

FRIENDS OF THE MEADOWS

Newsletter 172

July/Aug/Sept 2009

Leeches

Not all leeches are bloodsuckers, many species predate on smaller invertebrates such as insects, crustaceans and worms. Leeches are classified as segmented worms belonging to the Phylum Annelida, most have 33 segments. Their bodies are flattened with suction cups at each end that are used for mobility and for latching on to hosts. Leeches are often brown or sometimes black or dark green, some species have no markings, others have spots and stripes. There are about 500 species of leech worldwide, 15 of which are native to the British Isles; several of these can be found on the Chester Meadows but fear not, only the rare medicinal leech is capable of piercing human skin.

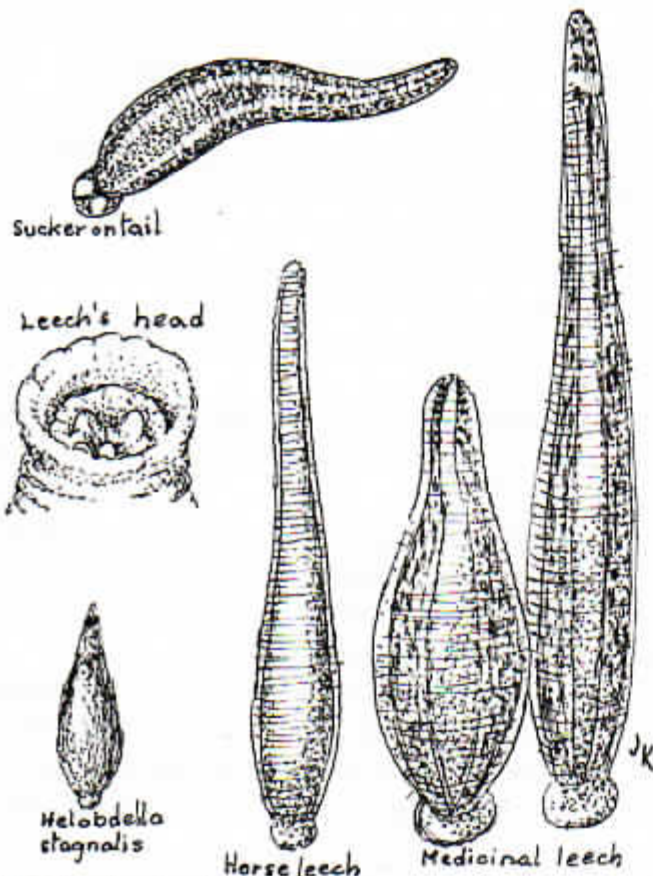
Most species of leech are not considered parasites but highly evolved predators as they take only one meal of blood from their victim. A few leech species are parasitic remaining permanently attached to their host, *C. Lophii* a parasite of the angler fish, *H. Soleae* a parasite of sole and various species of *Theromyzon* that live in the nasal cavities of water fowl. Species you may encounter on the Chester Meadows include, *Helobdella stagnalis*, a small brown leech up to 10mm, very common in still waters, this species is not a

bloodsucker but swallows its prey of worms, snails and other invertebrates (those of you with a Classical education will have noted that the scientific name of the horse leech means "bloodsucker", a name no doubt attributed before its feeding habits were discovered).

For over a millennium Western European medicine was dominated by the theories of the Roman physician Galen (200AD). According to Galen the four 'humours', blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile must be kept in balance. Leech therapy was used throughout Mediaeval Europe and up to the late 19th century to balance the 'humours'. In modern times leeches are making a comeback in microsurgery; leeches are an effective method of reducing blood coagulation, reducing venous pressure from pooling blood and are used in reconstructive surgery to stimulate circulation in reattachment operations for organs such as eyelids, fingers and ears.

Countless millions of the medicinal leech, *Hirudo medicinalis*, were collected for leech therapy and research to the extent that this species is now rare throughout Europe and is legally protected by the CITES Treaty. Blood sucking leeches possess a proboscis with a triple set of semicircular, chitinous jaws used to cut through the skin of their host. These creatures produce a substance called 'hirudin' in their saliva that mixes with consumed blood and prevents it coagulating in the stomach. Blood is first pumped into the crop by the pharynx where special nephridia remove up to 40% of the water from the blood so the animal stores a greater volume of food. Blood sucking leeches do not digest their own food but employ symbiotic bacteria in their gut to break down the blood meal before absorption of nutrients takes place.

Ron Iremonger.



Your River Cruise ~ The Return Journey (concluding)

Now look out for what appear to be some lovely Georgian buildings on the right hand side. Known as Deva Terrace they were actually built in Victorian times. Deva is the name given to the city almost 2,000 years ago by the Romans in honour of the Celtic goddess of this very same River Dee on which you are now sailing.

Almost immediately, and again on the right hand side, we come to Grosvenor Park. This 20 acres of parkland was laid out with lawns, flower beds and specimen trees and given to the people of Chester in the 1860s by Richard Grosvenor, the 2nd Marquis of Westminster, whose marvellous statue you can see high up between the trees. I am sure that many of you will be surprised to know that the very first Public Park in the world was laid out in Birkenhead, a town north of here just across the River Mersey from Liverpool. It was landscaped in 1874 by Joseph Paxton, that very same architect responsible for the Crystal Palace built for the Great Exhibition of 1851. His pupil, Edward Kemp, designed Chester's park in 1867 and the very same idea was later taken across the Atlantic to America to become Central Park in New York.

Once more on the right hand side note the large poplar tree at the water's edge. This signals the start of the final stretch of your cruise. From this point our passage tends to vary because of other river traffic and so, for this reason, I will outline the remaining points of interest so that you can look out for them yourselves.



To begin with you will see some of Chester's premier Rowing Clubs on view, the oldest of which is the King's School. The King in question is Henry VIII and, following the dissolution of the Abbey, the school was founded in 1541 in the refectory of the newly formed Cathedral for the education of 24 poor and friendless boys. Of course it soon became a school for the prosperous townspeople and local gentry and, by 1960, the school was too large and was moved to new premises just south of the city.

The Boathouse Inn dates from the 1850s and is still as popular today as all those years ago.

The large buildings on the left hand side were built from the mid to late 19th century; once again for the well-to-do people of the day. Nowadays many have been converted into Nursing Homes and the like.

With the arrival of the railways in the mid 19th century people flocked to the city. Many of the rich people naturally chose to live in the suburbs next to the river, like the area of Queen's Park on the left, and in 1852 a suspension bridge was built as a pedestrian link to the city. The present bridge replaced the original in 1923.

Some of you may have seen or heard of Brown's Department Store in Chester. Founded by Susannah Brown in the late 18th century, it later went on to become one of

the best known shops in the North of England. Now it is part of the Debenham Group. It was the same Brown family who, in the 1880s, provided funds for the planting of the grove of lime trees which you can see all along the right hand side of the river. Today the area is simply known as The Groves.

Immediately opposite the landing stage where you boarded this vessel look out for a very large building with Classical columns. It was originally built in neo Georgian style in 1937 as the Headquarters of the Army's Western Command. The Army moved out in 1997 and the building now belongs to the Bank of Scotland.

In the distance note the Old Dee Bridge. Built in the 14th century, it replaced a number of partly wooden structures washed away in floods and high tides and there is recent archaeological evidence that part of its base is even of Roman origin.

A tower on the left hand side was demolished in the 1780s. In 1826 the structure was widened for pedestrian traffic and, in 1886, tolls were finally abolished.

Just before the bridge is the weir built by the Norman Earls of Chester in the 11th century. It served two main purposes - firstly to provide water power for their corn mills situated along the right hand side of the river and, secondly, to keep a constant depth of water above the weir.

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

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In our year September 2008 to September 2009 we gratefully acknowledge

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Birds: The mute swans nesting on the landing stage below the Blue Moon were unsuccessful. The eggs failed to hatch.
 09/06 Willow warblers were busily feeding young by the edge of Handbridge Marsh.
 13/06 A grasshopper warbler was still reeling on the Meadows but this skulking bird remained well out of sight. More obliging were the sedge warblers with their rising and dancing display flights.
 20/06 Two goosanders were found on the river by the weir. They were tolerant of the canoeists and were observed by a number of FOMs. They were fairly approachable and even posed for photographs on 21/06 in the afternoon. At least one remained on the river at the month's end. The only other recorded sighting of a goosander was back in Aug/Sep 2007.
 27/06 The hawthorns dotted around the Meadows can produce the odd surprise. A small brown bird flew out of one revealing a bright red tail. It was a female redstart, a bird normally associated with Welsh woodlands at this time of year.

Animals: 09/06 A fox and two of her growing cubs were in the long grass by the horses paddock but vanished into the reeds when the vixen realised they were being watched.

Insects: 27/06 Meadow browns and small skippers were found in the field of long grasses to the right of the lower Bottoms Lane track. Two common blue damselflies were beside one of the lagoon areas.

Flora: Yellow flag irises and purple loosestrife were in flower in the damper parts of the Meadows at the beginning of the month. Meadowsweet herb and the tall pinkish tinged hedge parsley flowered to the right of Bottoms Lane track. The bright yellow petals of the monkey flower could be found at the end of Handbridge Marsh and also clinging to the Old Dee Bridge.

July 2009

Birds: 08/07 Incredibly a further three female goosanders were on the river by the Reuben and Joan Wesley seat. The two moulting males remained to at least 21/07. The males favoured the fast shallow water by the weir but were also seen by the Bandstand and the Sandy Lane Sailing Club.

12/07 A kingfisher, the first of the year, darted past the Sandy Lane landing stage. The same or another bird was seen farther up the river. Amongst the bullrushes on the Handbridge Marsh were newly fledged reed warblers. They begged food from their parent continuously as they moved through the bullrushes. A flock of sixty goldfinches also fed on the Handbridge Marsh.

18/07 A grasshopper warbler reeled from a sapling on the Handbridge Marsh.

26/07 A marsh/willow tit put in a brief appearance by the side of the Handbridge Marsh but unfortunately its correct identity remained a mystery as it vanished quickly into the tree canopy. The little owl put in an appearance.

Animals: No reports of any foxes. However, the long grass may be concealing them.

Insects: Enjoying a brief spell of sunshine on the Meadows were four small tortoiseshells, a good number of meadow browns and a pink, diurnal burnet moth.

Events: 12/07 Rafts were launched again off the Meadows in the well organised pandemonium of the Rotary Club Raft Race. Those who entered the race were subjected to the usual bombardment of tomatoes and eggs. All good fun if you like that sort of thing.

August 2009

Birds: 01/08 Sightings of the kingfisher continued all month. The kingfishers shrill call was often heard before the bird was seen.

02/08 Grey partridge have declined dramatically on farmland around Chester. So it was a surprise when two were flushed from beneath a big oak next to Handbridge Marsh.

08/08 One of the two male goosanders continued to fish the river under the Old Dee Bridge.

14/08 A successful breeding season for bullfinches. Two juvenile birds in the hedgerow by Bottoms Lane track.

Insects: Very few dragonflies on the Meadows this year. May partly be due to lack of water in the ditches for the nymphs.

11/08 Numerous gatekeepers and a few small coppers on the Meadows. Two common blues, one on brambles by the Handbridge Marsh, the other on bird's foot trefoil.

14/08 A female common blue on Gorsty Bank (RS). The remains of a wasps' nest in the grass on Handbridge Marsh. What animal or bird would suffer being badly stung for a few grubs? A badger perhaps.

Flora: The naturalised Himalayan balsam flowering along the river bank. Although the pink flowers add a splash of colour, this plant is very invasive.

Operations: At the start of the month ten horses appeared in fields up from Bottoms Lane track. They settled down and greeted walkers who ventured beyond the Meadows. They're quite attractive grazing in the long grass.

14/08 Sections of the Meadows were cut as the cattle were having little impact on the growth.

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

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.

The Cat and The Magpie

All morning the magpie had been cackling, it hopped about on the sides of grounded boats until it eventually settled on one called *Caroline*.

I was washing up and occasionally glanced up to see what all the complaining was about and then I saw the reason. Tilly the cat, a stray who turned up about eighteen months ago, was having a quiet snooze in *Caroline* and the magpie was taking violent exception to this. The magpie hopped along the edge of the boat pecking with that big, strong beak as if to say, "you will have to contend with this if you have a go at catching me!" Once or twice I saw Tilly spring up menacingly but she didn't make a determined effort to catch the magpie. The game went on for most of the morning with the magpie cackling and jumping up and down and the cat taking a bit of a pounce towards it but always watchful. The episode only ended when the cat got out of the boat and sat on the bonnet of a nearby car and all went quiet.

I have no doubt that different types of birds and animals play games with one another. I have watched their antics too often for it to be disputed. They play like children and even those that are usually enemies, such as the cat and the magpie, seem to have some sort of mutual respect for the other's strengths. The cat with its paws full of quite evil claws as opposed to the magpie's big strong beak often came within just a few inches of one another, yet the cat held back either from respect or fear.

As I have already said Tilly arrived about eighteen months ago - she was very timid and wary and, although in those days she occasionally accepted food, seems to have survived by catching mice and birds. The pigeon population decreased very noticeably and remains of pigeons were to be found all around the area. Last August I discovered she had three kittens, little faces were peeping out from beneath an old wooden boat where she had made a nest. As soon as a human being approached the

little ones would escape up into the boat through a hole in the bottom. I spent many hours trying to tame them. As soon as they were old enough I started a regular feeding routine and although they were very shy and their mother was totally hostile I managed to tame them and get them into the house. Tilly remained quite wild but, with the help of the RSPCA who lent me a special cage to catch her, I got her to the vet where she had the operation to prevent her having any more kittens. She was one very unhappy cat and gave the vet quite a handling problem.

Now, a year on, the kittens are three very beautiful cats, all different. Tilly has calmed down and stopped spitting at me although she does not venture indoors. A near neighbour has a nineteen year old cat and Tilly has taken to visiting that house and seems to be reserving a place for herself for when there is a vacancy! My three, Valentino, Gracie and Pearl, are welcome additions to the household and, although they wrecked the curtains, they are here to stay.



Rita Hibbitt.