayed **Oak** –(*Quercus robur*)- Must have been magnificent in shape at one time however extensive testing shows severe decay and it was reduced by 40%, the maximum permitted for a reduction.

Now you might think it was getting dark – you’re right but I couldn’t resist showing my favourite tree in the town centre to the others in the car. A **Golden Rain Tree** (*Koelreuteria paniculata*) It has flowered and produced its wonderful golden lantern-type seed pods. You may know this tree, however, I won’t say precisely where it is so that I don’t cause a traffic jam equivalent to ‘that one’ back in the Winter which ground the local area to a halt.

Shirley Henderson

Editor’s note.

Shirley, a committee member and the Society’s Liaison Officer thought that maybe the idea of ‘Diary of a Digswell Lake Member’ could be a regular slot. Why don’t you send in reports of special outings, open days, meetings and the like. Help make your newsletter more interesting. I’m banking on your support.

Sherrardspark Wood - the Next 20 Years

Gary Dobrin, Sherrardspark Wood Wardens Society

Sherrardspark Wood on the outskirts of Welwyn Garden City is classed as an ancient semi natural woodland (see note 1) and covers an area of almost 75 hectares (185 acres). The wood was designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in February 1986 and a Local Nature Reserve in 1998. Both of these are statutory designations (details can be found on the English Nature website www.english-nature.org.uk).

The main reason for the wood’s designation as an SSSI is because a significant part of it is dominated by mature sessile oak high forest, a habitat now rare throughout lowland England. Sessile oak (*Quercus petraea*) is a native oak more commonly found in the west and north of Britain and in Ireland. It is a less spreading tree than the common oak (*Quercus robur*) and in addition the leaves and acorns have different characteristics.

Sherrardspark Wood is owned by Welwyn Hatfield Council. In recent years, and in conjunction with statutory bodies such as English Nature, the Council has developed 5-year plans detailing the management objectives and work schedules for the upkeep of the woods. This year in July, the old grant schemes were replaced by the new English Woodland Grant Scheme (EWGS) which includes the following elements - Woodland Planning Grant, Assessment Grant, Regeneration Grant and Creation Grant. Two more elements, Woodland Improvement Grant and Woodland Management Grant, will be open for application shortly.

The aims of the EWGS are:

to sustain and increase the public benefits given by existing woodlands

to help create new woodlands to deliver additional public benefit

The Council has recently been successful in gaining the necessary certification for all the woods for which it is responsible and so it can now apply for the management elements of the grant scheme.

Under the terms of the EWGS, the new woodland management plan for Sherrardspark Wood has had to include a long-term policy or vision for the woods covering the next 20 years. This contrasts with the former plans which just covered a five year period.

The long-term vision for the wood is for it to be managed so that it is sustainable with tangible environmental, social and economic benefits.

Particular elements include:

regenerating sessile oak high forest woodland

controlling the spread and removing a proportion of the invasive exotic species such as rhododendron and sycamore

improving the existing areas of coppiced hornbeam

maintaining and improving public access

encouraging the production of high quality timber so as to create a resource for present and future generations

supporting a site popular with schools as an educational resource

Since the early 1990s, the Sherrardspark Wood Wardens Society, a local voluntary group, has helped the council with the week-to-week practical work in the woods. The group meets on Thursday and Sunday mornings and details can be obtained from Gary Dobrin (01707 375216) or Helen McLean (01707 329034).

Note1: Ancient Woodland in England is defined as an area that has been wooded continuously since at least 1600 AD. Ancient Woodland is divided into ancient semi-natural woodland and plantations on ancient woodland sites. Both types of stand are classed as ancient woods.

Ancient Semi-natural woodland sites are composed predominantly of trees and shrubs native to the site that do not obviously originate from planting. They include stands that may have been managed by coppicing or pollarding in the past, as well as those where the tree and shrub layer has grown up by natural regeneration.

WORKING PARTY REPORT

SPRING AND SUMMER 2005

Since the last newsletter we have held 6 work parties and an Open Day at the Lake. Unfortunately due to computer problems I am unable to report on May or June's work party as the data has been lost.

What I can recall is that on the May work party we managed, with a lot of effort, to remove a double mattress from the lake and transport it to the entrance to dry out ready for disposal.

As the Open Day was soon to be upon us an extra work party was arranged. Breaking with tradition this was on Saturday 9th of July where we prepared the signs and repaired notice boards for the Open Day and also put up some signs along Bessemer Road advertising the event. The double mattress was still very difficult to handle so it was taken to the old boat house and despite being of modern flame retardant material we managed to prepare a fire that allowed its incineration. It was not, however, only the mattress that benefited from this controlled fire; we cut down and burnt Rhododendron which was spreading and, more importantly, burnt Japanese Knotweed (*Fallopia Japonica*) that had been dug up; this being the recommended way of disposing of the plant. It is an invasive weed, introduced to the UK many years ago and is rapidly becoming a serious problem in a range of habitats. Under the provisions of the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981, it is an offence to "plant or otherwise encourage the growth of" either Japanese Knotweed or Giant Hogweed. We have a small area of Knotweed at Digswell Lake and its location is closely monitored. It was a pleasant dry morning and we certainly were not cold with our little fire. Rubbish was collected from around the site and disposed of.

The regular July work party took place on the 24th July which turned out to be very wet by the time we packed up although still around 15 degrees C. Repairs and inspections were carried out along the south eastern boundary and ivy was removed from trees in the adjacent Beech plantation. The garage notice board was prepared for staining, removing all moss and plant growth, but with the onset of the rain, which grew heavier as the morning passed, we were unable to apply any preservative. The mattress springs were retrieved and disposed of with other rubbish from site which included two inflatable dinghies - albeit no longer inflated !

I personally missed the August work party of the 28th through being on holiday in Spain and having broken my left clavicle. The attendance was into double figures with some extra volunteers coming down to help following a successful Open Day a few weeks earlier. The weather was glorious and the garage notice board finally received its preservative. Two new helpers, who have worked with other local conservation sites, helped clear the weir and had a tour of the lake area before lending their skills in the repair of breaches in the southeastern boundary with new wire and chestnut paling. Our newsletter editor having arrived to take photos for this publication ended up being the chief strimmer operator for the morning and basically strimmed everywhere that needed attention. A new family to the work party collected six bags of rubbish and was kind enough to take them away for disposal. Coffee and doughnuts were the refreshments missed by myself on this occasion.

September is the traditional month for the autumn grass cut and raking. With seven helper's, three mowers and a strimmer this should have been a simple task, however one of the mowers would not start and needed some engine attention before it could be used efficiently. The task was completed with the assistance of a smaller mower offered by a

new volunteer. Photographs were taken of the days work along with a set of photos from around the site, which has been done on a historic basis, so we now have sets of photos showing the change of views from different locations. The weir was again cleared and rubbish removed from site.

I'd like to thank all those who have helped over the past months and would again like to invite any member who would like to give some assistance in the coming months - no matter how small an effort or for what limited period of time - to just turn up on the 4th Sunday of any month although this December is, of course, excluded as it's Christmas day!

James Godbold Deputy Maintenance Convener and Vice Chairman

We have nothing to fear and a great deal to learn from trees, that vigorous and pacific tribe which without stint produces strengthening essences for us, soothing balms, and in whose gracious company we spend so many cool, silent and intimate hours.

- **Marcel Proust**, Pleasures and Regrets, 1896

I like trees because they seem more resigned to the way they have to live than other things do.

- **Willa Cather** (1873-1947), O Pioneers 1913

That each day I may walk unceasingly on the banks of my water, that my soul may repose on the branches of the trees which I planted, that I may refresh myself under the shadow of my sycamore.

- **Egyptian tomb inscription**, circa 1400 BCE

Sycamore trees were held to be sacred in ancient Egypt and are the first trees represented in ancient art.

He that planteth a tree is a servant of God, he

provideth a kindness for many generations, and faces that he hath not seen shall bless him.

- **Henry Van Dyke**