

# FRIENDS OF THE MEADOWS

Newsletter 200

Summer 2015

## Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Walk across the Old Dee Bridge at night and look below and the chances are that you may see the ghostly apparition of a grey heron standing motionless at the water's edge. With its long neck and legs, heavy dagger-like bill and pale plumage, this tall bird looks very striking. Indeed, the grey heron is Britain's tallest bird and one of the most easily recognised. Its outline is quite distinctive, whether it is standing or flying silhouetted against the sky.



*Long-legged Statue  
The Grey Heron motionless  
Frogs on his menu.  
(Haiku by Steve Wilde)*

*Photo of a grey heron on Chester Weir by John McHugh*

A heron uses stealth and speed when hunting and will wait, poised and silent, at the water's edge, or stand up to its breast in water, hoping unwary prey will approach. When a victim comes within reach, the heron strikes quickly, stabbing down its long, sharp bill to grab the prey tightly. Fish are swallowed whole, head first so that the spines or fins do not get stuck in the bird's throat. Large fish may be brought to land and broken up into smaller pieces before being eaten. Herons sometimes visit garden ponds to steal goldfish and there has even been a report of a heron catching a baby rabbit and drowning it before swallowing it whole!

Despite their size, they are surprisingly light, weighing on average only half as much as a greylag goose. Yet with a wingspan of six feet, the heron has been described as the Lancaster Bomber of the bird world by countryman John Keeling. "A lethargy about the way they fly, unassuming - yet lethal when hunting" he says of them.

When you first look at a heron chick, it looks like something prehistoric. They look rough and coarse with a little punky tassel on their heads and a big bill. They appear so gawky yet grow to become the beautiful birds we see around us. One of the reasons why we like to see herons in the city and on the Dee in Chester is because they symbolise nature co-existing with us.

**Rachel Cross**

## Notes from the Chair



### Welcome to our special 200<sup>th</sup> Newsletter!

I hope you enjoy all the extra articles that we've included for this edition, including an interview with Adele Edwards who started the whole thing off with the Meadows Users' Association back in 1980, later being formalised as Friends of the Meadows in 1984. James Holroyd has put together a fascinating look back over all the Newsletters since then and, of course, we have our regular Meadows Log from Andy Ingham.

The Watersports Hub Proposals are the main ongoing issue with the plans to extend the development into the Meadows with a car park on the Barn Field. A Joint Action Group has been formed with Queen's Park Residents and other interested parties to keep people informed of the plans, express the concerns we have and engage in lobbying. You will have received a leaflet created by the group which pointed to a petition (these are all done online these days!). The petition is directed to our local Councillors to let them know the strength of feeling of local residents and also other Cestrians who value the Meadows being kept as a green space. At the time of writing we have over 1,200 signatures! However, we need to keep the pressure on, especially as the Council's Project Group will be expected to present formal plans later this year. The petition is at <https://www.change.org/p/save-the-meadows>

At the first Botany Walk last month, Julie Rose led half a dozen of us along Bottom's Lane and into the Gorse Terraces. We enjoyed plant spotting and reading off the plant keys. Julie would be pleased to see many more at her next walks all on the second Tuesdays of the month at 7pm. On 14<sup>th</sup> July, she will guide us from the Lower Park Road entrance to look at the Barnfield. Details were in our last Newsletter and are on the Notice Boards.

Since our last Newsletter, the Greenspace Ranger team has had to be re-organised following a reduction of staff. Paul Taylor has moved on to another job covering the Wirral Way and its satellite sites. On behalf of Friends of the Meadows I wish him well and thank him for all the work he put in on the Meadows site. We expect to welcome back Amanda Pritchard who covered the Meadows for a while on a part-time basis back in 2012-13.

The Greenspace Ranger works closely with volunteers from rehabilitation units such as Turning Point and Richmond Court and we're grateful for all their efforts. Recently they've been repairing fencing and coppicing. It is expected to put up some riverbank fencing by the NW Gate to help with erosion control by reducing footfall in that area. We also hope to see the gates and railings getting a fresh coat of paint.

We are still waiting for confirmation that cattle grazing will take place this year as arrangements with graziers have yet to be completed. If we don't have cattle on the Meadows, it will be interesting to see the effect on plant and wildlife diversity.

Our membership stands at 171 households. Thank you to everybody joined for another year and also to those who joined us for the first time. Here's hoping for a lovely Summer on the Meadows!

**Rachel Cross**

01244 679141 or email [rachelm.cross@btinternet.com](mailto:rachelm.cross@btinternet.com)

### Update on Reporting Anti-social Behaviour on the Meadows

Should you see any issues of anti-social behaviour, and/or any breach of bylaw and law please call **101** and report it to the police. **If it's an emergency call 999.**

The Rangers work closely with the police to target antisocial behaviour on the site and your assistance in reporting such incidents directly to the police is greatly appreciated.

For other issues relating to the Meadows, please contact the Council's Customer Contact Centre by either telephoning **0300 123 7026** or by email at [enquiries@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk).



## A Room with a View... of The Meadows

*Current Chair, Rachel Cross meets with Adele Edwards, founder of the Meadows Users' Association, later to become Friends of the Meadows.*

When I meet Adele Edwards at her home in Queen's Park, I am also greeted by a variety of dogs; these are not her own but those she looks after for friends. All seem very content together and very much loved by Adele. Her photographs show the dogs she once owned including her beloved Cavalier Spaniels Siegfried and Siegmund, named after the characters from Wagner's opera. As we walk to her living room, my attention is immediately drawn from the dogs to the wonderful view Adele enjoys from her large window across the Meadows to the river and beyond.



*Adele looking out over The Meadows from her garden*

"I have no need of a television," she says with a smile, "why would you want one when you have this to look at?" And certainly, she has a perfect vantage point to watch the seasons come and go on the Meadows below and see all the visitors enjoy this lovely natural space.

At the bottom of her garden is the old Bog Field, although she laments the draining of the wetland by the digging of the ditches during the War. "It was done to prevent enemy aircraft from landing there!" she explains. "Later, they were filled in for safety but have since been dredged again. The Meadows used to look a lot greener but at the moment they are quite brown and full of deschampsia," she says.

.....  
*"We were always in the local paper ... It became a full time activity."*  
.....

Adele founded the Meadows User's Association in 1980 when she used to walk the Meadows with her dogs. Back then, it was very informal. She recalls "One of the biggest bug-bears was the amount of litter that was left behind. Together with Derek Smith, we started litter-picking on the Meadows. Once people started to see the difference being made, lots joined in."

Eventually, in 1984, the Association became a formal group and the Friends of the Meadows was formed, with Richard Smart becoming Chairman and Adele managing membership and the Newsletter.

"This provided the basis to build up good relations with the farmers, the Water Company and of course, the Council. We were always in the local paper and the newsletter was issued every month. It became a full time activity."

Adele recalls raising money for charities and organising lots of events like boat trips, raffles and trips to Hilbre Island and Llangollen as well as many walks. "Once, we walked from the Boat Inn at Erbistock along the River Dee back to the Meadows, which took us over 13 hours!"

She remembers many other times spent on the Meadows with enjoyment but sometimes with alarm. Once, she heard the sound of a thunderous crack. "It was a massive willow tree branch that broke and came crashing down. Fortunately, no-one was around to get hurt."

On another occasion she helped rescue a man who had been forced into the river by unusually aggressive cows. "I went to the scene with a fellow member of the group to find the man still in the water" she said.

"He thought he would have to swim across the river. If he had tried, he would not have got to the other side but would have been swept along by the currents and it would have been far too cold. It doesn't bear thinking about. We got there just in time. Sadly, the cows were later destroyed."

Another time, four cows died from eating yew leaves which are highly poisonous to cattle and horses. "Events like that are rare" she says, "but also prove how careful management of the Meadows is so important."



.....  
"I've fought many battles"  
.....

Over the years she feels like she has done a lot of fighting to protect the Meadows and is rightly proud to have received two Queen Mother's Birthday Awards for her contribution to Environmental Improvement.

Over the years she recalls many schemes and threats put forward by planners.

"In 1996 Manchester submitted its bid to host the 1996 Olympic Games, and it was seriously suggested by Chester City Council that a competition rowing lake should be constructed on the Meadows! Thankfully, those plans were abandoned when Manchester's bid failed."

Now, she is especially concerned with the current plans to build on the Barnfield.

"The field was added to the Meadows ten years after the original gift by the Browns" she explains, "but it has a rather special place. It was secured and given to us by Harry Brown's widow, Phyllis Brown in 1939 - the year she was the first woman to become Chester's Mayor."

She points to the photograph on the petition leaflet to Save the Meadows. "What you can't see clearly is all the trees that were planted here. The bird cherry in 1995, 'Richard Smart's Oak' a year or so later and of course 'Jackie's copse', a group of seven trees to commemorate the late Jackie Leach, known to many as the 'Swan Lady' of the River Dee in Chester."

We talk about the Council's proposals and the need to ensure that the Meadows remain protected for the future.

"I spent a lot of time dedicated to the Meadows. I've fought many battles. We're very privileged to have this green space in the heart of our City and must ensure that it is kept for all to enjoy now and in the generations to come."

## 200 Newsletters: time to review past issues and look to the future

Yes, this is our 200<sup>th</sup> edition! And as we prepare to go to press it is timely to assess how much, if anything, has changed in format or substance since *Friends of the Meadows* was founded back in 1994, and whether our future role should remain unaltered.

The first newsletter printed in June 1994 reveals some obvious differences from current editions. There was no colour in the early days. Drawings were sketches in pen and ink. No possibility then of downloading pictures from the Internet. Now, of course, mobile phones with cameras are common place, so the opportunity for chance photos is much greater. The design for the headline title, however, stays exactly as it was.

As to themes, they have remained constant over the intervening score of years: an emphasis on the flora and fauna of the Meadows, particularly the flowers, trees and birds – though not exclusively. Short articles on local history have also been included. The first edition focussed on the white willow and the need for pollarding. There were sketches of the reed bunting and the sky lark, and a list of some 27 flowers identified in just one hour on the Meadows. The role of the Chester Waterworks Company was discussed, and an explanation of the name *Barrelwell Hill*. No sky larks have been heard over the Meadows in recent years, it has to be said, and the sound of the cuckoo is rare indeed.

However, as some species have dwindled or disappeared, others have emerged. The ringlet butterfly has been sighted on the Meadows in the last two years, and the hairy dragonfly was recorded last year. For the very first time, as far as we know, the Cetti's warbler has been heard singing and, at the end of April, was **still** singing on land adjacent to the Meadows.

The citizens of Chester are unusually privileged in possessing such a magnificent green lung so close to the heart of their city, with such varied views along its river bank. This was granted to us as recently as 1929 through the generosity of the Brown family, and it is a heritage we must defend with tenacity against demands for encroachment of any sort, at the same time managing and maintaining the space for the amenity of a growing population.

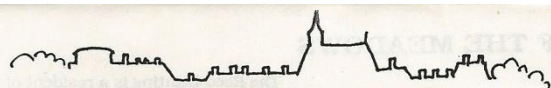
Many people have given generously of their time and energies since our group was founded, to run activities, prepare the Newsletter and, let's not forget, to deliver it! Has their dedication been worthwhile? Is such effort still required? Looking back over time we can see that certain concerns are often highlighted in the Newsletter: the need for the replacement of trees, attention to be given to benches and notice boards, repairs to gates. But beyond these staple matters the *Friends* are concerned with longer-term, deeper issues, as evidenced by the Management Plan, shortly to be published, after consultation with our Ranger.

What of biodiversity, for example? Should we be seeking to protect the internationally threatened eels and our locally scarce beetles? Why did our ground nesting birds, like the lark and meadow pipit disappear, and should we be trying to encourage them back? As the climate changes, should we ensure that the Meadows store as much water as possible, or is access to green space all year round more important? And what about the growth of scrub vis-à-vis grass? These are just some of the issues to be considered.

We must recognise that with the reduction in Council funding and the valuable support of Rangers perforce reduced, the role of *Friends of the Meadows* is ever more crucial. The current debate over the scale of the proposed Watersports Hub is one in which the *Friends* have a key part to play. Let us hope, therefore, that there will always be a steady supply of volunteers willing to take up the baton and assume stewardship of the Meadows, safeguarding this unique space for the enjoyment of generations to come.

**James Holroyd**

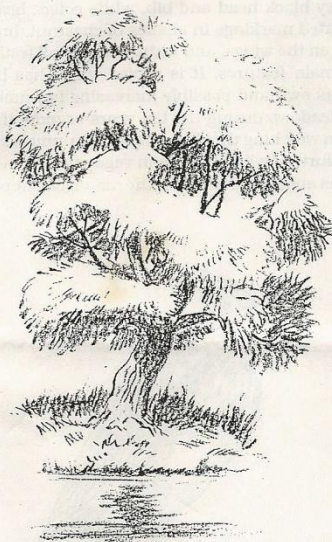




# FRIENDS OF THE MEADOWS

Newsletter No. 1

June 1994



## THE OLD WILLOWS

The dozen or so old trees by the bend in the river are a fine landscape feature, but how long have they been there? One rough rule of thumb for assessing tree age is to allow a year for every inch of girth for open grown trees. One of the trees measures 162 inches in girth but it is certainly not 162 years old. Willows are an exception to the rule for they grow far more rapidly than most other species. My estimate was 70 years, but in fact they are a little younger than this for a Handbridge resident remembers them from his youth in the early 1930s when they were newly planted saplings, so let's settle for 65 years. Apparently they were planted to help stabilise the bank for tree roots help to bind the soil and reduce erosion.

These trees are White Willows (*Salix Alba*), lovely to look at and supportive of a great variety of insect life, but as they grow so fast the timber is very porous and has few uses these days. The White Willow is now mainly planted for ornament and for river bank conservation.

The traditional way to maintain river bank Willows was to pollard them at regular intervals, that is cut them back every few years to 7 to 9 feet, a height above the reach of cattle, with the poles and produce going for agricultural use. Our oldest trees on the Meadows may never have been pollarded, and it is now almost too late to carry this out, though one of the trees cut back after severe storm breakage is showing fairly vigorous regrowth. It would be worth pollarding one or two trees as a trial, for it would extend their life considerably if it were successful.

Eventually if the trees are left they will shed limbs and collapse, limbs often taking root where they fall so regenerating the tree. Willow branches take root easily in the right conditions, and Willows are usually propagated commercially from cuttings.

Willows also hybridise very easily and there are many new varieties and forms of the White Willow. When the newly planted replacement trees get larger it will be interesting to see how they differ from the old trees.

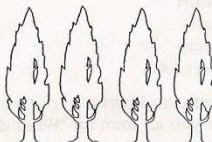
**Richard Smart**

**Definitions (1)**

Lombardy Poplars - "exclamation marks on the landscape"

I like it, thank you Richard.

Do you have a favourite? Please let me know. (Ed.)



## Early Memories

The front page of our very first Newsletter

Richard Smart and Mike Dix planting trees on Barnfield Meadow



## Tribute to Meadows campaigner

A GROWING tribute has been paid to the former chairman of a Chester conservation group as he steps down from the role.

Former Friends of the Meadows chairman Richard Smart completed the spade work when he planted an English oak on the Meadows to mark his three-year stint as chairman of the group.

More than 40 people, including green group members, city councillors and city council officers, were on hand to pay tribute to Mr Smart, who had led the group since its inception.

Chester City Council provided a cage for the young oak and a plaque for the

tree naming it in Mr Smart's honour.

Forestry consultant Mr Smart, of Queen's Park, Chester, might have retired from the top spot but intends to continue to be an active member of the Friends of the Meadows committee.

Incoming chairman Adele Edwards said: 'Richard has been an excellent chairman.

'He has managed to build up good links between ourselves, the council and other outside agencies.

'He was delighted with the tribute and was really in his element when he was out on the meadows planting the tree.'



**TOP OF THE TREE:** Mike Dix, countryside officer for Chester City Council, right, and Richard Smart, ex-chair of Friends of the Meadows, plant a new oak tree to commemorate his commitments to the Chester Meadows. 0573V33A

Press cutting for tree planting on Barnfield Meadow – February 1998



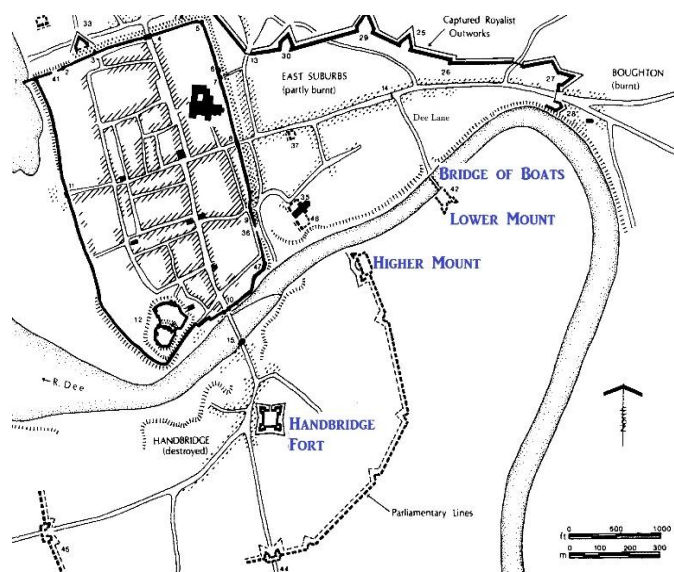
# Handbridge, the Meadows and the Siege of Chester

# 1645

The Civil War had been raging for three years. From the beginning of the war, the City of Chester had been held by forces loyal to the King; its ancient walls strengthened and a new ring of earthwork defences added outside them. But by the end of 1644 the Parliamentary forces in Cheshire under Sir William Brereton were closing in.

In February 1645, Brereton mounted a determined assault on Chester, in the course of which a force of his men tried unsuccessfully to scale the walls near the Northgate. Defeated, he began to besiege the city. This was abandoned in May and in June 1645 Parliament scaled back military operations in Cheshire. With the siege less close, the city's defenders were able to send out foraging parties, clean the streets, and build a new fort at Handbridge to protect the approaches to the Dee Bridge. The Handbridge Fort was situated at the junction of what is now Overleigh Road and Eaton Road.

But with the surrender of Bristol in September, Chester became the only seaport in England under the King's control where it would be possible to land the reinforcements he was awaiting from Ireland, which he hoped could save him from ultimate defeat. By this time, the city was being bombarded by artillery mounted on St John's Church. The King reached Chester, entering the city across the Dee Bridge on 23<sup>rd</sup> September. The next day he witnessed the defeat of his forces at Rowton Moor and retreated back to North Wales. The City refused to surrender and the Parliamentarians extended their siege works around the city.



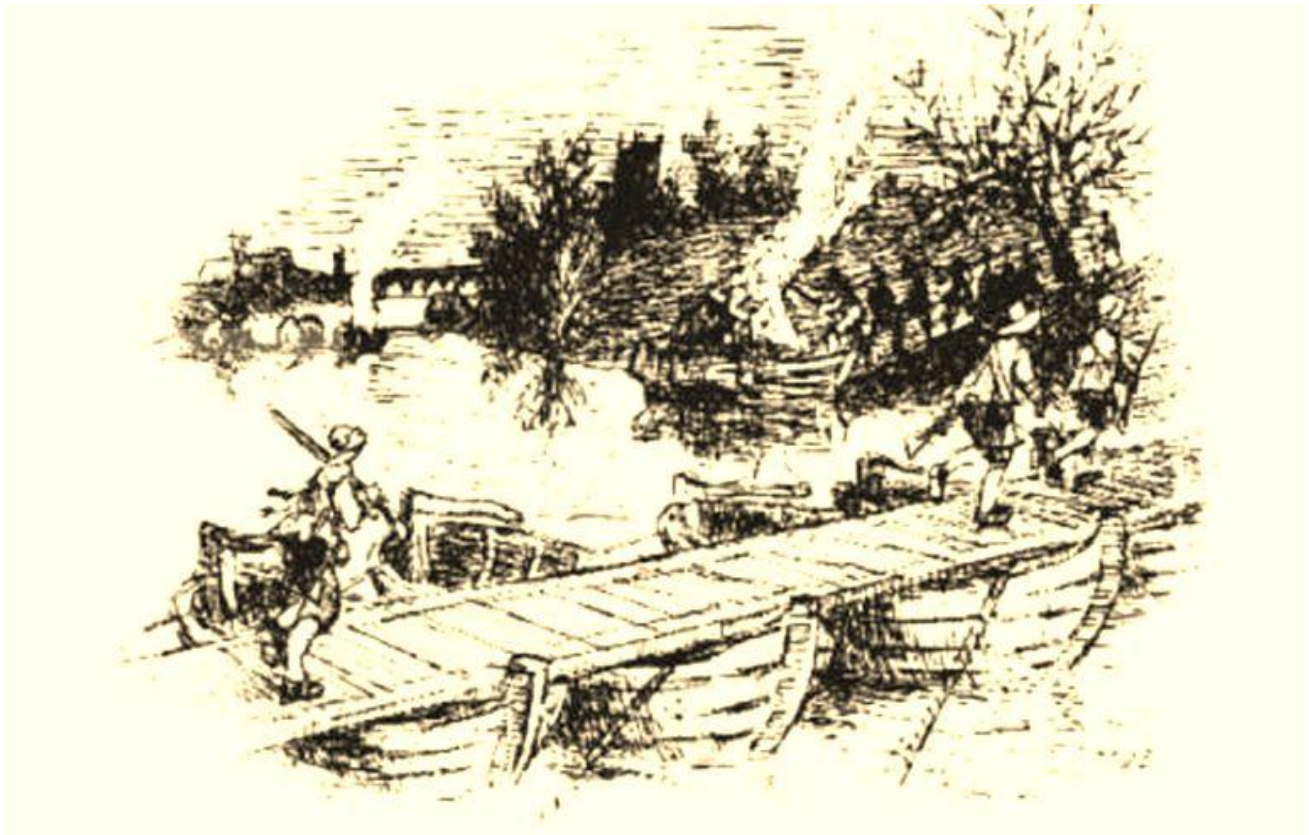
Siege Fortifications in 1645

The guns at St. John's and on the bowling green below were turned on the Dee Mills, the Bridgegate waterworks, and the south-east corner of the walls. On the Welsh side the Royalists still held the fort at Handbridge. In response the Parliamentarians built a battery for a large artillery piece on Brewer's Hall Hill, and linked their positions on either side of the river with a bridge of boats spanning the river from Dee Lane to the Earl's Eye. On 18<sup>th</sup> October, this bridge was completed, consisting of "boates, carte bodies and the lyke." It was protected on the Welsh side by two mounts with gun emplacements. The Lower Mount on the Meadows was constructed "in the fashion of a half-moone". The remains of the earthworks can still be seen by the river entrance to the Meadows although they were built over by a Civil Service boathouse in the 1900's. The "Higher Mount" was on higher ground further up the hill where Victoria Crescent is today. These mounts formed part of the Parliamentary siege lines that extended in an arc southwards to present-day Greenbank on Eaton Road.

The Bridge of Boats and the two mounts were of great importance to the besiegers. Brereton wrote "*Since we caste upp one mount at our bridge to secure it and another mount higher to confront their royal mount they can receive no relief at all.*"

The bridge enabled the Parliamentarians to easily switch troops from one bank to the other and the Royalist defenders planned a full-scale operation to destroy it on 25<sup>th</sup> November.

*"The besieged in Chester finding themselves much annoyed by a floating bridge over the river had recourse to the following contrivance for the purpose of destroying it. They provided two boats filled with combustible matters and upon a day when there was a spring tide, turned them adrift up the river to be carried by the tide to the enemy's bridge. The trains took fire but by the diligence of their guards no great damage was done."*



### The Bridge of Boats

*(Illustration by John Barratt from The Great Siege of Chester. Reproduced by permission)*

Brereton's report also stated *"The enemy had a design to have fallen upon our guards both of horse and foot beyond the water. They about 12 o'clock in the night issued out on the other side [out of Handbridge Fort] with a party of about eighty horse or more and a considerable party of foot; forced in our sentinels to the Higher Mount ... our horse kept their ground and our foot gave them good store of shot and they retreated before their relief came up."*

On 4<sup>th</sup> December, a Royalist cipher messenger was captured in Handbridge. Nathaniel Lancaster, the Parliamentary chaplain wrote *"being sent prisoner to Tarvin, he took the opportunity to dismount himself on the new bridge, leapt into the water in the hope to escape but sunke and was drowned."*

Later that month, in a very severe winter, the Dee froze over and there was much concern that the bridge might be destroyed by the ice. On 28<sup>th</sup> December floating ice sank one of the boats supporting the bridge but by this time, the Royalist defenders could not take any advantage.

During the winter of the 1645-46 many inhabitants died of starvation. In January 1646 the city finally surrendered. On 3 February 1646, the forces of Sir William Brereton occupied Chester.

**Rachel Cross**

### References

John Barratt (2003) *The Great Siege of Chester*

R Faulder (1795) *History of the Siege of Chester during the Civil Wars in the Time of King Charles I*





## Meadows Log April and May 2015

6/4 A lone Swallow flying up river was the first migrant of the spring. Rob

11/04 A short, loud blast from deep within the fen on the Handbridge marsh drew attention to the song of a **CETTIS WARBLER** the first ever recorded on the Meadows. A familiar bird in southern England it has gradually moved north and now looks set to colonise in this area. By the landing stage the first Common Sandpiper of the spring paused to feed in the surf created by a passing rowing boat. (See photo below)

16/04 A morning walk on land adjacent to the Meadow produced a beautiful male Redstart flitting in the hedgerow, a pair of Whinchat, Common Whitethroat and Willow Warblers along Bottoms Lane track. Mark

17/04 A first ever sighting of 2 migrating **TREE PIPIT** paused briefly on top of a hawthorn bush on Dee Valley Water land. Other seasonal migrants to be observed were Sand Martins and Sedge Warbler. Jon

19/04 Butterflies were everywhere with good numbers of Orange Tip (see photo below), Peacock, lesser numbers of Small Tortoiseshell, Speckled Wood, 2 Comma and best of all a male Brimstone flying over Bottoms Lane track.



*Common Sandpiper*



*Orange Tip Butterfly*

20/04 The first Lesser Whitethroat of the spring rattled away in willow by the side of the river.

23/04 A lone Swift above Andrews Crescent arrived a good 2 weeks before the rest of the Handbridge Swifts. Val

24/04 Grasshopper Warblers arrived in good numbers with at least 5 reeling in the vicinity of the Meadow. Jon (see photo on the next page) A further 2 were also recorded on land by the Handbridge allotments.

25/04 A 3rd migrating Whinchat of the Spring was feeding in the centre of the Meadow and a 4th on the 09/05 below the Handbridge allotments.

27/04 The only Garden Warbler of the spring was found near the entrance to Belgrave Park. Reed Warblers were also present nearby on the Handbridge marsh. Mark

10/05 A Spotted Flycatcher was in the canopy of trees bordering the Barnfield Meadow. Nearby, a pair of Nuthatches nested on the Meadows for the first time this year. The family left their nest box some time during w/c 25/05.

## Meadows Log continued



*Grass Hopper Warbler*

Other birds nesting in the hedgerow and scrub around Barnfield Meadow included a pair of Blackcap, Chiffchaff and Long tailed Tits. It would be a loss to the Meadows if this quiet little corner was lost to development.

10/05 Butterfly numbers had dropped off but a single Small Copper braved the cool windy weather.

24/05 On land bordering the Meadow a couple of inquisitive Fox cubs left the safety of their den in daylight and were immediately reprimanded by the adult who ordered them back in doors.

31/05 A Female Banded Demoiselle, Damselfly on the riverbank was the only Odonata species to be recorded. Damselflies have been absent due to cool weather conditions.

A **CUCKOO** calling from a garden bordering the Meadow was another excellent sighting. It has been 10 years since the last one. Let us hope we don't have to wait another 10 years for the next one! David

**Andy Ingham Meadows Log Recorder**

01244 677135



*Thanks to Philip Macey for this photograph of herons near the weir*

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## New Members

Anyone wishing to join Friends of the Meadows please contact the Membership Secretary  
Richard Cain, 56 Elizabeth Crescent, Queens Park, Chester CH4 7AZ

Telephone 01244 671841.

Please let us know who introduced you if appropriate