



# FRIENDS OF THE MEADOWS

Newsletter 169

Jan/Feb 2009

## **Charles Darwin** **'I was born a naturalist'**

The work of Charles Darwin radically changed the way we perceive both ourselves and the millions of other species with which we share the planet Earth. To date, the scientific community has identified about 300,000 species of plants and 1,300,000 species of animals but there could be as many as 100 million species including: 10-30 million insects, 5-10 million bacteria, 1.5 million fungi and 1 million mites. Before Darwin most people in England believed that all species of life were unrelated and unchanged since the moment of creation; mankind was believed to be separate and above all other life forms. The Earth itself was considered to be only about 6000 years old relying on interpretations of the Bible. Following the publication of 'The Origin of Species' 150 years ago the world would never be the same again. The main idea of biological evolution is that all life on Earth shares one or a few common ancestors, evolution means that we are all distant cousins: humans, yew trees, stag beetles and kingfishers.



Isaac Newton, in a letter to fellow scientist Robert Hooke on 5<sup>th</sup> February 1676, modestly claimed that his success had been built on the achievement of others, "If I have seen further than others it is by standing on the shoulders of giants" and so it was with Charles Darwin. As early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC Greek philosophers such as Anaximander and Empedocles theorised that man had descended from animals. Darwin's grandfather, the famous Erasmus Darwin, developed similar ideas on evolution. From his life's work studying the natural world Charles Darwin was able to demonstrate a scientific theory for evolution, a theory he shares with co-founder Alfred Russel Wallace, intrepid explorer and brilliant naturalist. Following the publication of 'The Origin of Species' Darwin received most of the credit for the theory of evolution but there was no resentment on the part of Wallace, indeed he was Darwin's greatest fan.

During his childhood, Charles visited North and Mid Wales many times for holidays including visits to: Abergele, Tywyn and Snowdon where his main interest was collecting beetles (his first girlfriend dumped him because he preferred the company of beetles). Charles Darwin was a polymath, geology being a particular interest. After graduating from Cambridge in 1831, he was Adam Sedgwick's assistant on a field trip to North Wales surveying red sandstone in Llangollen, Ruthin, Conway, Bangor and Capel Curig. When in later life he published 'The Origin of Species' it was not just Theologians but sections of the scientific community that challenged Darwin's theory. The work of great Taxonomist Carolus Linnaeus seemed to point to the fixity of species. Our planet could not be old enough for the slow process of evolution as the presence of volcanoes suggested that the Earth's interior was still hot and relatively young, if the centre was as old as was necessary for evolution it would have cooled down over such a long period of time (the Earth generates internal heat from radioactive processes but this understanding was some way off). Over time the discovery of DNA by Crick and Watson and the science of genetics has added credibility to Darwin's theory. Theology and Science have learned to adapt to each other although there are still fundamentalists on both sides.

Charles Darwin was born on 12<sup>th</sup> February 1809 at 'The Mount' in the county town of Shrewsbury, 2009 is his bicentennial. My house is about a hundred yards further along The Mount and I am struck by the similarity of the surrounding environment and that of the Chester Meadows (the Severn or Afon Hafon used to flow into the Dee estuary before moraine from retreating glaciers during the last Ice Age altered the river's course). Darwin's maternal grandfather was Josiah Wedgwood founder of the pottery dynasty and together with his paternal grandfather Erasmus, his father Dr Robert Darwin and the liberal views of the Unitarian Church that Charles attended with his mother Susannah they were a powerful influence in his early years. Much has been made of that trip in HMS Beagle taking in the Galapagos Islands, but Darwin's formative years were spent in Shrewsbury exploring the natural history of **River and Meadows** that was the environment where the **Mind was Made**.

*Ron Iremonger.*

### **The Apple Tree**

In my back garden on the riverside I have a large old apple tree. It is a Bramley, or a Bramley type and is probably close to a hundred years old. It is the last remnant of a small orchard which can be seen on old Ordnance Survey maps.

My tree still crops well but unfortunately, due to its height, the fruit is very hard to pick. In younger days I could usually find a willing volunteer to climb up to get the apples but now I resort to a long cane with a child's fishing net fixed to the end with which to capture the lower fruits one by one. The apples at the top are only available to fleet footed squirrels. The problem with my method, and theirs for that matter, is that you can get bombed by apples and the big ones can nearly knock you out if they score a direct hit.

I have found in the past that a good many apples are spoilt by grubs but these are usually in the ones that fall off on their own. However, in the last couple of years the grubs have all but disappeared and in 2008 I did not find one at all. Like the honey bee, which was also absent, could the apple grub have fallen victim to global warming or associated problems.



Every spring my old tree is a sight to behold with its beautiful pink blossom. I dread the day when a strong westerly gale comes roaring across the Meadows and knocks it down. I am sure it will happen eventually but I am hoping to start a new tree by grafting a piece of the old one onto a new root stack. If I can successfully do this then maybe someone else will continue to enjoy this ancient tree in a more manageable form than previously.

In the Duke of Westminster's kitchen garden there are some very low growing apple trees bordering the vegetable beds. I believe the root stock is called a step-over and they are just that. The root stock is only fifteen at twenty inches tall with the fruiting branches trained along the horizontal bars or wires. This economical method of growing makes optimum use of the space, provides ease of gathering as well as being extremely picturesque. In the Duke's garden there are many different types grown this way. He also has a fairly large conventional orchard growing a variety of fruits. On open days the kitchen garden is the first place I make a beeline for and it is also the first place the bees make for at blossom time.

As we look forward to a whole new year ahead of us I hope man's activities, which have so much marred 2008, will result in a reversal to more modest desires for 2009.

So good luck, good health and happiness to everyone.

*Rita Hibbitt.*

## **CHAIRMAN'S PAGE**

### **Meadows Management**

Following a meeting with the City Council Countryside Manager, Mike O'Kell, a number of works were recognised as necessary and will hopefully be carried out in 2009. They include: four badly shaped and leaning willow trees in wooden cages and one dead one to be removed and six new ones of a more appropriate type to be planted; six silvery metal tree guards to be painted black, now that they have weathered sufficiently; some planting of willow shoots to reduce bank erosion; continuation of the improved mowing which has been done in 2008, particularly the flat area opposite Deva Terrace, which has proved to be an excellent recreation area for children; and continuation of the grazing by cattle, the desired number being about 30. I am glad to say there was agreement on all these points. Pollarding of some of the willows along the river is another item. Those pollarded last year are shooting very satisfactorily. Particularly desirable is some clearance where large branches have fallen into the river. The new tree officer accompanied us and this will be one of his concerns.

However the main problem is funding. At the time of going to press we do not know who the new Countryside Manager will be, nor even if there will be one. I have stressed in my letter to the Council how many people walk on the Meadows and derive healthy enjoyment from so doing; that the Meadows are excellent value for money, costing far less than the carefully tended parks and gardens. I have pressed for sufficient funding to maintain them.

### **The Bridge**

It appears that considerable progress has been made towards raising the £7 million necessary for the Sustrans scheme, which includes the bridge. It is understood grants have been promised by Cycle England, Sustrans itself and the North West Development Agency. It also appears that the new West Cheshire and Chester Council have agreed to underwrite the shortfall. Assuming that the authorities decide to proceed with the scheme notwithstanding the present credit crunch, which must surely be an element of doubt, it seems that the next step is to undertake a feasibility study. At that stage it would be appropriate for FoM to make representations, which might well include representations as to where the bridge should best be sited. Our aim must clearly be to minimise any aspects of the scheme detrimental to the Meadows. It must however be noted that the siting so far proposed is substantially on land not owned by the Council. Nevertheless it would be ironic if the Council, having co-operated so successfully in the promotion and improvement of the Meadows, were to support a scheme causing grave detriment to them. It would also be ironic if, when such enormous sums are being dispensed, those in charge could not find the modest sums needed to maintain the Meadows to a reasonable standard. We await developments.

*John Makinson FoM Chairman*

### **Spring Lecture - Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> March at 7.30 p.m.**

**Sarah Bird, the Bio-Diversity Officer of the Zoo, has agreed to talk to us about plants at the Zoo and other things within her purview - so if you want to know about BIO-diversity in all it's mystery and perhaps see some samples, make a note now of the date in St Mary's Parish Hall**

## Friends of the Meadows Poem

Foxes chase noisily after their prey.  
Reeds swirl as a creatures' sleep is disturbed.  
In the trees owls wait for when to come out.  
Early sunrise gives the queue for singing birds.  
Nymphs are breakfast and filling for fish.  
Dee swirling as it goes round a corner.  
Salmon jumping their steps.

Otters glide through water like birds in air.  
Fishermen fishing for salmon.

Trees waving to you in the wind.  
Herons waiting like statues on the weir.  
Earl's eye were cows are relaxing.

Meandering around is the maker of this.  
Everything still and quiet.  
Animals dropping of to sleep.  
Dragonflies green, yellow and blue.  
Oars pacing through the water as the sun sets.  
Willows dipping their hands in the river  
Sun is setting and the cycle starts again

*By Samuel Squires age 12. Written on 10/01/09*

### Chester Croquet Club

Why not try a new outdoor leisure activity this summer? Croquet is an interesting and enjoyable game which can be played on equal terms by men and women of all ages and at all levels of ability. Perhaps you have played garden croquet with family or friends and would like to learn more about the game. Perhaps you have just retired and are wanting to try something new. Perhaps you are attracted by a game which involves challenge and skill but does not require the strength and endurance of more energetic sports.

Chester Croquet Club meets in Westminster Park off Hough Green in Chester. It is a friendly club and is always pleased to welcome new members of all standards from absolute beginners to more experienced players

The next beginners' course will be held on Wednesday evenings at 6.30 pm for eight weeks from 29 April to 17 June 2009.

No previous knowledge of the game is needed and all equipment will be provided by the club. The only stipulation is that players must wear flat-soled shoes.

For more information, please call Janet Davies, the club secretary and coach, on 01244 350370.

Come and join in, and bring your family or friends!

### Newsletter

Please continue to send any articles and photos for inclusion in the newsletter to Richard Cain, 56 Elizabeth Crescent, Queens Park, Chester, CH4 7AZ or email to richard.cain1@btinternet.com.

### Dates for your Diary

**14 March – Saturday – North of England Head of the River Race. 5km. Starts at 10.00 a.m. and 14.30 P.M. For details <http://www.royalchester.com>**

**19 March – Thursday at 7.30 p.m at St Mary's Hall. FOM Spring Lecture – Sarah Bird, Chester Zoo Biodiversity Officer**

## Meadows Log ~November 2008~

- Birds:** 1/11 The month got off to a cracking start! The alarm call of the tits and finches drew attention to the ivy covered trees at the far end of Handbridge Meadow. Two little owls sat motionless amid the mayhem.  
200+ redwing and fieldfare continue to devour the berries either side of Bottoms Lane track.  
8/11 Buzzard, kestrel and sparrowhawk all hunted over the Meadows. The sparrowhawk was visible all month, either shooting through the hedgerow or gliding high on rounded wings.  
The soft, distinctive *piu piu* call revealed the location of a bullfinch in the hedgerow off Bottoms Lane track. The hedgerows around here provide an important feeding station for a good number of these beautiful, but increasingly rare, birds. The bullfinch is now on the Red List for conservation concern.  
15/11 A kingfisher flew past a fisherman sitting opposite the Deva Terrace. It was seen again on a fence post before darting off up the river. Always a wonderful sight (RC).  
17/11 A flock of goldfinch moved from the thistle to feed in the alder trees where they were joined by five siskin.  
Two stonechat, last seen 20/10, popped up on bramble by the Handbridge allotments and again in the horse paddock 23/11 and 30/11.  
29/11 Two treecreepers worked their way up the trunks of the willows and one tufted duck took flight by the Sandy Lane landing stage as rowers approached.  
30/11 A male gadwall joined the mallard on the river opposite the Reuben & Joan Wesley seat.
- Insects:** 1/11 A red admiral basked in the late autumn sunshine on a conservatory in Cross Hey.
- Mammals:** Foxes continue to be more visible with sightings on 03/11 and in a ditch by the Handbridge Meadow 15/11 and unsuccessfully stacking five pheasant off Bottoms Lane track 29/11.  
Evidence of mole activity continues to be seen around the Meadows and, judging by the size of the molehills by Handbridge Meadow, giant moles are lurking underground.
- Events:** 08 & 09/11 Cattle, having munched their way through the Meadows, were removed for a well earned rest.  
20/11 The AGM was well attended and included a slide show and talk by Peter Boughton on the historic buildings of Chester.

## ~December 2008~

- Birds:** 04/11 Four stock doves lingered round the Meadows box. The two stonechat remained in the horse paddock all month and a third one was seen behind the Handbridge allotments on 11/12 and 14/12.  
11/12 A wintering chiffchaff was in the willows and a male blackcap in the copse behind the Handbridge allotments.  
14/12 Two redpoll joined the other finches feeding in the hedgerows off the Bottoms Lane track.
- Insects:** 24/12 Flowering mahonia and winter sunshine brought bees to a Cross Hey garden.

**A Happy New Year to all 'Friends of the Meadows'.**

*Andy Ingham, Meadows Log Recorder. (01244) 677135*

## **The Birds**

I see a lot of activity on the river every day. Around Christmas and New Year the resident pair of swans were still with last year's big cygnets. This morning, 18<sup>th</sup> January, I saw the cob with wings arched furiously driving himself along to chase off a well grown cygnet plus another adult interloper. There is now no sign of the original cygnets unless this was one of them and he was driving off his own young which is normal behaviour at this time of year.

The powers of nature are amazingly strong and it will only be a few short weeks before the next building and pairing up begins. Indeed it may already have started with some early nesting birds such as blackbirds.

During the very hard frost it was pleasing to see up to a dozen blackbirds feeding on fallen apples on the wide grass verge near Sandown Terrace (opposite Boughton Health Centre). Amongst them was a pied blackbird with an almost pure white tail and wing feathers. It is most attractive and seems to be there feeding daily. I have heard of them in the past but this is the first I have ever seen.

Some birds are now entertaining us with their song, particularly the robin, usually on a high vantage point. Also the song thrush, blackbird and chinking great tits. There is even the beginning of a dawn chorus if you have the good fortune to be awake in time.

Every so often we see something rather gratifying. Our man who empties the rubbish bins at Sandy Lane car park and children's play area picks out the rubbish with a litter picker if there is only a small amount and it isn't worth changing the bag. As I was out with my dog recently I heard the black headed gulls squawking and discovered he had come across some bread in the bin and was throwing it to the gulls rather than waste it. In my book that's a way of making a dull job very enjoyable and it made my day. Too often people fail to take advantage of what presents itself to them to improve their day. Here was a worker who did.

*Rita Hibbitt*

## **Corporate Members**

**In the year September 2008 to September 2009 we gratefully acknowledge**

The Alfred Green Partnership – Chartered Accountants

Bank of Scotland – Central Bank PLC

Chester Chronicle Associated Newspapers Ltd

P&A Davies (Chester) Ltd – Bakers

Bithell Boats Ltd

Morris & Company – Chartered Accountants

Homelet (UK) Ltd – Residential Lettings

B&Q Warehouse

Urenco (Capenhurst) Ltd.

Dixon Webb – Chartered Accountants

British Nuclear Fuels PLC

Shell UK Ltd.

Brophy McPaul Ltd. - Search & Assessment Consultants

Dee Valley Water PLC

Oakbase PLC – PR Advertising Consultants

P&P Eeles – Chester Boat Hire/Riverside Takeaway

## **New Members**

Anyone wishing to join Friends of the Meadows, please phone or write to the Membership Secretary:

Clive Gregory, 6 Victoria Pathway, Queen's Park, CHESTER CH4 7AG. Tel: (01244) 680242.

Please state who introduced you if appropriate.