



Newsletters 170

FRIENDS OF THE MEADOWS

March/April 2009



The Swift *Apus apus*

Sometime in early May swifts appear over the Chester Meadows having spent the winter south of the Equator in Zaire or Tanzania. Their sickle shaped wings and shorter tails make them easy to distinguish from swallows or house martins, birds to which they are completely unrelated; resemblances between these species are due to convergent evolution reflecting similar lifestyles. The screaming behaviour of a group of swifts hurtling precariously through the air appears to be a celebration of their mastery of flight, sheer enjoyment, although in reality this display is probably to advertise the presence of their colony to other swifts.

Swifts are the most aerial of all birds, eating, mating and even sleeping on the wing. They only perch to nest, flying non-stop for eight or nine months outside the breeding season. Swifts have very short legs adapted to cling to vertical surfaces, their scientific name, *Apus*, comes from the Ancient Greek 'apous' meaning 'without feet'.

Swifts nest almost exclusively in buildings in towns and villages but fly long distances to feed. Breeding birds use the same nest year after year, just adding fresh material; nest building items such as dry grass, dead leaves, flower petals,

winged seeds, feathers and scraps of paper are collected from the air when there is sufficient wind to blow them about; these materials are stuck together with saliva. Lengthy fights with violent screaming occur when intruding swifts attempt to occupy an existing nest site. The hen bird lays two or three long white eggs. During cold, wet days the parent birds may spend long periods sitting on the nest close together. When the parent birds have filled their throat pouches with insects and spiders, all glued together with saliva, they return to the nest to feed their chicks. This may occur up to forty times a day. Once the fledglings leave the nest they become independent and are ignored by their parents. Swifts can live for up to twenty years.

There are eighteen swift species of the Genus *Apus* worldwide and these birds are amongst the fastest animals on the planet. In level flight several species of swift have been recorded at speeds of over 100 mph (the peregrine falcon can reach speeds of over 200 mph but only in its hunting dive or stoop).

Then, all of a sudden, in August the swifts disappear. The realisation that they have gone is a significant moment in my experience of the natural world. Within forty eight hours swifts can be hundreds of miles southwards en route to their central African winter quarters. What amazing creatures. Swifts drink, bathe, preen, collect food and nesting material in the air and are the only birds known to mate on the wing.

Ron Iremonger

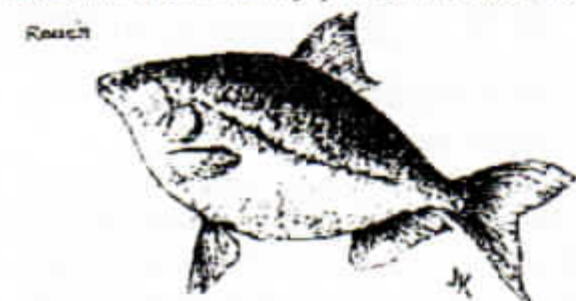
Your River Cruise ~ The Return Journey

As the vessel turns to begin the return part of your cruise take note of the large white building with the very long window. It is known as Carlton Villa. It is the site of a Roman villa almost 2,000 years ago and you can still see parts of the base below the modern foundations.

Further upstream is a stretch known locally, for quite obvious reasons, as the Long or Straight Mile. Many British rivers do not have stretches like this and consequently many international rowing teams, including the British National Squad, regularly visit here for practice. A little further, beyond the straight section, the river begins to twist and turn, eventually passing through the estate of the Duke of Westminster. The family name is Grosvenor and the present, sixth, Duke owns some 13,000 acres here, just south of the city. His home is known as Eaton Hall and has been a family possession since the 15th century. The original Grosvenors were actually kinsmen of

William the Conqueror himself and, as Norman Earls, they owned most of the land around Chester. Today not only are they the biggest landowners of Chester but, also in London, with properties in areas such as Grosvenor Square, Belgravia and even Mayfair.

As the vessel moves downstream almost immediately note the Red House on the right. There has been a public house on this site since 1850. It used to be painted red until quite recently, but changed to its present colour after pressure from the local council who considered it unsuitable for the river environment.



A little further on, note the large luxury apartment block built in 1979 and known as Riverside Court. From 1868 until the 1970s this was the site of yet another public house known as the White House. Beyond Riverside Court, and continuing for quite some distance on the right hand side, look out for some riverside wooden cottages which were once part of the property of the large houses to the rear. Earlier last century a road was built between the two and many were sold off. Prices vary considerably depending on their size and quality, but are quite expensive considering that the owners cannot live in them and insurance is difficult because of the likelihood of flooding.

Now turning to the left hand side, and far away in the distance, you will soon be able to see part of the city skyline. The tall, pointed tower is part of the Town Hall, seat of local government since it was built in 1869. Very much in the style of a French chateau but, surprisingly, designed by a young Irishman, William Lynn of Belfast, when only 29 years of age.

Moving further to the right you can see the four turrets atop the majestic Cathedral. Originally this was the site of a 7th century Saxon Minster but, in the 11th century, with the arrival of William, Duke of Normandy, the first Earl of Chester, Hugh Davranche, built an Abbey here in 1092. In 1540 Henry VIII, in order to divorce his wife, Catherine of Aragon, split with the Church in Rome and made himself head of the newly formed Church of England. From this point on Chester's Abbey became a Cathedral. In 1992 Chester celebrated its 900th Anniversary, firstly as an Abbey and then as the Cathedral. Queen Elizabeth II herself joined Chester's celebrations by creating the Lord Mayoralty of the City. Since 1228 we have had a Mayor - now we have a Lord Mayor.

Moving further right you will notice the long roof of St John the Baptist Church. In a similar way to our present Cathedral, St John's also started life as a Saxon Minster. In 1075 the Normans built their first Cathedral on this site and it remained so for twenty seven years. The Church was badly damaged during the Civil War in the mid 17th century, but very much lovingly restored to its present state by the 19th century Victorians.

Still on the left hand side, but sweeping well to the right, you will notice a tall chimney. This is Chester's lead shot tower. Built in 1799 to provide lead shot, otherwise known as musket balls, primarily for use as ammunition in the Napoleonic Wars. Although a number of such towers were built at that time, only Chester's tower remains in production today, albeit for the sole purpose of providing lead shot for clay pigeon shooting.

Returning once more to the right hand side one can't help but notice the large castle type building set back in the trees. This is Walmoor Hall, the retirement home of John Douglas the famous Victorian Chester architect and designed by him. He was responsible for almost 500 buildings in and around the City and is particularly noted for his splendid chimney stacks, some resembling sticks of barley sugar. By far his most famous piece of work is the marvellous wrought iron framework supporting Chester's beautiful Eastgate clock. Walmoor Hall was begun in 1898 but was not quite finished at the time of John Douglas' death in 1911.



Written by Mike Hill of Bithell's Boats and reproduced here by kind permission of Brian Clark.

Chairman's Page

Our New County

Welcome to Cheshire West and Chester. From 1st April, the Meadows are vested in them and are their primary responsibility. Effectively, we have new masters. At the time of going to press, the arrangements are not entirely clear – perhaps not surprising when thousands of jobs have to be re-arranged. Mike O’Kell, our former Countryside Manager whom we knew so well has become the Natural Environment Manager –an even grander title, which sadly seems to take him into a different orbit from ours. It appears The Meadows are to come under the care of a Green Spaces Team, headed by a Green Spaces Manager. We look forward to meeting him or her when appointed. Can this be a return to the Green Men of medieval times? Haunting and somewhat mysterious symbols of fertility – we have several of them in the Cathedral – it would be fun to have them on The Meadows!

We may well shed a tear for the old County Council, who looked after us so well for so long. We must hope their successors will carry on the good work and recognize what a jewel they have.

Proposed River Dee Park Masterplan

An imaginative scheme was launched by the City Council shortly before its demise. Consultants were commissioned to prepare a masterplan covering all the City’s parks and green spaces. I attended a workshop on behalf of FoM. You will be delighted to know that The Meadows was placed first of all the 27 sites considered. We must not preen ourselves too heartily: we may have more to do in future.

This is a highly promising project, which can benefit the entire City, and encourages more visitors. A report is due to be published: hopefully Cheshire West and Chester will adopt it and give it the backing and funding which at first site it appears to deserve. Other familiar sites which could benefit include Grosvenor Park, Caldby Nature Park, Edgar’s Field and Richmond Hill Gardens. There is a lot of Green around if you look for it!

Our Dogs

I grew up with a beautiful black Labrador, Ben. I tried to ride on him once (he didn’t mind) but fell off. His tail would clear a coffee table with one sweep. During the war, when my father was away, he looked after my mother. Just occasionally he answered the call of the wild and went off for a day or two. Once he came back carrying a large joint of raw beef – 2 or 3 pounds. My mother was aghast – where had he got it? Was it on the Black Market? Discreet enquiries bore no fruit. Eventually it was cooked and he enjoyed the benefit of his ill-gotten gains! He didn’t like dust-men – the noise and smell no doubt – and cornered one against our

Chairman's Page cont..

hedge until my father, home on leave, released the poor man , shaken but untouched.

Once in the early 1940's a large policeman called. The dog licence had not been renewed. (7/6d – 37.5p now). Hitler might be advancing across Europe but dogs had to be licensed. "Oh dear! My husband used to look after al that !" "Don't worry Ma'am. Get it done" My mother felt such kindness deserved a recompense, and remembered there was a bottle of beer in the back. She fetched it and offered it to the policeman, with a tankard. There was a degree of foaming when it was opened – it might have well have been in the back for two years – but the policeman, though obviously somewhat inflated, duly consumed it in silence, with a politeness matching the gesture. How different things were then.

John Makinson

Dates for your diary

Saturday 16th May – Chester Regatta – Rowing event at Sandy Lane

Wednesday 17th June (evening) - Deva Mile - Swimming race from the Red House to the Suspension Bridge

Sunday 21 June a.m. – Deva Triatholon – Swimming (River Dee) , Cycling and Running.

Thursday 25 June – FOM Summer Cruise at 7 p.m.

Sunday 13th July – One Earth – Grosvenor Park – Environmental Festival

Sunday 13th July – Chester Raft Race – On the River Dee

Newsletter

Without more articles/letters/contributions from members future newsletters will be restricted in size and possibly frequency. This would be a pertinent time to get your views on what should be contained in the newsletter. Please provide comments to Richard Cain, 56 Elizabeth Crescent, Chester, CH4 7AZ, mob: 07968 745434 email:richard.cain1@bntinternet.com

Queens Park High School Sports Plan (See inside back cover)

This is one topic that members may like to share their views. The proposed plans are to replace the existing single story flat roof boathouse with a two story pitched roof building including accommodation on the second story for up to 32 people. Improved boating facilities for users of the premises must be welcome but the change of use of the premises from occasional recreation/leisure to include future domestic use needs to be considered in terms of their potential environmental impact. Additional building /parking will be required which in a conservation area also needs careful consideration. Please let me have your comments/letters on this matter.

History of Chester Regatta (Part 1)

Founded 1733

1733. George II was on the throne, Robert Walpole was starting to be called 'prime minister' and Bonnie Prince Charlie had yet to make his famous stand at Culloden Moor. Canals and railways would not take off for another one hundred years. ..., and Chester Regatta was just getting started.

Chester Regatta has enjoyed a distinguished place in rowing history. In 1733 most of the competitors were men and women engaged in fishing, using their own boats and coracles to race against each other in mixed doubles. Racing was often between public houses - how unsurprising! The regatta flourished, continuing to welcome entries from men, women and juniors. When the Oxford - Cambridge Boat Race was rowed for the first time in 1829, Chester Regatta was the only established regatta in the country. Prior to 1830 it was the known venue for amateur racing and Chester was the first rowing centre in Britain.

Back in 1814 competition at Chester Regatta was for cash prizes. An open race had a prize of four guineas, another, for young women was for a purse of two pounds. In 1832 there were two separate races in six-oared and four-oared gigs for amateurs and boatmen, a two oared race for amateurs and a sixth race in fishermen's boats for women. There were no races for gentlemen rowers in the early 1830s but within a few years a race for amateurs from which manual labourers were excluded was instituted.

At the time of the accession of Queen Victoria in 1837, local newspapers stressed the respectability, gentility and influential position of the gentlemen interested in rowing at that time. The celebrations in honour of the coronation included a regatta with seven races open to competitors from all parts. The most important was for the Coronation Cup, for four-oared gigs, to be rowed and steered by amateurs "being persons not usually employed in manual labour". The event was a success and reported as an "aquatic treat worth of repetition every year".

In 1840, in honour of the marriage of Queen Victoria to Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg, the Right Honourable Lord Robert Grosvenor MP donated the "Prince Albert Cup" to Chester Regatta, still fought for at each regatta. At that time, the regatta was rowed half a mile upstream from the present suspension bridge to a river boat moored immediately opposite "The Mount" public house in Boughton and back again. The principal race was of course for the Prince Albert Cup. Two boats from Chester and three from Liverpool took part in heavy, clinker-built, inrigged tubs. In the final, Liverpool led by a length at the turn and it was not until a short distance from the finish that Chester drew up to within half a length, but could not get level and lost by one length.

1851 the course changed and the Regatta was rowed downstream from Heron Bridge to Dee Fords. Last year, tradition was upheld with a Victor Ludorum being offered to clubs. Commemorative prizes to honour the Regatta's 270th birthday added interest to any rower looking to add a special trophy to his or her shelf. The course this year will again be between the Red House public house and the Earl's Eye (overlooked by The Mount public house) using a course with plenty of visibility from the new regatta site at Sandy Lane.



Massive Sports Plan for Queens Park High School

An ambitious £700,000 sports development at a city High School is to be considered by councillors on Thursday 26th February.

The project has been put forward by Queens Park High School which is seeking to replace an all weather pitch at the school and to build a replacement two storey boathouse on the riverside with eight affordable apartments on the upper floor.

Surplus land on the campus at St George's Crescent and at the front of the school would be sold off and new parking areas created to enable land at present used for parking to be used for sporting and social activities.

The project would complete a programme of "significant enhancement" to the sports facilities available to the school and the wider community, according to a County Hall report. It would be fully funded through the sale of the land and finance from the school together with a contribution from the Muir Group Housing Association which would lease the apartments for 30 years at a peppercorn rent.

County councillors are due to hear the school has been planning the scheme for a number of years and has commissioned a consultant to develop it further. A feasibility study has also been completed.

The existing all weather pitch at Queens Park is beyond use, according to the school and a new synthetic turf pitch would meet the needs of a number of users.

The boathouse, which is used by the school for rowing and canoeing and is hired to various community groups for canoeing, is said to be in a poor condition and is "very dated and not fit for purpose".

There is also a long-standing joint use arrangement with Connexions, previously the County Youth Service.

"A new boathouse would offer an excellent facility for the school with enhanced community use," suggests the report.

The scheme has been developed by the school, the Housing Association and the City Council on the basis of it being self financing for the present and the longer term future.

The Muir Group would provide a financial contribution towards the construction of the boathouse with the school being responsible for fitting out costs.

At the end of the initial 30 year lease the apartments would revert to the local authority who would be free to enter into a new lease or to sell the properties on the open market. The surplus land to be sold is unused and out of bounds for school pupils and unsuitable for use as a playing field, adds the report.

A meeting of the County Council Executive is being asked to agree that the two areas of land should be declared surplus subject to the proceeds being linked to the scheme and used for the new synthetic pitch, part of the costs of constructing and fitting out the boathouse and the creation of new parking areas. Councillors are also being asked to approve the lease of the apartments.

David Norbury, Chester Chronicle.

The above article is with acknowledgements to Chester Chronicle

(<http://www.chesterchronicle.co.uk/chester-news/local-chester-news/2009/02/24/massive-sports-plan-for-queens-park-high-school-59067-23001717/0>)

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.



- Birds:** 01/01 A male mandarin duck was an exotic find past the Rueben and Joan Wesley seat. This bird is usually seen in small numbers on the river by the Duke's Estate. A stonechat was also seen on the Meadows off the Bottoms Lane track (VG).
 A raven alighted on the Queens Park High School field before being mobbed by lesser black backed gulls. The same or another bird was seen again above the Meadows 31/01 (RS).
 03/01 Four floating fluff balls on the river was a good count of little grebe (VG).
 06/01 Did the big freeze take its toll on one of the stonechats? Only one remained in the horse paddock. The ice-sheets on the river provided an alternative landing stage for common and black headed gulls. Snipe moved from the frozen Meadows to feed by the river.
 A redshank took refuge underneath the arches of the Old Dee Bridge.
 17/01 A summer plumaged great crested grebe fished on the river by Sandy Lane Sailing Club. Once persecuted for its feathers in Victorian times the great crested grebe now only has the approach of passing rowers to deal with.
 25/01 Five bullfinches (2 male & 3 female) sat in the same hawthorn bush by Bottoms Lane track. A buzzard continued to hunt on the Meadows all month. What has it found to its liking? (AE/TS).

Flora: snowdrops appeared for the first time mid month after being held back by the cold weather (AE).

February 2009

- Birds:** 14/02 A quiet start to the month. A redpoll joined the other finches in the hedgerow off Bottoms Lane track. Twelve snipe flew high above the Meadows gradually dropping down and then flying past 'Red Arrows' style before eventually settling on the quieter Handbridge Marsh.
 The snipe's larger cousin, a woodcock, flew off the Handbridge Marsh before disappearing into cover behind the small copse on the Handbridge side.
 16/02 A great spotted woodpecker was heard drumming to the side of Bottoms Lane track.
 22/02 The mute swans opposite Sandy Lane increased from four to seven individuals.

Other Fauna: Despite a search at the end of the month only one report received of frog spawn in a ditch in the centre of the Meadows (ZC)
 No reports either of any foxes.

Events: Hedges round the Handbridge Marsh were cut back at the start of the month.

Andy Ingham, Meadows Log Recorder. Tel. 677135

Corporate Members

In our year September 2007 to September 2008 we gratefully acknowledge

The Alfred Green Partnership - Chartered Accountants
 Bank of Scotland - Capital 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

Ureenco (Capenhurst) Ltd.
 Dixon Webb - Chartered Surveyors
 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

Many thanks to our contributors and honorary artist, Jill Kemp. Contributions to the Newsletter are very welcome, but please note that they are not necessarily the views of the Editor or Committee. Please send contributions to the Editor.