

FRIENDS OF THE MEADOWS

Newsletter 184

Spring 2012

Violets



'I know a bank whereon the wild
thyme blows,
Where ox-lips and the nodding
violet grows'

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Among the twenty eight species, subspecies and varieties native to the British Isles, dog violets are the most common, look out for them in the hedge-bottoms as you walk around Chester Meadows. When not in flower, violets can be recognised by their heart-shaped leaves. Identification of a particular species of violet is not always easy as the family are apt to produce a range of hybrids. Dog violets can respond dramatically when woodland is coppiced; a forty-fold increase in number of flowers has been recorded. The name dog violets are so called as the flowers are unscented.

Our native sweet violets are often found growing in gardens. Sweet violets have been cultivated throughout recorded history for their strong fragrance; in the Middle Ages they were used as a strewing herb in households. Francis Bacon described this violet as having the sweetest scent of all flowers. The scented flowers of sweet violets have been used for flavouring food and wine and in herbal medicine as a cure for insomnia, headache and depression. Sweet violets are recognised by their large, hairy leaves; its flowers are often white but may be deep blue, purple or cream and there is a rare red form. One of the molecules in the scent of sweet violets is a ketone called ionine that has the curious property of deadening our sense of smell so that the scent comes and goes. The sweet violet produces normal flowers in spring but later in the season the plant produces 'cleistogamous' flower buds that do not open but are self-pollinated forming perfect seed. For centuries, poets have waxed lyrical in honour of the sweet violet; Shakespeare seems to have been particularly smitten, mentioning it on eighteen different occasions in his works:

'The forward violet thus did I chide.
Sweet thief, whence didst thou steal thy sweet that smells,
If not from my love's breath?'

Sonnet XCIX

Ron Iremonger

Notes from the Chair



Welcome to our Spring Newsletter of 2012. After some early signs of a warm Spring at the end of February, the colder weather returned to remind us that Winter hasn't yet loosened its hold! However, as I write this, the weather is once again typical of the season as we move towards the "official" start of Spring at the Equinox. I hope that no-one forgot to put their clocks forward one hour on the 25th March!

Andy Ingham compiles our Meadows Log included in the Newsletters and we would welcome any wildlife sightings from members to be included, especially the early Summer migrant birds due over the next few months. Look out for an early chiff-chaff or even a cuckoo if you are lucky. Just get in touch with me or via our website on friendsofthemeadows.org.uk.

Andy and I did some additional tree planting in February – this time some alder buckthorn saplings amongst the gorse near to the Water mound. Thankfully, the ground was easy enough to dig with our spades, but we also helped ourselves to some backfill from the plentiful molehills! The larger trees planted in December are looking good, although we must keep a watchful eye that they don't dry out, particularly as there are signs that the impending drought might extend to Cheshire. If so, we'll be looking for help to water the trees from the river!

We are planning a number of social events this year and have included details in this newsletter. I hope that many of you will be able to attend and support these events and we look forward to meeting as many of you as possible.

Rachel Cross

01244 679141 or email rachelm.cross@btinternet.com

Friends of the Meadows – Planned Events in 2012

Saturday 5th May at 5am – Dawn Chorus Walk with Andy Ingham. Last year's was very popular! This is a free event, but please get in touch to book a place so we have an idea of numbers.

Sunday 1st July at 11am – Floral Walk led by botanist Jack Swan. This has been arranged following members' suggestions and will be a free event. This is a chance to walk the meadows with an expert to find and identify all the summer plantlife!

September – we are planning a possible **Barbeque on the Meadows**. Watch this space!

November – in conjunction with this year's **AGM** we are planning a **Cheshire Night**: cheeses, cakes, wine and a Cheshire Quiz. Date to be confirmed.

Dawn Chorus on the Meadow 5 May 2012.

Meeting Place Bottoms Lane, Start Time 05.00am

Resident songsters such as Wren, Robin & Song Thrush are joined by up to 9 species of warbler on or around the Meadow. Last year we were treated to bursts of song from Garden Warbler Blackcap, Whitethroat, Chiffchaff and Willow Warbler. Other highlights included Great Crested Grebes fishing on a mist covered river and a Whinchat pausing to feed on the Meadow.

To find out what we will see and hear this year come and join us for a leisurely stroll around the Meadow.

Participants are advised to wear stout footwear and clothing for all conditions. A pair of binoculars is also useful but not necessary.

For further information call Andy on 01244 677135.



January - March 2012

07/01 3 Horses were introduced on to land owned by Dee Valley Water. They seemed a little skittish at first, but soon settled down to graze.

14/01 A flock of approximately 15 Snipe flew like fighter jets low over a hedgerow and disappeared into the dense vegetation on the Handbridge marsh.

04/02/2012 2 Woodcock were flushed from the scrub lined ditches to continue their daytime sleep elsewhere. A short cold snap brought in 2 diving female Goldeneye to the Sandy Lane stretch of the river. Nearby a hungry looking Fox sauntered along the river edge hoping to find a dosing Mallard.

11/2/2012 Passed off initially as floating piece of rubbish a closer inspection revealed not one, but 2 handsome male Goosanders diving by the water mound. Over on the Water Co land horse numbers doubled in size to six while nearby yet another Woodcock exploded from under the hedgerow.

14/02/2012 A singing Blackcap in St Johns Road garden was a reminder spring was not far away.

23/02/2012 A mass of mating Frogs were discovered in the main dyke crossing the Meadow. TS. The spawning continued until at least the 10/03/2012. All the thrashing around attracted the attention of Herons and Black Headed Gulls. They easily picked off the exhausted participants.

03/03/2012 Most Redpoll visiting the Meadows during the winter are of the European race *cabaret* (Lesser). However, a larger Redpoll almost the size of a Chaffinch was attracted to Nyger seed put out in Annes Way. The Redpoll was probably of the Greenland race (*rostrata*).TD

07/03/2012 A rare Mediterranean Gull was found and photographed among the 200 plus flock of Black Headed Gulls that gather on the picnic area of the Meadow. The Med Gull superficially looks like a Black Headed Gull, but note the black hood and all white wings of this smart looking bird. The 2nd photograph taken shows the 2 Gulls swimming side by side and the differences can be clearly seen. For further photographs and information on the Gull visit Austinmorley.blogspot.com



08/03 A flock of up to 60 finches, mostly Goldfinch, were observed coming to roost in a Hawthorn bush on Gorsty bank. This is a good count as numbers are not swelled by young birds at this time of the year.RS

10/03 Redshanks are abundant on the Dee estuary, but are a rare sight by the Meadow. So it was a treat to see 4 feeding along the Sandy lane stretch of the river. Kingfisher sightings on the river have been few and far between, so a pair flying over the Handbridge allotments was equally unexpected.

15/03 A singing Chiffchaff along Bottoms Lane track was the first of the returning summer migrants. The Great Spotted Woodpecker continued to drum on the metal casing of a chimney pot in Elizabeth Crescent. The sound was a loud metallic rattle similar to a car going over a cattle grid. This must surely have woken up the occupants every morning.

25/03 Warm summer sunshine encouraged a Peacock butterfly out of hibernation to nectar on ribes in a Cross Hey garden.

Andrew Ingham

Meadows Log recorder 01244 677135

A Waterways Strategy for Chester

In January there was an unusual but welcome sight on the River Dee opposite the Meadows. A canal narrow boat was moored against the ferry landing stage. Someone working on the annual maintenance of the river boats on the Sandy Lane slipway was living aboard it. The sad thing was that the boat had had to be brought to the river by road.



A canal boat on the Dee – brought by road!

This simple fact underlines how Chester is failing to make the most of its fascinating waterway system. The Romans founded Chester here because of its strategic location on the Dee, and the city's history has been bound up with the fortunes of its waterways. In Norman times the causeway was built to tap the river's power for the Dee Mills, but it divided the river into the upstream non-tidal and downstream tidal sections. Only during the highest spring tides is it possible to bring a boat over the weir. In the 1770s the Chester Canal was built with the aim of reviving the port and the city. In 1776 it linked into the Dee, but the scheme failed because the canal did not connect with any other canals. There was no trade on it. Only when the Ellesmere Canal was built in the 1790s to what became Ellesmere Port did Chester find itself on a successful waterway. It ultimately linked with North Wales, the Midlands and the rest of the canal system.

Chester's waterways today bear ample witness to their complicated history. The system has four parts – the upper and lower Dee, the Dee lock and branch canal to Tower Wharf and the main canal through the city. In theory they all interconnect, but in practice they don't. The potential for Chester's waterways to be developed as a unified system has not been realised.

The latest example of this is the Chester 'One City Plan' being prepared by Chester Renaissance and Cheshire West and Chester Council. This plan recognises some of the importance of the waterways but mainly as the background to site development opportunities. There is no joined-up vision. This has led the Chester Canal Heritage Trust, the Inland waterways Association and British Waterways to press the planners to adopt a 'waterways strategy' for Chester. There needs to be a long term waterway aspiration for the City with improvements to encourage a greater number of boats to visit Chester's canals and river. Above all, an improved and safe passage between the canal and the upstream Dee is the key to delivering this vision. It would offer huge benefits in terms of increasing visitor numbers, supporting waterside regeneration, creating interesting visitor destinations for boaters and other users whilst also providing additional business opportunities.

Two things are needed to make this vision a reality. The first is a lock in Chester weir so that a link between the tidal and non-tidal Dee could be safely used at wider states of the tide. This would allow both canal boats and suitable sea-going yachts to come up to Chester's Riverside and cruise the upper Dee as far as Farndon. Chester would become an attractive waterway destination in the same way that Stratford has benefited from the reopening of the River Avon and the Stratford Canal. There is a potential site for the lock on the surviving mill race for the old snuff mills.

The second thing is the restoration of the Dee Branch canal down to the River Lock. At present it is almost impassable due to silting, and there are difficulties with the River Lock itself. These problems could be solved, but it would only be worthwhile to do so if boats could easily reach the Riverside and the upper Dee. The two developments are, therefore, a package.



The Potential Lock Site



The River Lock today

These ideas are not new. Proposals for a lock in the weir and the restoration of the Dee Branch canal were made in the past. Then they were premature – people couldn't see the economic and social benefits of such expenditure. The time is now right. The 1990s and 2000s have seen ambitious waterway restoration and improvement schemes that have reinvigorated their surroundings. Examples are the Falkirk Wheel, the Anderton Lift, the reopening of the Rochdale, Huddersfield and Droitwich Canals and canal-based urban renewal in Birmingham, Manchester and elsewhere.

Chester's waterways and their surroundings – including the Meadows – are a massive asset to the City, but not enough people see or use them. These proposals are put forward for debate as a way of contributing to Chester's future in these difficult times.

John Herson
Chairman, Chester Canal Heritage Trust

Artists and the Meadows

Having lived in Queens Park for 43 years (half my life) and having had a lifelong interest in drawing and painting, it is not surprising that I have found the river and various other aspects of the meadows, to be a constant sources of inspiration for my paintings over the years. Nor have I been the only artist in the local community to take advantage of what the meadows have to offer.



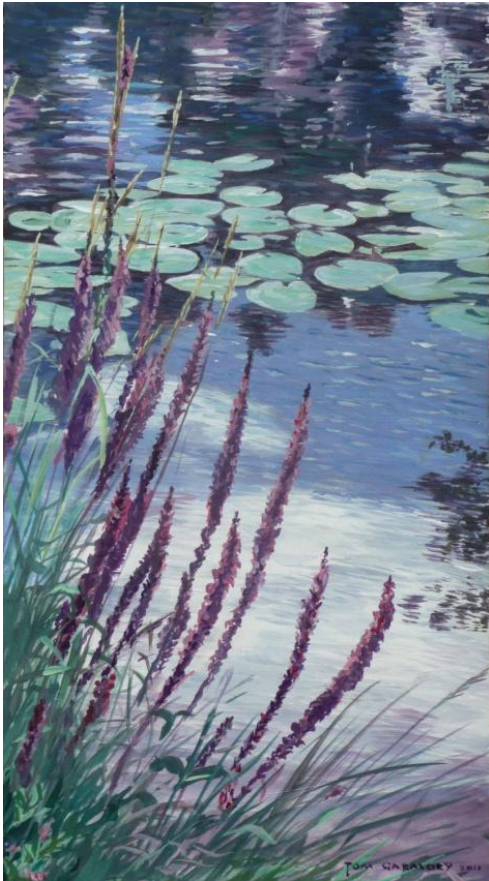
After I first came to live in Chester in 1969 I attended local evening classes at the College in Eaton Rd. Then Derek Healiss became my next-door neighbour and soon found that we had similar interests. We went painting together, joined the Grosvenor Art Society together and quickly discovered that we weren't the only aspiring painters living in Queens Park. The late Angela Spedding lived close by at Derby Cottage on the corner of Bottoms Lane and her friend, the late Sylvia Warren lived on Queens Park Rd. Both were keen and active members. We all took advantage of the proximity of the Meadows and both sides of the river bank for subject matter that was full of interest and variety and exhibited our work at the Art Societies' popular spring and summer exhibitions that were then held in the St. Marys Centre and the Chester Town Hall respectively but now at Upton Golf Club.

On my regular meanderings down Bottoms Lane and beyond, in more recent years I often came across the late Jack Shaw, of St. Georges Crescent, sketching the local views from one of the riverside benches. Jack had been the Principal of the Art department at the Eaton Rd. College, for many years before he retired, and a past-President of the Royal Cambrian Art Society, based at Conway. He had a vast knowledge of famous artists of the past, which he passed on to his students- including myself, at adult-education classes in the '70's.



"The Chester Five" was a small group of like-minded artists that Derek and I painted with in the 80's. We often painted local subjects outdoors together, in the City and on the river-bank, after work, on summer evenings. Sunsets across the river and meadows from Sandy Lane were popular (but difficult to catch). Mike Gordon-Leigh, our leader, lived on Sandy Lane, Maureen Hymes lived somewhere on Dee Banks and Heather Parry lived on Appleyards Lane. So we were all very local. We successfully exhibited our

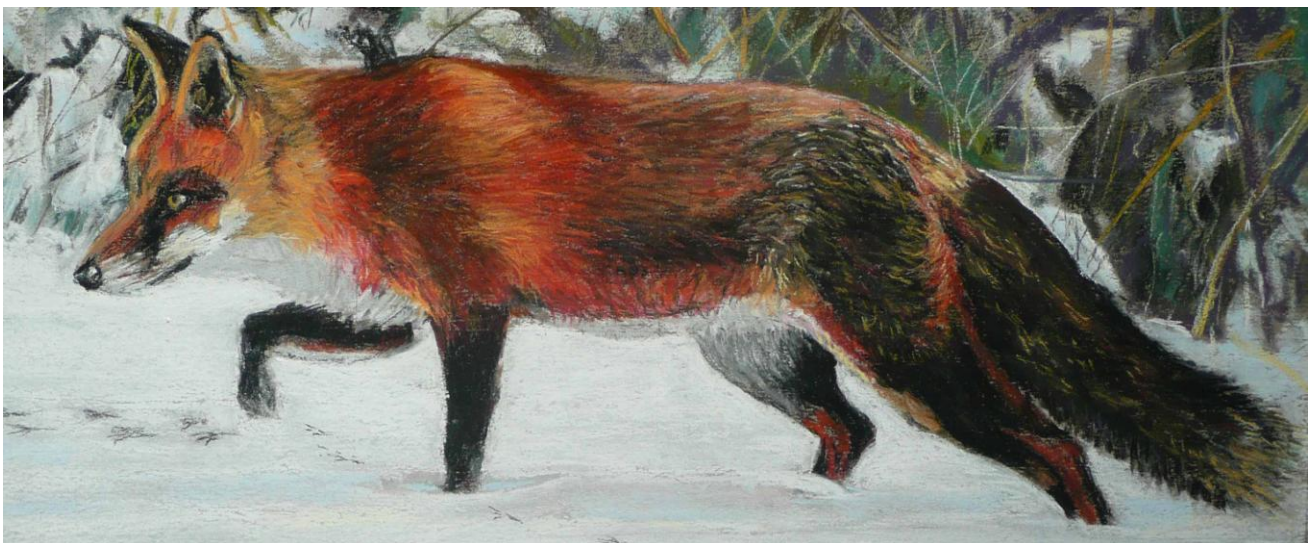
work at the Hart Room of the Gateway Theatre every December, for several years in the '80's. Other local painters, who I mustn't forget, are Audrey Price, Rosie Lush, Richard Smart and there are, probably other talented people unknown to me living in Queens Park and across the river.



Over the years my own subjects have included the Grosvenor Bridge and the Salmon boats, viewed from "Nowhere", several of the old Dee Bridge from the same area, from the Groves and from Handbridge Green, various views of the Groves, the Bandstand and the day trippers, the Suspension Bridge, by day and by night, and views from it. St. Pauls Church Boughton and Barrel-well Hill from the Earls eye, Dinghy racing and the Sailing Club, Canoeists and Rowers powering through the early morning mist on the river, The Handbridge Marshes, Water Lilies and Purple Loosestrife at Heron-bridge, and detailed water-colours of Butterflies, from photographs I took when recording them for the Friends newsletter 'Nature Log'. I have regularly painted in Oils, Soft pastels, Acrylics and Water-colour, the latter being my favourite medium.

The qualities that have always attracted and inspired artists to a subject, whether it be open sunlit landscapes with vast skies, the sparkle of sunlight on rippling water, human activities, boats, birds, animals, trees and flowers, are all available on Chester meadows in all the endless seasonal varieties. To have these, practically on my doorstep, is to me one of the major advantages of living where I do. All this, together with having a daughter who lives near the coast, in Pembrokeshire, and another in Scotland, makes me a very lucky guy.

Tom Garmory.



(Tom is a Member and past-Chairman of the Grosvenor Art Society of Chester and taught Water-colour painting at Queens Park High School Adult Education classes after he retired from Manweb in 1990. He exhibits his work at the Cloud Fine Art Gallery in Lower Bridge St and at The Forge Gallery in Pembrokeshire. Some of his paintings can be viewed in www.tomgarmoryart.co.uk).



Chester Croquet Club

Summer's coming, make the most of it!

Welcome for new members and learners

Croquet may not be an Olympic sport but it's a game that can be played and enjoyed by people of all ages and abilities. It does not require the strength or stamina needed for more strenuous sports and the handicapping system means that it can be played on equal terms by men and women from beginners to more experienced players.

Now that we are looking forward to warmer days and longer evenings, why not come and try your hand at croquet as an interesting and enjoyable outdoor leisure activity for the summer months?

This year Chester Croquet Club is offering a **free taster session** on Sunday afternoon, 15 April, from 2 to 5 pm at the club's lawns in Westminster Park off Hough Green in Chester.

For those who would like to develop their skills further, there will be two further **introductory sessions for golf croquet at 2 pm on Sunday afternoons on 22 and 29 April. These sessions are ideal for people who have not played the game before and who would like to learn more about it. The club is also offering a more comprehensive introductory course for association croquet at 6.30 pm on Thursday evenings for six weeks from 3 May to 7 June. This course is aimed at people who have played some croquet before, perhaps golf croquet or garden croquet, and who would like to develop their skills and tactics for association croquet.**

All equipment is provided by the club and the only requirement is that players must wear flat-soled shoes.

If you are interested in joining the initial taster session or the introductory sessions for golf croquet, please contact Pat Clare on 0151 3362606. For more information about the club or to enrol on the introductory course for association croquet, please contact the Club Secretary, Janet Davies, on 01244 350370.

Come and join in and make the most of the summer