Newsletter 202

Winter 2016

# FRIENDS OF THE MEADOWS

## Welcome

Happy New Year to all Friends of the Meadows!

After a very wet December, the Meadows have again been flooded. We saw rising water levels forcing mice, voles and shrews from their homes which attracted hundreds of gulls to the Meadow, Some amazing photos are included in Andy Ingham's Meadows Log.

This is my fifth year as Chair and at our AGM in November I announced that I will be stepping down from that position at the next AGM, but will continue to edit and prepare this newsletter.

With the start of a New Year we also ask for your Membership Renewals and a form is included with this Newsletter. We have kept the subscription at a minmum of £5 per household, but of course, if you wish to donate more it will be very welcome. The option of renewing by Standing Order has also been introduced.

Thank you in advance for your continued support! I hope you have an enjoyable and peaceful 2016 and will spend some time of it on our lovely Meadows.

**Rachel Cross**
**Chair**

## IN THIS ISSUE

# Remembering the Winter of 1963

***Rachel Cross** looks back to one of the coldest winters of the last century*

**Swans on the ice underneath the Suspension Bridge**

There had never been a winter like that of 1963 for nearly three centuries. The early months of 1947 had brought more snow but temperatures did not plunge so low. Not since the Great Frost of 1683-84, during the period known as the Little Ice Age when winter fairs were held on the River Thames, had Britain ever been significantly colder.

The big freeze began in December 1962 with a dusting of snow in the middle of the month. By late December, very cold easterly winds were blowing in from Scandinavia. A vicious cold air mass moved across Britain late in the month, bringing snow on Boxing Day and the day after.

On December 29th to 30th, a blizzard swept its way across Wales and the south west of England with snow drifting to more than 20 feet in places, driven on by gale force easterly winds, blocking roads and railways.

The near freezing temperatures meant that the snow cover lasted for over two months in some areas

The River Dee stayed frozen like this for over four months from December 1962 until March 1963. Holes in the ice were made for the many swans as seen in this photo by the Suspension Bridge. Adventurous people took the chance to walk on the frozen river, some posing for photographs while sitting on the old "Danger" bouy by the weir. Someone even drove a mini onto the river at Sandy Lane!

That Winter saw over sixty days of continuous snowcover, severe frosts day and night, raging blizzards, deep drifts, blowing snow and frozen rivers. There were ice floes on the River Mersey and even the sea froze for a mile out in Kent.

And in all that time, the schools never closed!

# A new bench for the Meadows

Last year a new bench was commissioned by the Committee and installed by Amanda and two of her team in early December who did a very good job.

It occupies a prominent position by the riverside path entrance and it is hoped will be enjoyed by many visitors. The bright new wood makes it stand out, but the colour will of course naturally fade over time.

Here's a photo of it being "tested" by Treasurer Bill Richardson and his wife Audrey.

# Volunteers at work

Back in October, the Countryside Ranger, Amanda, had a team of volunteers from Richmond Court and Turning Point on the Meadows with Cheshire Wildlife Trust.

They made a start on clearing some of the vegetation in one of the ditches at the northern end of the Meadows. They brushcut back the overgrowth in the ditch, raked back the arisings and dug the base to soil level. The sides of the ditches have been left after cutting to regrow next year. The aim is to try and manage a short section each year, to create a rotation. It's rather labour intensive and they were only able to achieve so much, even with 12 or 13 taking part. The team had kestrels and buzzards keeping them company, not quite as exciting as the recent evening owl sightings, but still fabulous.

# Public Events on the Meadows in 2016

**12th June**
**Deva Triathlon**

**10th July**
**Raft Race**

**17th July**
**Deva Diva Triathlon**

**30th July**
**Dee Mile Swim**

# The Social Evolution of Honey Bees

***James Holroyd*** *reports on a fascinating talk given by Master Beekeeper Graham Royle at our AGM in November*

There had been high expectations for this talk and we were not disappointed. Graham Royle traced the evolution of honey bees, supporting his explanation with some stunning visuals, some of them still and some in video format.

Along the way we learnt or were reminded of a number of interesting facts: bees collect pollen which they need as protein, as well as nectar; by looking through a microscope at pollen from a cell in the hive, we can tell what plant the bee has visited; since humans are mobile they can easily share their genes, but plants, being immobile have to rely on pollinators.

We know from cave paintings that man has been harvesting honey for at least 6000 years. Until the 17th century, at least, most bees in Europe were kept in skeps made of straw bound by twine or even brambles. For a long time it was thought that the chief bee in a colony was a male, since women were, of course, seen as subservient! However in 1609 a certain Reverend Butler had the audacity to write a pamphlet entitled '*The feminine Monarchie*'! The chief bee, he argued, laid eggs and therefore had to be female.

Our locality had an important part to play in the history of bee keeping, for the hive with the pitched roof, which we see as the typical bee house, was invented in the late 19th century by William Broughton Carr of Bebington on the Wirral.

We learnt of the differences in appearance and role between the three different types of bee in a colony: the worker (female), the drone (male), and the queen. The drones, whose sole job is to fertilize the queen, congregate in huge groups in the air waiting for new queens to emerge from a hive. For this purpose they have much larger eyes than the workers, so that they can easily spot the queen in the air. She will then be mated from ten to twenty times by different drones, thus ensuring maximum genetic diversity and better resistance to diseases.

The queen will leave a certain number of eggs unfertilized to create a limited number of drones. The drones, therefore, have no father and have half the number of chromosomes of workers and a queen. Since the queen carries eggs from a number of different males inside her, the colony will be composed of different sub families. Apart from fertilizing the queen, the drones are nothing but layabouts! So at the end of the season they are thrown unceremoniously out of the hive!

The talk was so wide-ranging that this report does no more than give an idea of some of the issues broached. To finish, Graham Royle looked briefly at similarities between the way humans and bees organize their societies. Among the examples he gave: both have extremely sophisticated means of communication, compare the bees' waggle dance.

Females are playing an increasing role in our own society. In a bee colony all the workers and queen are of course female. And he asked teasingly: are males in our society becoming expendable?

# Focus on Fungi

***Julie Rose*** *explores the Kingdom*

What's the difference between a mushroom and a toadstool? To a fungal fan, absolutely nothing, they are both part of the fascinating Kingdom of Fungi.

There used to be just two kingdoms in classification and fungi were in the plant kingdom. Now, they have one of their own because they don't produce their own food, but use other organic material. This doesn't mean Fungi are all living on and killing other organisms, far from it. We need saprophytic fungi, to break down and recycle redundant material, e.g. dead trees, dog poo.

Some fungi have a symbiotic relationship with plants, these are the mycorrhizal fungi. Some have symbiotic relationships with algae or bacteria to form Lichens. The specific form of a Lichen comes from the species of fungus, the species of alga or bacteria can vary. Many trees have mycorrhizal fungi associated with them, for example the familiar and common Fly Agaric grows with birch. These mycorrhizal fungi increase the effective surface area of the plant roots and help the plant absorb water and minerals from the soil, by forming a network round the plant roots. In return the fungal hyphae absorb sugars from the plant roots that the plant manufactured by photosynthesis.

Most of a fungus is below ground in a network of hyphae called the mycelium. When conditions are right different types of hyphae are produced, which if they meet up will grow into the above ground

structure to produce spores. These are our familiar "mushrooms".

Other fungi produce the moulds on leaves, branches and fruit. We love these, they increase our species count on Fungal walks, especially when there are few "Cap and stem" fungi around because it's too wet, dry, cold, or hot. They can be fussy and very transient.

Now millions of spores are produced but very few are successful in growing; another example of nature producing huge wastage if there is huge inefficiency. Some people feel that these "fruit" can be picked at will because it's just like picking fruit off a tree. Sadly not, you can damage the mycelium, and the spores are necessary to produce the next generation. And other people want to enjoy their beauty too. The only studies that show no effect of picking are in very fungal rich habitat where there will be abundant spores. In our habitats where there are only a few, they can be easily picked out.

Chester Meadows grassland doesn't have a huge variety of fungi; it's too wet, and too nutrient enriched from the silt deposited by flooding. The best spot for the beautiful wax caps is the dry short mown grass. Here are snowy waxcap (*Hygrocybe Virginia*), meadow waxcap (*H. pratensis*), Blackening waxcap (*H. conica*) and some of the difficult to identify red and yellow waxcaps.

The dead wood produces some beautiful fungi, both brackets and cap and stem. These are eaten by beetles and other invertebrates which then are eaten by the birds. Keep a look out in Autumn on the dead wood and admire their beauty.

## Winter Tree Identification

**Saturday 6th February 2016 10-Midday**

Trees can be identified from clues such as their buds, bark, and shape.

Come out and see what trees we can ID and enjoy some winter sunshine!

Please bring a hand lens if you have one!

**Meet road end Bottoms Lane**

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Bring wellies!

## Friends of the Meadows Committee

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Membership Secretary: Richard Cain
Minutes Secretary: James Holden
Newsletter Distribution: Ruth Davidson
Meadows Log Recorder and Facebook Admin: Andy Ingham
Committee: Clive Gregory, Julie Rose

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# Meadows Log

## October to December 2015

**3rd October**
The Cetti's Warbler was again calling from scrub below the Handbridge Allotments.
Nearby the agitated calls of two Water Rail gave their presence away, but as with the Cetti's they remained frustratingly difficult to observe.
On Bottoms Lane track the roving flock of Tits were joined by two Goldcrests.

**7th October**
The first truly wild Geese of the autumn were a small skein of 18 Pink Feet heading down river.
Flying in 'V' formation they were perhaps heading out towards the estuary.

**19th October**
The high vole population on the Meadow has already attracted the attention of Buzzards & Kestrels. It was still a surprise to see a Short Eared Owl hunting in the twilight hours.

It was an even bigger surprise when numbers started to increase with a peak count of four SEOs on the 4th November.

**1st November**
A single Woodcock was flushed from Gorsty Bank. The lack of sightings this year is possibly due to winter Woodcock remaining on the continent and also a declining resident population.

**4th November**
A walk around the Meadow yielded a fairly diverse range of fungi. These included a Stump Puffball, Artist Bracket and the delightfully named Wolf's Fart (photo below) *Julie*

**20th November**
A close relative of Fungi is the Slime Mould. A Slime Mould was found in the grass beyond the ferry landing stage. Identified as possibly a *Mucilago Crustacea*- Dog Vomit Slime mould. No prizes though for guessing what it looks like! *Helen & Chris*

**10th December**
A Kingfisher was observed fishing in the ditch along Bottoms Lane track on a number of dates in December. Usually spotted by the early morning dog walker it was fairly confiding.

**29th December**
Flooding of the Meadow always provides a great spectacle and it was no different this year. The rising water level forced all the Voles out of their homes and in turn this attracted hundreds of Gulls looking for easy pickings. In the space of one hour over 20 unfortunate Voles were picked up by the Gulls.

The flood water also attracted a flock of 23 Teal and three Shovelera (see photo).

Overhead there was a wonderful but rare large flock of Lapwing - 72 in total.

**2nd January 2016**
A walk around the Meadow and Queens Park yielded over 20 flowering plants. These included Red Campion, Geranium Molly, Dovesfoot Cranesbill and Wall Speedwell. *Julie*

***Andy Ingham***
*Meadows Log Recorder*
*01244 677135*

*[Left]* The floods have provided quite a spectacle in recent days.

Rising water levels forced mice, voles and shrews from their homes.

This in turn has attracted hundreds of Gulls to the Meadow looking for easy pickings.

The picture shows the ensuing chasing and squabbling when one is caught!

*[Right]* Not only gulls, but even a rower was attracted onto the Meadows!