

FRIENDS OF THE MEADOWS

Newsletter 183

Winter 2012

Bullfinch



One of the most attractive birds to visit our bird table is the cock bullfinch, in the sunshine his rose-pink breast, grey back, glossy black cap, wings and tail feathers are spectacular. These are shy birds, often a white rump is all that is seen as they fly off. The plumage pattern of the hen bird is similar to that of the cock but duller. The bird's plump bull-necked appearance gave rise to its common name, bullfinch.

When I am working in the garden I listen with delight to the plaintive call of our resident cock bullfinch; birdsong is difficult to describe in words, I recommend investing in a reputable birdsong CD. We have a

nesting pair in our garden and we become very excited when the family group visits our feeder. The nest, built by the female, is a flimsy structure of twigs and moss, lined with fine roots and hair. Four to five eggs are laid that are greenish-blue, spotted with brown, purple and black, there may be up to three clutches in a season. The male bird helps the female with incubation and feeding, the chicks are fed a mixture of seeds and insects. Due to predation by magpies, grey squirrels, weasels and cats only about a third of all clutches are successful

The stout black bill of the bullfinch has evolved to process seeds, its diet in autumn consists of the seeds of herbaceous plants but as winter takes a grip, attention switches to tree seed especially ash. In spring, the bullfinch diet consists of fruit buds, a single bird can strip more than thirty buds a minute from an orchard tree; for this reason bullfinches have been persecuted by mankind throughout recorded history. Bullfinch numbers increased significantly during the 1950s such that fruit farms took to trapping these birds, it was not uncommon for a single fruit farm to trap up to five hundred in a season. Despite this persecution, the bullfinch population remained stable until the 1970s when an alarming decline began to be observed, their numbers collapsed by 65% over a period of 35 years. The decline in the bullfinch numbers mirrored the general decline in song bird numbers and has been attributed to agricultural intensification that led to a reduction in the quantity and quality of woodland margins and hedgerows; another significant factor for the decline may have been over-grazing by wild deer, the deer population of Britain is at a 1000 year high. At the moment bullfinch numbers are stable but we must ensure continuity of suitable habitat if we wish to see this magnificent bird at our feeders.

Ron Iremonger

Notes from the Chair



A very Happy New Year to you all and a welcome from me as the new Chair of Friends of the Meadows - a position which I am very honoured to take following on from Peter Hadfield. On behalf of all "Friends" I should like to thank Peter for all the work he undertook as Chairman in the last two years. He shall, however, be staying on the committee and will continue to produce our quarterly Newsletter.

I hope you will find lots of interest in this first issue of 2012. For those of you who were not able to get to the Annual General Meeting last November we have included copies of the winning entries for the photographic competition. My thanks also go to Eric Fletcher from RECORD who stepped in at short notice and gave a most interesting presentation on the work of the Local Biodiversity Records Centre, based in Chester Zoo.

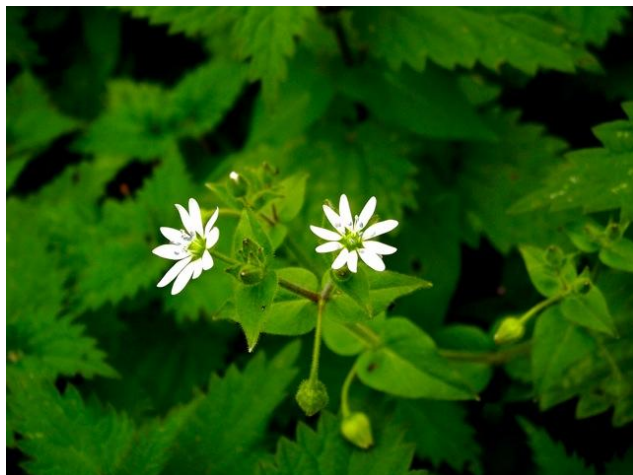
Last year, many of you enjoyed our Meadows Walks led by Andy Ingham, the Summer Garden Party and the Wine Tasting evening. In the coming year we will be planning a number of various activities which I hope you will continue to support.

At the end of last year, the project to plant new trees on the meadows finally happened, and I have included a summary on the next page.

Finally, many of you will already be aware of threats being made to Chester's green belt. Of particular concern for us is that the meadows between Bottoms Lane and the A55 is marked within the study zone. A summary of the proposals is given in the Newsletter, which I urge you to read.

Rachel Cross

01244 679141 or email rachelm.cross@btinternet.com



Senior First Prize	Junior First Prize
Sarah Gregory	Ben Gregory
Senior Second Prize	Photographic Competition 2012
Peter Hadfield	

Tree Planting on the Meadows

Last Summer, the idea was put forward to replenish some of the trees on the Earl's Eye. Some of the willows had been felled due to splitting and horse chestnuts had gone because of fungal disease.

Andy Ingham and I sat down to consider what types of native trees would be best suited for planting and where they might go. We consulted with Justin Dyke, the Greenspace Ranger and eventually plans were drawn up to source established trees of about 3-4 years' growth from Morrey's Nursery and to plant them in three areas: by the riverside entrance, in and along the avenue of willows and finally, a small area near the mound and gorse hedging. In this latter plot we hoped to introduce two or three native black poplar and some alder buckthorn.

By October, we had contacted contractors to do the work and were able to cost out the project. Our initial plans had to be scaled back slightly especially as we had to factor in the building of extra wooden "parkland" tree guards to protect from cattle and potential vandalism. The black poplars and alder buckthorn were only available as young saplings so we decided to put this on hold for now.



On 6th December, Will Broughton and his brother Joe from Southview Landscapes met with Andy and I on the meadows and the trees were delivered from Morreys. After plotting out the locations for planting, Will and Joe were left to get on with the work and Andy and I then waited for Tim Finch to cross the river from the Sailing Club in a motor boat to ferry us back to help bring over the "Friends of the Meadows" bench. The heavy wooden bench was lifted into the boat and we all ferried back over to bring it safely on the meadows, thankful that we hadn't toppled into the river!



Over the course of the next few days all the work was completed. In the New Year we hope to plant up the alder buckthorn and black poplar saplings ourselves – with help from any of you Friends who would like to volunteer!

Green Belt Survey

Cheshire West and Chester Council have conducted a survey of the green belt areas around Chester. A draft report has been issued, which can be viewed in full via the link in the news item on the handbridge.com website. In this short article I have tried to summarise in an unbiased way what the survey is all about and its findings as they affect the Meadows and the adjoining green belt land. The study does, however, consider the whole of Chester, and these others areas can be examined in more detail in the survey document.

The study aims to identify Chester's development needs for the next 15 years. Housing and employment are seen as central to the growth needs of CW&C and the availability of land is seen as a critical constraint. Since green belt land is subject to development restrictions, an assessment has been conducted to determine if all areas within the green belt still meet green belt standards. These standards are described in the planning policy guidance note 2 (see survey). Figure 1 shows all the areas being assessed by CW&C.

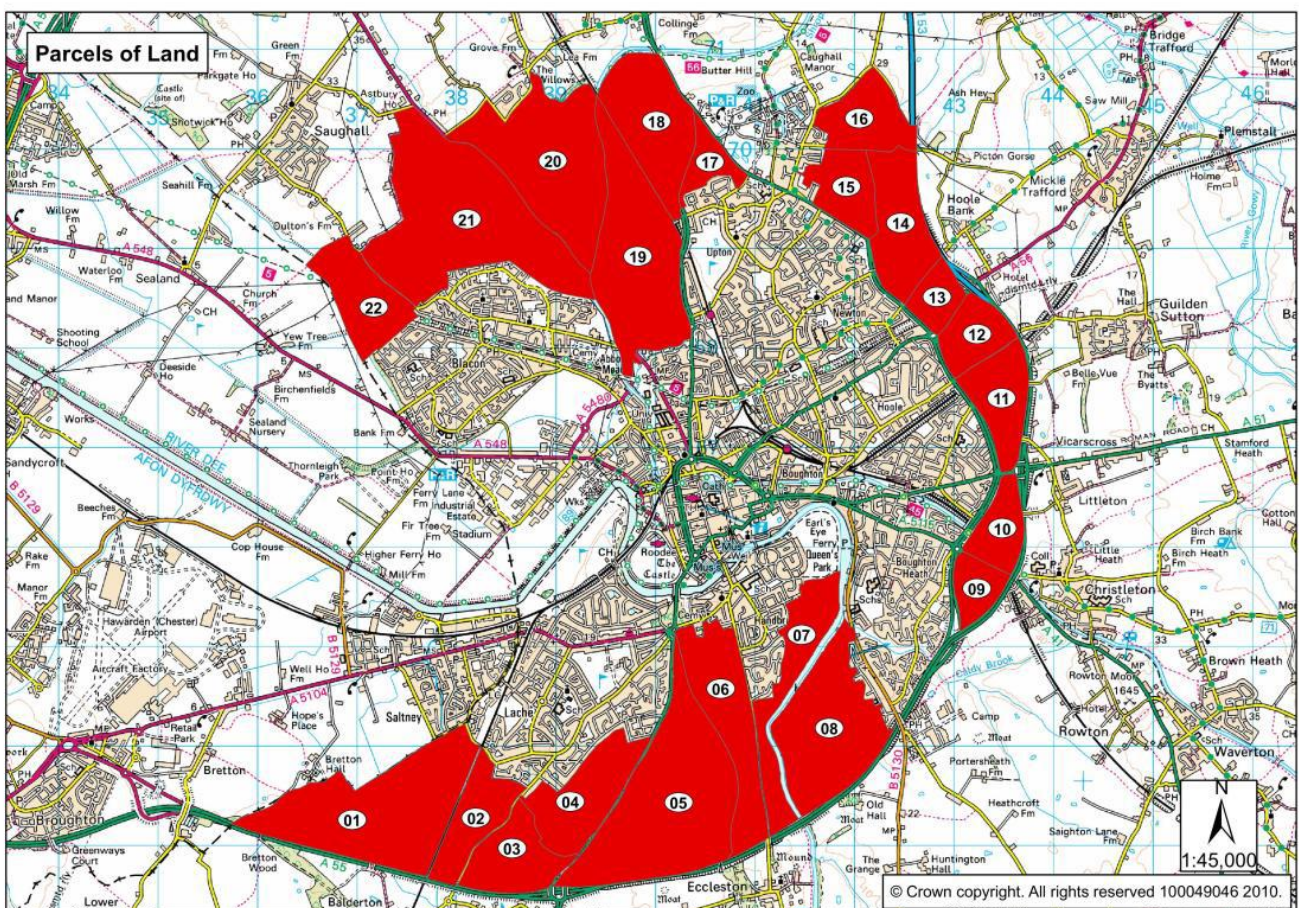


Figure 1: The green belt areas included in the survey are marked in red. 07 is the land to the south of the Meadows. The green belt land to the west (in Wales) is the subject of a separate study.

It is intended to give each area a traffic light code depending on whether the plot meets green belt criteria or not. Thus, green is green belt purpose achieved – positive impact on maintaining the green belt. Amber – Green belt purpose partially achieved – neutral impact on maintaining the green belt. Red – Green belt purpose not achieved – negative impact on maintaining the green belt.

No traffic light ratings have yet been given to areas 5-8, which are of most interest to us. These units of land are considered as one block by the report. However, answers are given to some, but not all,

the questions in the more detailed section of the survey as to whether the area meets the different aspects of the green belt criteria. The places where answers have been given, in my opinion, fall into the easy to answer category. e.g. Does the area provide (i) access to open countryside for the urban population and (ii) opportunities for outdoor sport? (iii) Does the area retain and enhance attractive landscapes near where people live? Whilst all these questions received a 'yes', sailing on the river was not mentioned in the survey (Chester is one of the few clubs in the country that have been awarded Volvo Champion Club status), and the writers of the report seemed to be unaware that cycling on the Meadows is not permitted.

A positive answer was also given to the questions of 'secure conservational interests' and comments were also made referring to the Dee being a site of special scientific interest (SSSI) and the Meadows being a feature of local importance.

I could not find any specific reference in the report to the fact that the Meadows and the surrounding land lie in the flood plain of the Dee. This is recognised, however, by the Environment Agency and their map (figure 2) shows the area of land that is at risk from flooding. The Environment Agency considers that there are currently more than 1000 homes likely to be affected by flooding in Chester (River Dee Catchment Flood Management Plan, January 2010).

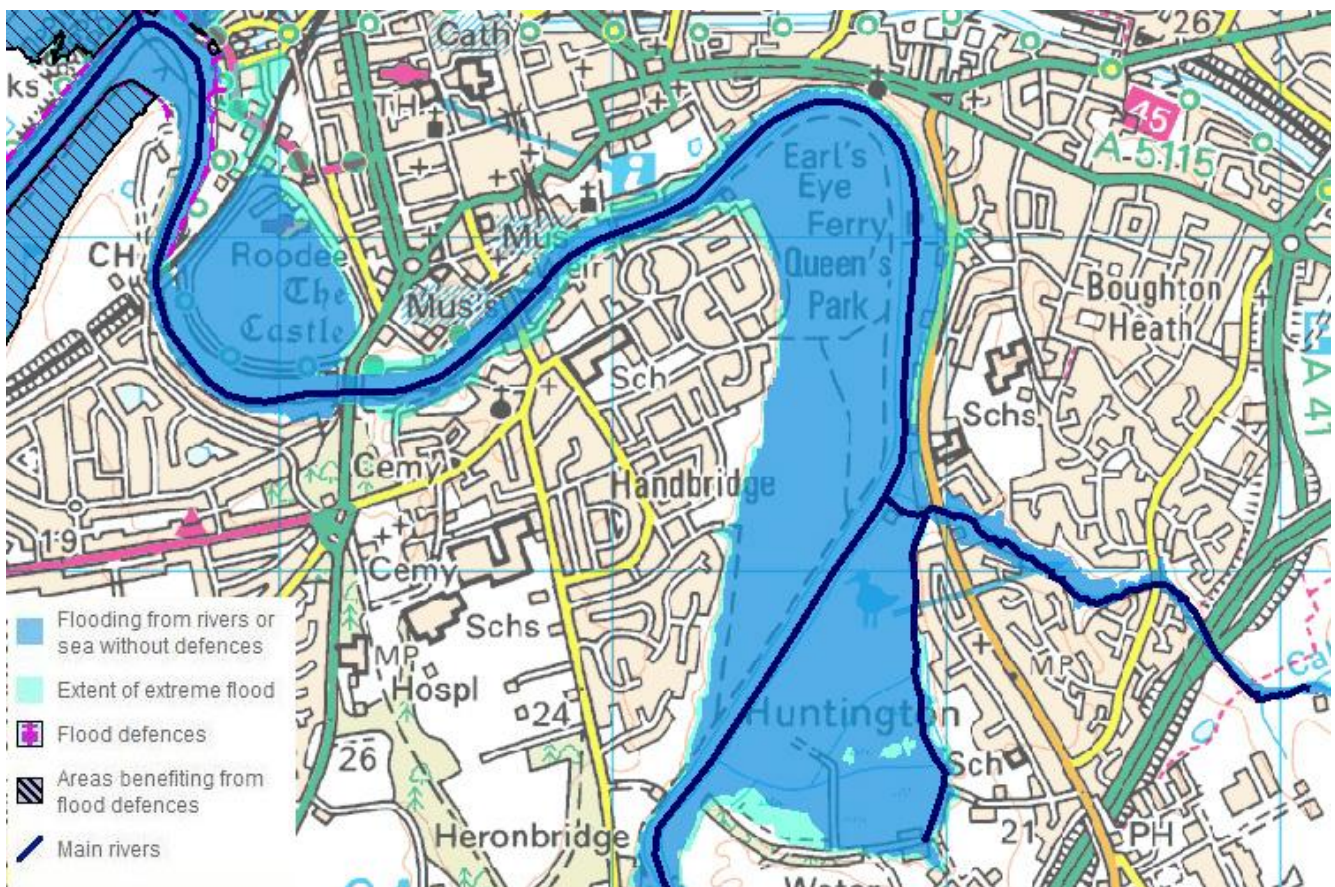


Figure 2: Environment Agency map showing the areas at risk from flooding

If you want to find out more, a good starting point is the handbridge.com website, which contains links to many of the relevant documents. We will try to keep you informed of further developments when we hear about them.

Tim Finch



October 2011

01/10/2011 A clear blue sky and light winds prompted diurnal migration of at least 4 chirruping Skylarks high above the Meadow. Also enjoying the very late summer sunshine were 2 Blackcaps below the Handbridge allotments. Butterflies were also present here, with a single Speckled Wood and a rather stunning Red Admiral (see photograph below).



11/10/2011 Finding a Painted Lady anywhere is worthy of a mention, but to find one in your own garden is a "great treat!" JC. The Elizabeth Crescent sighting is the only record for the log this year.

15/10/2011 On the bank below Andrews Crescent a familiar Chack Chack call drew attention to the first Fieldfare of the autumn. Normally, a very sociable bird, it was surprising to see only one bird fly out of the Hawthorn bush as a dog walker passed by.

22/10/2011 Where there had been only one the previous week, a flock of 60 chattering Fieldfare flew in the direction of Eccleston. They were followed by a further flock of 20 heading in the same direction.

29/10/2011 The extremely mild autumn provided enough warmth for many plants to continue flowering around the Meadow. The white flowers of Yarrow put on a good display on Water Co land along with Knapweed and the occasional Meadowsweet. The first Redwing flying above the Meadow was a further reminder winter was late to arrive this year.

Meadows Log continued.....

November

05/11/11 The Duke of Westminster land borders both Water Co land and Bottoms Lane track. It consists of marshy areas similar to the Meadow along with Reeds, Bulrushes and a lot of mature hedgerow. This in turn provides an excellent place for wildlife. The fields though have not been grazed or cut for many a year so it was interesting to see a couple of areas are now cut. The cutting has been done in a sensitive way leaving patches of longer grasses. We shall have to wait and see if there are any benefits to the wildlife.

06/11/11 The sun continued to shine and Red Admirals remained active. A Red Admiral glided purposefully out of trees by the west end river entrance to the Meadow.

12/11/2011 Where the Meadow meets the bottom of Gorsty Bank 3 Blackcaps gorged themselves on Hawthorn berries.

19/11/2011 Remaining cattle were finally removed from the Meadow. The cattle appear to have had the desired impact on the vegetation. It will be interesting to see what affect this has on the flora and fauna next spring after a couple of years without grazing. 2 Woodcock burst out of the scrub by the Handbridge marsh, but quickly descended into cover to continue their daytime sleep. Woodcock usually feed by night and in recent years have been an annual winter visitor to areas around the Meadow.

26/11/2011 A magical sight and sound of 65 Pink footed Geese high above the Meadow. Spread out in a long line they made their way majestically over Handbridge. An hour later they were back with a repeat performance, this time heading up the river towards Ecclestone.

December

w/c 06/12/2011 There was plenty of traffic on and above the Meadow. Morreys Nurseries delivering the trees, South View Landscapes planting them and Dee Valley water making essential repairs to the pipework by the water mound. In the air Peregrine, Kestrel, Sparrowhawk and Buzzard all hunted over the Meadow as the work went on.

10/12/2011 2 Water Rail called from deep within the Handbridge marsh. They remained well out of sight unlike last year when the snow and ice forced them to come out in search of food. 2 Snipe were flushed from the wetter areas of the Meadow.

23/12/2011. Flocks of finches continued to feed in the hedgerow along Bottoms Lane track. These included the usual Bullfinch, Chaffinch, Goldfinch and Greenfinch but also included a flock of 15 Redpoll feeding in Alder Trees. 4 Herons were also feeding on the waterlogged area, while a sizable flock of 40 Redwing flew up to Oak Trees on the edge of the Meadow.

Happy New Year!

Andrew Ingham
Meadows Log recorder 01244 677135

The River Bank

I am writing this on 2nd November 2011. I have spent a happy time this morning etching a greater spotted woodpecker feeding on my aged Bramley apple tree. As I watched I could see pieces of bark showering down as it went up and down the gnarled trunk and main branches. Its outline was unmistakable but there was no drumming which, I understand, only happens in Spring. It was the rapid movements it made with its head whilst probing beneath the bark that alerted me to what it was.

It arrived with a flock of tits of various sorts, blue tits, great tits and long tailed ones. The tits were flitting amongst the apple branches and also on a nearby Norway Spruce, Then a much larger bird caught my eye and I knew immediately it was a wood pecker.

I watched it from the window for about an hour. I kept my cats in as I could not risk a tragedy. Even though they are well fed their sporting instincts are liable to take over.

I feel I am a very lucky person to have such garden visitors. Since last year's harsh winter when the river was frozen solid it had concerned me that all our kingfishers may have perished. If they can't fish they can't eat and the same goes for our resident herons. Fortunately it soon became apparent some herons had survived but it was September before I spotted a kingfisher quietly sitting on a bollard at the water's edge at the bottom of my garden.

I read recently that kingfishers travel hundreds of miles. This amazed me because whenever I have seen them flying, they virtually skim the water flying about a foot above the surface and mainly from bank to bank. If they do this across the sea I would expect they could soon come to grief with the rising and falling of the waves.

I was pleased to read in the autumn Newsletter about the progress of Mr. Holroyd's bees. I have seen more honey bees this year after noting their absence in previous years and my broad beans, runner beans and garden peas did very well. As for apples this has been a year like no other - a huge crop and my sister's plum tree which is about a mile away from Sandy Lane was overloaded. The lovely warm April helped no end but I am sure Mr. Holroyd's bees played a vital part. I have said this before in previous articles but it is well worth repeating - nothing, and I mean nothing, would convince me that insecticides should play a part against pests in our gardens. I would never use them as they are so deadly to bees and other beneficial insects. I squash greenfly on roses with my fingers. If you are squeamish wear a rubber glove. I pick caterpillars off the greens and squash their eggs on the backs of leaves before they hatch. In fact, this year I have covered my sprouts and sprouting broccoli with fine netting to stop the cabbage white butterflies and the wood pigeons from ravaging them. We have all got to try to live together in harmony to survive. In the summer I watched ants going amongst blackfly on cardoons. I have never grown cardoons previously and probably won't again as they are fiendishly prickly but it was quite an education to see the ants busying themselves on the blackfly colony.

One final thing, I have seen a young hedgehog twice in my garden in recent weeks. It must have been born locally which is good news. I am now looking to find a way to prevent it from falling into the river and drowning!

Rita Hibbitt

2nd November 2011

New Members

Anyone wishing to join Friends of the Meadows, please contact the Membership Secretary
Clive Gregory, 6 Victoria Pathway, Queens Park, Chester, CH4 7AG, Telephone 01244 680242.

Please let us know who introduced you if appropriate.