



# FRIENDS OF THE MEADOWS

Newsletter 171

May/June 2009

## The Stinging Nettle

'Yet it would be well if people knew how to make use of them. When the nettle is young, its leaf forms an excellent vegetable; when it matures, it has filaments like hemp or flax. Nettle fabric is as good as canvas. Chopped the nettle is good for poultry; pounded it is good for cattle. The seed of the nettle mingled with fodder imparts a gloss to the coats of animals; its root mixed with salt produces a beautiful yellow colour.'

*Victor Hugo  
'Les Miserables'*

In 1532, the doctor and botanist Otto Brunfels wrote, 'Could there be anything as trifling or as despised as a nettle?', a point of view that persists to this day in the minds of most people. In fact, the common stinging nettle has been of great benefit to mankind from the earliest times. Traces of nettle were found in the remains of Neolithic stilt dwellings in Switzerland dating back to the third millennium BC. Nettles provided our ancestors with food, clothing and medicine. Pedanius Dioscorides, a Greek physician served as a surgeon in the Roman army under the Emperor Nero. In his master work, 'De Materia Medica', Dioscorides described 600 medical plants and this wisdom was influential for 1,500 years. The nettle was greatly esteemed by Dioscorides who gave detailed descriptions of its uses.

The stinging nettle, *Urtica dioica*, is found throughout the temperate areas of Europe and Asia and also in Japan, South Africa, Australia and the Andes. The nettle's generic name, *Urtica*, comes from the Latin 'uro' to burn due to the burning properties of the fluid contained in the stinging hairs of the leaves. The plant's specific name, *dioica*, is from a Latin word meaning 'two houses' as there are separate male plants with flowers that produce pollen and female plants with seed producing structures. The stinging sensation produced by the nettle is caused by a complex of chemicals including histamine, acetylcholine and 5-hydroxytryptamine. The juice of the nettle provides an antidote to its own sting but the well known remedy of dock leaves works just as well (there is a higher concentration of antihistamine in dock root).

When nettles are boiled for food the chemicals that cause them to sting are broken down and rendered harmless. The plant is a good source of iron. It is important to use fresh, young nettles as towards autumn the leaves become gritty with crystals called cystoliths that can act as an irritant to the kidneys. Nettles are also an important food source for many insects including the larvae of the peacock and small tortoiseshell butterflies.

In Hans Andersen's fairy tale 'The Princess and the Eleven Swans' the coats she wove for them were made from nettles. The fibres in mature nettles are similar to hemp or flax and have been used to make cloth or string throughout human history.

Nettles have been used as a herbal remedy for rheumatism, sciatica and anaemia, to lower the blood pressure and improve circulation and as a poultice to treat eczema. Methinks Victor Hugo was right about nettles!

*Ron Iremonger*



## Your River Cruise ~ The Return Journey (continued)

This particular stretch of the river is known as Dee Ford and was the site of a Roman ford way back in the 1st century A.D. It's quite shallow here even today and it is still possible to walk across, at this point, without getting one's hair wet.

Now in view, on the right hand side, is a splendid 19th century cream building with a red roof, recently divided into self-contained apartments. Just marvel at those amazing stone mullioned windows which date from the 17th century but whose origins, even today, are still uncertain.

Many of the buildings from this point on were constructed around the mid 19th century, in most cases, for the well-to-do people of the day.

The railways came to Chester in the 1840s and tourism started to boom. The city also became a fashionable centre for the rich and famous, many of whom chose to build their houses in the suburbs. This particular area, approximately one mile from the city centre and known as Boughton, is just one of them. Today many of the houses have been split into apartments or taken over by various business concerns. This area was also very significant 2,000 years ago. The Romans discovered natural water springs in the vicinity and pumped their supplies into the city by means of lead pipes and an aqueduct. Our modern city still takes some of its water supply from this area.



Shortly coming into view on the right hand side, and standing out very prominently, is the lovely Church of St Paul. Although initially built in 1830, it was comprehensively restored in 1876 by the previously mentioned Victorian architect, John Douglas. This is very much an Arts and Crafts building and contains windows by William Morris and Burne-Jones.

Between the Church and the buildings below is a barely visible small lane known as Barrelwell Hill. For an explanation of this strange name one has to go back to Mediaeval times and the practice of witchcraft. Ladies under suspicion were brought here to this spot, tied into a barrel and then rolled down the hill into the river. Should the occupant drown then she was deemed innocent and already on her way to Heaven. However, should she survive the ordeal then she would be declared guilty, taken from the barrel and transferred to a place of execution where she would then be hanged. Clearly a classic 'no win' situation for the ladies. Just a little distance beyond the Church look out for an overgrown, uncultivated area known as Hangman's Hill. This is the place where such executions were carried out. It is still consecrated land and will



not be built on. From the 13th to the 17th centuries some 300,000 unfortunates suffered similar deaths throughout Europe. The last such trials in England were in 1712. For many years this was also the site of more general public hangings, the last being in 1801. When John Clare, a young boy in his 20s was convicted of stealing and brought here in chains to await hanging he escaped and tried to swim across the river to safety. Unfortunately he drowned but, because justice had to be seen to be done, he was dragged from the river and hanged anyway. The whole gory process took well over an hour and caused such revulsion that public executions, on this spot, stopped forthwith. However, they continued on the western side of the city until 1866 and, in Britain generally, until 1868.

For quite some time now we have been travelling round a big bend in the river. In the 11th century the land on the left hand side was actually an island known, in those days, as an Eyot or Eye and owned by the Norman Earls. When the last Earl died, without an heir, in 1237 the land passed to the Crown and was eventually sold off. Today, just as in Mediaeval times, the land is referred to as the Earl's Eye.

Just ahead on the right hand side, and partially hidden by trees, look out for a red brick building; in appearance like a fairy-tale castle. This was once the home of Thomas Hughes who wrote *Tom Brown's School Days*, published in 1856 and recounting some of his experiences at Rugby School. As a member of the legal profession he moved to Chester in 1882 as a County Court Judge and had this beautiful mansion built overlooking the river, naming it Uffington House after Uffington where he was born in 1822. Uffington was a small town in Berkshire but, because of boundary changes, it is now in Oxfordshire.

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

## **Chairman's Page**

### **Canon Laurie Skipper**

Many of you will have known Laurie Skipper, who died on the 9<sup>th</sup> May at the age of 92. He was Rector of Eccleston for ten years before "retiring" to Handbridge. His powerful preaching was always so relevant, reconciling things in Heaven with things down here. Also, he wrote a whole series of engaging articles for our newsletter, on such varied topics as pulford Castle ( "No, dear Dept of Works, Edward I levelled it , not me"), the great floods, his ancient Austin Seven ("Running Smoothly"), and his early days in Nottingham. Now he is at peace, after a lifetime of service. We send our sympathies and much love to his Widow, Margaret ( herself over 90), his three daughters and ten grand-children. Margaret lives in Apartment 4, Manor mead, Hindhead, Surrey GU26 6RA and we are sure she would love to hear from any of you.

### **Chairmanship**

Regrettably I shall have to stand down from the chair at the November AGM. Anno Domini dictates.

It would be a vast pity if FoM ceased to exist because nobody from our membership of about 250 can spare the time to take over the not very onerous duties of the Chair. It is not too late! Will all of you who read this please think again and give me a telephone call at 678876.

The AGM is fixed for 19<sup>th</sup> November – Stephen Langtree from the Civic Trust has agreed to talk to us, and will show some pretty pictures – and the Meadows are in excellent shape. Surely we do not want to go backwards on all this? Come along – give me a Phone!      John Makinson

### **Summer Cruise Cancelled**

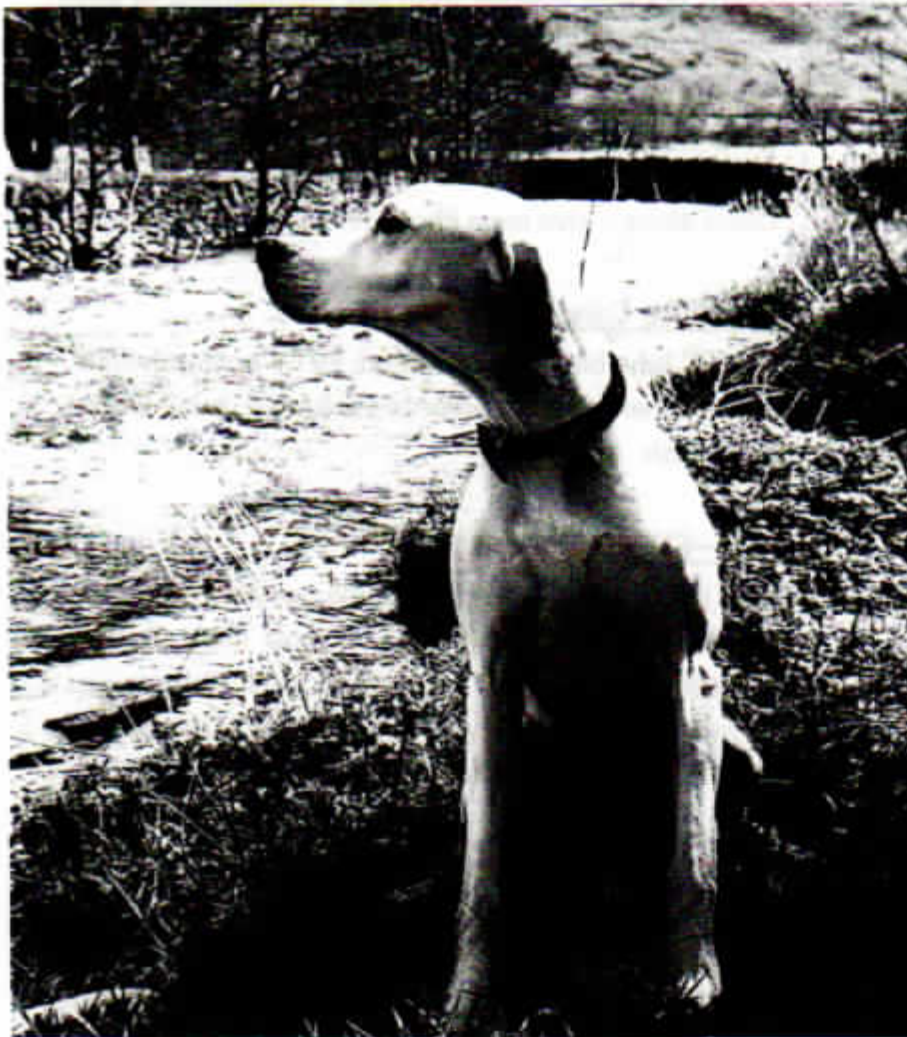
The summer cruise up the River booked for 25<sup>th</sup> June has been cancelled. By 3<sup>rd</sup> June only four people had booked and paid. A pity. Next time we will ask for earlier commitment, but it would not have been wise to anticipate a last minute rush

### **Our Dogs –(2) – Gemma**

Once in a lifetime you may be fortunate to meet a dog which personifies elegance and clean living. Such a dog was Gemma. Pointers divide into working dogs and show dogs, the latter being an inch or more taller at the shoulder and bred for show rather than work. Gemma was a show dog, and knew it. The step of her head was superiority itself. Her front paws were so delicate that I would pick one up, cradle it in the palm of my hand and stroke it in admiration. Gemma practically purred.

The Easter show at Nefyn had a class for sporting dogs. There was twenty or so Labradors, a few setters, and three or four other pointers entered by professional breeders. Gemma beat the lot and took first prize to the audible grumbles of the breeders. One very hot day we went to the Anglesey Show. We all had ice cream, so Gemma had to have one too. The dainty way in which

she sat on her haunches and licked gently all around the proffered cornet made several passers-by stop and smile in amusement. Once we were in Deeside, Scotland, walking up a track to the area for grouse trials. Gemma didn't actually work: we were running another dog, and took Gemma along to share the magnificent hills and heather with us. Six or seven dogs were ahead of us, being walked up in single file by their handlers. On the left was a small bush. Gemma would not pass it. She tugged at her lead and pointed in true pointer fashion, nose down and tail out. Sure enough, sitting in the bottom of the bush was a grouse, its black beady eyes visible when you looked down from directly on top. Six or seven prime working dogs had gone past, but not Gemma. Show dog though she was, there was nothing wrong with her nose! One day we were in the Lake district, by a stream flowing into Lake Ullswater. A professional photographer friend took the accompanying photograph. Later it appeared on the front page of *Our Dogs*. Not many dogs can have graced the front of that periodical at the age of twelve. She strode the stage for two years after that, the softness of her coat, like a beautiful woman's skin, never to be forgotten.



## History of Chester Regatta Part 2

Chester Regatta 1733 – 2008 The earliest record of rowing in Britain dates back to 296 AD with a medal of Constantine I showing a four-oared coxed craft on the River Thames. Another record dating from 973 AD describes how King Edgar visited Chester following his coronation at Bath. He was rowed on the River Dee by the “eight kings of Britain”. The crew is listed as bow Kenneth (Scotland); 2 Malcolm (Cumbria); 3 Maccus McHarold (The Islands); 4 Dunmail (Strathclyde); 5 Siferth (unattached); 6 Hywel Ap Idwal (Gwynedd); 7 Iago (Gwynedd); stroke Tuchil (unattached) and coxswain King Edgar. The next account is 1541 which says that the scholars of the King’s School, Chester, rowed Henry VIII up the River Dee. The word “regatta” is first known to be used in English in 1652 to describe the boat races on the Grand Canal in Venice. There is a reference to a “local print of Chester Regatta in 1733” in an article in *The Field* magazine of 11th August 1883, but unfortunately the print of 1733 itself has not yet been found.



Records show that in the 18th Century, there were rowing contests on the Dee between fishing boats and coracles used by professional watermen, women and apprentices. Betting was an important element of these contests and the prize was usually a purse. In Joseph Hemmingway’s *History of City of Chester* written in 1831, there is specific reference to Chester Regatta. “1841, June 17, the City illuminated in the commemoration of the General peace ... a regatta took place on the Dee.” A further reference to early 19th Century rowing in Chester describes the regatta of 1817; “... when Liverpool and other aquatic minded cities sent boat crews to compete in the races ... the surface of the Dee was covered with boats decorated in all the gaudy splendour of various covered floats.” A poster for Chester Regatta in 1832 displays events for six-oared and four-oared gigs for amateurs and professional boatmen, as well as an event for women in fishermen’s boats.

Amateur racing closer to today’s type of regatta appears to have started in the early 19th Century, with most of the oldest English clubs being founded between 1840 and 1870. There are at present six rowing clubs on the River Dee, although records reveal that other clubs have existed in the past. Athena Women’s Amateur Rowing Club at the Groves only recently ceased to have members and the White House which used to overlook Dee Fords and the Meadows from Sandy Lane was the home of Cestria RC. The oldest of the rowing clubs on the River Dee is Royal Chester RC, founded in July 1838 as Chester Victoria RC in honour of the recent accession of Queen Victoria in 1836. A subscription was levied for the purchase of two “first rate” racing boats and during its first two seasons the club enjoyed numerous local regatta successes.

Source: [http://www.chesterregatta.org.uk/Chester\\_Regatta/Welcome.html](http://www.chesterregatta.org.uk/Chester_Regatta/Welcome.html)

## The Meadows in Spring

The Meadows cattle arrived during the week-end of 28/29<sup>th</sup> March. I think I look forward to this event almost as much as the arrival of the first swallows and house martens. I delight in seeing the cattle investigate the perimeter of their new summer home, they go at a fair trot all round the edges of the Meadows before settling down to eat.

Last year the swallows arrived on 11<sup>th</sup> April, I remember it well, at first just a couple and then about eight. They stayed a day or so for a feed and then moved on. After that others came and went until eventually we had probably a couple of dozen. It was an utterly beautiful sight to see them swooping and diving from dawn 'til dusk.

This year I saw one swallow on 3<sup>rd</sup> April and then no more until two on the 16<sup>th</sup>.

When I was a tiny girl in Lincolnshire it was the departure of these lovely birds which fascinated me the most. I would see them gathering on the telegraph wires alongside the railway that ran a couple of hundred yards behind our house. My mother would tell me they were waiting to go on a journey of thousands of miles. I was probably too young to properly understand what a huge distance they flew but I would talk about every day until one day they were gone.

I always hoped they would stay and maybe build a nest in the Spring on our house, but they never did. I can never understand people who have the honour of a bird choosing to build a nest under their eaves and who then take a stick and knock it down. I have only ever had sparrows and starlings in my roofspace and I loved their chattering busy little lives.

When some years ago a pair of swans nested near our boatshed I was like an expectant parent. I tried to give them privacy but found it hard to resist peeping at them especially when hatching was imminent. I even put nest building material nearby for them as they constantly rearranged the twigs and grasses that made up their huge nest. They stayed for five years and produced a lot of young. In the fifth year something happened to the cob and he disappeared. The following Spring the pen reappeared with a different mate but sadly they proceeded to construct a new nest too close to the water and it was swamped by a high tide and their eggs ruined. They went away and built a further nest upstream before they were driven away by others. The pen eventually finished up on the canal and then disappeared from the area altogether.

The seasons fly by and with them the years but apart from a few hitches the animals, birds and insects continue with their constant life of toil and reproduction. Long may they continue to set an example to us all.

Rita Hibbitt

## Newsletter

Please send any articles/letters /comments to Richard Cain, 56 Elizabeth Crescent, Chester, CH4 7AZ or email [richard.cain1@btinternet.com](mailto:richard.cain1@btinternet.com). The next newsletter will be in September to coincide with the year-end; all contributions very welcome. (Very difficult to have a newsletter without content!!!) I would particularly welcome suggestions as to what members would like to see in the newsletter in the future and if in deed there is a need and desire for a newsletter.

## Forthcoming events

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| 5 July  | Cheshire Wildlife Trust "One Earth Festival" Bickley Hall Farm, Bickley ,nr Malpas |
| 12 July | Raft Race on the River Dee   |
| 27 Sep  | Chester Long Distance Sculls – River Dee   |



**Mar/Apr 2009**

**Birds:** 01/03 Two ravens landed briefly on the Meadows before flying off towards Handbridge.  
 21/03 A woodcock took flight from the Handbridge Marsh and again by the Bottoms Lane track. In the Handbridge Marsh two female and one male stonechats perched on bullrushes. They were last seen on the Meadows on 15/03  
 02/03 A blackcap singing in the Bottoms Lane area; a winter visitor or summer migrant? (RS).  
 17/03 The cheerful and repetitive sound of a chiffchaff was heard along the Bottoms Lane track.  
 18/03 Mute swan numbers increased to eight off Sandy Lane.  
 21/03 A male mandarin was again on the river just past the Reuben and Joan Wesley seat.

**Animals:** 20/03 A good number of tadpoles were found in the ditches in shallow water in danger of drying up (TG)  
 18/03 A dead common shrew was found in reeds by the horse paddock next to Handbridge Marsh.

**Insects:** 15/03 Spring sunshine brought out the first butterflies. A brimstone flew along the edge of Handbridge Marsh.  
 Two commas spiralled upwards from the Beeston View track.

**Flora:** 18/03 A single lesser celandine was in flower underneath the hedgerow on the Bottoms Lane track and was joined by many more by 25/03.  
 25/03 The white flowers of the blackthorn burst open either side of Bottoms Lane.

**Events:** The willows along the riverbank received their annual pruning.

**APRIL 2009**

**Birds:** 01/04 A lesser whitethroat singing in a hedge off Bottoms Lane - First of Spring (FoS) (TG). Perhaps as many as four birds were singing around the Meadows by 25/04.  
 04/04 A winter fieldfare and a redwing remained on the Meadows. A mandarin duck was again on the river at first light by the Reuben and Joan Wesley seat and joined by a second drake on 13/04. The drake was then joined by a female in flight over the Handbridge Marsh on 21/04.  
 05/04 Two sand martins (FoS) flew along the riverbank. The little owl was last seen perched in a tree by the Meadows and seems now to have moved on to pastures new.  
 06/04 The 'Birdguides' website reported a rare juvenile Iceland gull seen on the weir with resident herring and lesser black backed gulls.  
 08/04 Willow warblers (FoS) were singing appropriately in a willow opposite the Red House.  
 10/04 Swallows flew along the riverbank and two reed warblers sang from reeds below the Handbridge allotments. Both (FoS).  
 13/04 A grasshopper warbler 'reeled' from brambles by the Handbridge allotments (FoS).  
 15/04 A common sandpiper flew low over the river on stiff, bowed down wings by R & J Wesley seat (FoS) and two were seen over the river by Sandy Lane 18/04 (VG). Two calling oystercatchers flew high over the Meadows (TG).  
 18/04 A common whitethroat gave a brief view below the Handbridge allotments (FoS).  
 23/04 A distant cuckoo could be heard calling from the Huntington area (TG).  
 25/04 A splendid male wheatear sat on top of gorse. A first for the Meadows Log since records began. Nearby a sedge warbler sang from a hawthorn bush (FoS).  
 26/04 A lone swift casually drifted over Cross Hey into Handbridge (FoS).

**Animals:** Five smooth newts found under a paving slab in an Andrews Crescent garden (TG).  
 04/04 The ditch with the tadpoles (20/03) was rechecked and had unfortunately dried out (TG).  
 24/04 Fox sightings again scarce but one seen in the evening in Andrews Crescent (VG).

**Insects:** 01/04 The first holly blue of the spring was in a garden in Andrews Crescent (TG).  
 05/04 A small tortoiseshell basked in spring sunshine by the Handbridge allotments (FoS).  
 11/04 A pristine orange tip flew around a Cross Hey garden (FoS).  
 12/04 Two peacocks in Andrews Crescent and a speckled wood by Bottoms Lane. Both (FoS).  
 17/04 A green veined white appeared in a garden in Andrews Crescent (FoS) (TG).  
 19/04 A fine sight was good numbers of green veined whites, speckled woods and orange tips all on the wing below the Handbridge allotments on what was the warmest day of the year so far.  
 23/04 Enormous columns of gnats resembling smoking chimneys took to the air along the river (TG)

**Flora:** Lady's smock flowered at the lower end of Bottoms Lane track, the lagoon areas and later in fields to the side of the Meadows. Bluebells were also in flower along the Bottoms Lane track.

**Events:** 03/04 Fire engines were called out to a blaze which engulfed a large area of the Handbridge Marsh. Unfortunately vast swathes of bullrushes, reeds and grasses were damaged. At the weekend eighteen cattle were introduced to the Meadows. Jackdaws soon took advantage and were seen to land and remove hair to line their nests. The cattle seemed to enjoy the experience!



- Birds:**
- 04/05 A lesser whitethroat continued to call at the lower end of Bottoms Lane track and the same or another scolded every passer-by along the path to the right of Bottoms Lane. At least three pairs of lesser whitethroats have nested in the hedgerows around the Meadows this year. A mute swan has again nested in one of the lagoon areas along the river. However, the nest was deserted on 19/05 with no sign of eggs or cygnets. Another pair of mute swans have nested on the river below the Blue Moon café. The nest has been built on one of the floating landing stages and the pen was sitting on eggs at the end of the month.
- A lapwing was seen and heard displaying above the river. On 23/05 three agitated lapwings rose above the river. A carrion crow flew away from the scene with a lapwing egg in its beak.
- 01/05 The first group of swifts arrived and started their patrol of the Handbridge skies (TG).
- 23/05 Twenty swifts were in the air.
- 09/05 The first young long tailed tits appeared in the hedgerows and by the end of the month every tree and bush seemed to have long tailed tits in it.
- Mallard ducklings were on the river past the Reuben and Joan Wesley seat and nearby the mandarin drake sat on a log preening its coat of many colours.
- 19/05 The first young blue tits joined the long tailed tits to feed in the hedgerow off Bottoms Lane.
- 23/05 The yaffle of a green woodpecker drew attention to a tree beside Handbridge Marsh. The bird sat motionless before finally dropping down to feed on ants in the grass. As the clouds separated and the sun came out three grasshopper warblers reeled from the boggy parts of the Meadows.
- 25/05 The avenue of willows provides good nesting sites for the birds and treecreepers have nested under the flaking bark, also great tits have taken advantage by raising a family nearby.
- 28/05 A skylark filled the air with its song before descending to the Meadows. A second bird was seen on the ground nearby.
- Sand martins continued to feed along the river and may well be nesting in the sandstone wall on the river bend.
- Twenty Canada geese provided a dramatic sight as they flew over the Earl's Eye in the afternoon (TG).
- Oystercatchers have again been flying noisily up and down the river (TG). It is possible they have young nearby.
- Flora:**
- Umbels started to appear either side of the Bottoms Lane track. Soon they will grow tall and hang over the pathway. Bottoms Lane track at its best!
- Comfrey continued to spread below the Handbridge allotments attracting good numbers of bees to its flowers. Marsh marigold also flowered well into the month with at least fifteen plants on the marsh below the Handbridge allotments. Ragged robin was in flower in one of the lagoon areas upriver from the Meadows.
- Animals:**
- 22/05 A fox scampered away from the river's edge towards the Handbridge Marsh.
- 25/05 In the morning sunlight three fox cubs played in the long grass below the Handbridge allotments.
- 26/05 Two hedgehogs appeared in an Andrews Crescent garden enjoying the warm spring evening (TG).
- Insects:**
- 25/05 The first small copper of the year was noted (TG). This tiny butterfly was also seen on the embankment below Andrews Crescent and by the side of the Handbridge Marsh. The first banded demoiselle damselfly of the spring dazzled in the sunlight by one of the lagoon areas.
- 18/05 Thousands of painted lady butterflies have flooded into the country and are moving north. The first of these migrants to be seen on the Meadows were three feeding on pyracantha flowers in Elizabeth Crescent (RS) and another below Andrews Crescent (TG).

*Andy Ingham, Meadows Log Recorder. Tel. 677135*

#### Corporate Members

In our year September 2008 to September 2009 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  
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 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.

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.