

Friends of the Meadows



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Welcome *to our* Newsletter for Winter 2017

We have a slightly new look to the Newsletter with a revamped front page. I hope you like it!

At our AGM in November, there was an opportunity for members to see the Watersports Hub plans and talk to Mike Dix who is the Council's Project Manager. Although the formal planning consultation period finished on 27th December we understand that you can still register your comments until the Planning Committee meets in March. Please make your views known. Details can be found on the Council website (Planning Ref 16/05188/FUL)

Since our last Newsletter we learned of the deaths of two of our members who had been very active in their support.

In October, Grahame Jones, one of our Newsletter distributors passed away. In the past, Grahame produced many articles for the newsletter often connected with the river on which he was a ferryman for many years. He also led many charity walks. He was a true gentleman and will be very sadly missed.

At the AGM, I stood down as Chair and we decided to move forward without a nominated Chair or Secretary so we are adopting a "collective" approach to the work of the Committee. The responsibilities of these positions and all the work of the Committee will be shared between us. Of course, we always welcome anyone who wants to get

involved in helping especially if they can do so on a practical level. It is important that we keep the community actively involved in the promotion and development of this wonderful natural space that we have in the heart of our city.

Which of course brings us to our Annual Membership Subscription! You'll find a Renewal Form included with this newsletter. We've kept the subscription at £5 a household and left it to you if you wish to voluntarily donate any extra which helps us to undertake additional environmental projects on the Meadows. You can pay by cash, cheque or alternatively payment can be made by completing the standing order mandate on the enclosed form. Please pass on the details to anyone else who may be interested.

Thanks for your support!

Rachel Cross, Newsletter Editor

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Cover image: Seagulls over the flooded Meadows, Winter 2016 (Andy Ingham)

Meadows Management

A review of recent work and plans by Amanada Pritchard, Countryside Ranger

During November, a team from Chester Zoo met me at The Meadows and collected the willow that we coppiced from along the ditches which us taken back to the Zoo and used as browse for the giraffes and other herbivores (see also Andy's Meadows Log).



We made a good start on clearing the central ditch leading across the Meadow at a right angle from where we cleared last year (per the rotation) and the section we were working on ran along the short edge of one of the central baled areas. We also coppiced more willow from along the ditches around this area thus reducing raptor look out points.

Chester Zoo are going to be coming to the Meadows over the Winter months to thin out the willow that has populated the meadows to the rear of the houses on Elizabeth Crescent. They are starting with a "cut one, leave one" approach (ie 50% reduction of willow) – again, arisings will be taken as animal

fodder/browse. I have asked them not to coppice any other species at this time. The coppicing will be kept under review to possibly allow them to cut more if it has not been thinned enough - but I want to err on the side of caution in the first instance.

I see this as a long term solution for managing the willow, as the coppiced regrowth each year will be an excellent browse source for the zoo and enable us to manage the area without incurring costs and will welcome feedback over the next few months about the work.

The Zoo Team gave me their assurance that they always check for nests and will keep an eye out to ensure that they cause minimal disturbance around the barn owl box - obviously, from the zoo's perspective, they are keen to follow best practice where wildlife is concerned!

Hedgelaying

After last year's successful hedge-laying along the upper section of Bottom's Lane, we have organized another day!

**Saturday 4th February
Meet at 10am, Bottom's Lane
Entrance**

Kevin Feeney from Cheshire Wildlife Trust will be there to supervise and bring equipment. It's open to anyone who is fit and willing to have a go!

Erddig, the “Jewel in the Crown of Welsh Country Houses”

James Holroyd reports on a fascinating talk given by Jill Burton at the AGM in November.

After this year’s AGM we were treated to a summary of the ups and downs of the development of Erddig over the past three centuries; a history brought to life by Jill Burton. As Education Officer for the National Trust for 21 years she had deep knowledge of her subject, which she imparted with incision and wit, and an excellent array of slides.

The building began life as a large country house in 1685. After its first owner had been declared bankrupt, it came into the hands of John Meller (correct spelling), who created a house 19 bays wide and an estate of some 2000 acres. It has retained largely the same shape to this day: a long, narrow house, stretching from the public reception rooms to the most private apartment: the cabinet. With all doors opened, it was possible to see from one end of the house to the other.

The first member of the Yorke family to inherit the house and estate was Simon, known as Simon I, since the family insisted on repeating given names for their sons.

In the late 18th Century, the tradition began of recording servants with portraits and poetry, starting the creation of an important historical record.

One of Queen Victoria’s goddaughters married Simon III.



A slow decline was hastened by the First World War; the number of staff gradually declined, almost all female in the house.

The last Simon Yorke was reclusive, refusing to install gas, electricity or telephone. Then, in 1947, the newly created National Coal Board began mining under the house, causing large scale subsidence. The once grand country home was indeed on its way to becoming a ruin. The last owner Philip Yorke III began negotiations with the National Trust and donated the house and estate to them in 1973.

So why is Erddig so special? One answer, is that the Yorke family rarely threw anything away. The last Philip Yorke gave absolutely everything to the National Trust: the contents of the house, its archives, garden and estate; Erddig contains the second largest collection of objects of any NT house..

Jill Burton was Education Officer for the National Trust for 21 years. She retired in 2011, although still volunteers at Erddig.

Note: this is an updated version of the original article provided by Jill Burton which contains a number of factual corrections.

- Rachel Cross, Editor

Assessing Habitat Regulations

Gail Quartly-Bishop reports on her assessments for a small development on the riverside



For many years, the banks of the river Dee in Chester have been part of the city: for launching boats both pleasure and commercial; forming a particularly lethal obstacle on Chester Golf Course; for promenading; as a backdrop to Chester City Walls and Tower; and, surprisingly, as part of people's back gardens. In fact, almost the whole northern/eastern bank of the Dee opposite Chester Meadows is occupied by gardens (the rest is a public park). As the river is also a site of European importance for nature conservation, this creates some interesting paperwork when people want to remodel their garden space. I was asked to provide a report to inform Habitats Regulations Assessment for a small domestic development consisting of the amalgamation of two existing gardens on the riverbank to form a larger landscaped space, with a new shed-cum-summerhouse. The river is designated as a Special Area of Conservation for its aquatic flora including floating water-plantain, lampreys, salmon and bullhead populations and otters.

I studied the project plans, visited the site and spent a long time reading Natural England's Conservation Objectives for the river. I felt I could rule out floating water-plantain and bullhead, as there were no records anywhere near Chester and, in any case, habitat conditions were unfavourable for these species. That left aquatic flora in general, lampreys and salmon and otter.

This section of the river is popular with boats both private and commercial, meaning that there is little in the way of aquatic flora. I felt confident that the aquatic flora qualifying feature wasn't represented in the vicinity of my study site.

Turning to otters, we know that they will use urban rivers, even places which are very busy with people, as part of their wider territories. Otter spraint has been found on tributaries of the Mersey in urban Warrington, and there are regular sightings on the Mersey now, but only in secluded places. I concluded that otters were likely to be using the river Dee through Chester, even though there were few records for the local area. It did, however, seem unlikely that there would be any otter holts (hiding places) along this stretch of river, so if anything this section would be used for feeding and getting from A to B. I couldn't imagine how re-modelling someone's garden could possibly affect that.

The last species to be considered were the lampreys and Atlantic salmon. All of these are migratory fish, starting their life in the upper reaches of the river, travelling downstream to the sea, growing to maturity there and coming back up the river as adults to spawn and begin the cycle again. I found it strange to think of the entire population of the river Dee catchment swimming past my

client's garden, but it must happen, or they would never get to the sea or back to the spawning grounds. This means that every part of the river between the sea and the spawning grounds is important. Every section must have good water quality, places for fish to hide from predators if needed and must be free from barriers affecting the ability of fish to pass through. If there is a problem in just one place on the main river which prevents fish passage, the entire population is under threat. I was glad to see that my client was not proposing any material changes to the boundary of the river, all services would connect to the mains up by the road and

that there would be no changes to surface water flow arrangements. This meant that I could be confident that the project would not have any effects on fish.

Overall, then, I was happy to conclude that the project would have no likely significant effects on the river, its habitats or its populations of important species like floating water-plantain.

Gail Quartly-Bishop is a Freelance Botanist and Ecologist.

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Events on the Meadows in 2017

Sunday 4th June - The Deva Triathlon World Qualification Event

This event takes place from Grosvenor Park which is the transition point. The run route will incorporate running over the Old Dee Bridge as well as the Suspension Bridge, along the Groves and in the Meadows with the finish being at the Bandstand in the Groves

Sunday 2nd July - The Rotary Club of Chester Raft Race

The Chester Raft Race is an annual charity event taking place every July on the River Dee and organised by the Rotary Club of Chester. The Meadows is the launch area. This event takes place at 10am

Saturday 15th July - Deva Divas Triathlon / Quadrathlon

The Deva Divas Triathlon is a short distance ladies only race. It's now a well-known, popular event which, in 2016, won the coveted British Triathlon "Event of the Year". The Deva Divas Quadrathlon also takes place this year. As well as the 750m Swim, 25k Bike and 5k Run there will also be a 4k Kayak included.

Saturday 5th August – The Dee Mile Swim

A classical race of the modern era starting upstream at The Red House. The race starts at 5pm



October to December 2016

10th October 2016

It was a good idea by Amanda (Countryside Ranger) to get Chester Zoos Browse team to coppice some of the Willow that had started to get a foothold, and take it back as feed for the Zoo animals. One of the Browse workers predicted that the two trucks & trailers loaded up equated to only one day's feed for the herbivores. (See picture below)



27th October 2016

Skins of Pink-footed Geese flying over have been a daily feature of the winter. It appears the Meadow is on a regular flight path with Pinkfeet flying back and forth from the estuary. Every morning they head up river looking for a field to graze and in the evening make the return journey. Numbers have varied from day to day, but it has not been uncommon to see up 1000 Geese fill the sky. This has provided quite a spectacle and a wonderful sound to hear.

12th November 2016

A Water Rail was heard calling from the Fen area on Dukes land. This may be one species that benefits from the land going into Higher Level Stewardship.

15th November 2016

A pair of Stonechat were observed feeding on the Meadow for the first time this winter. (Julie)

1st December 2016

A juvenile Great Crested Grebe fished the river opposite the sailing club. (Jon)

13th December 2016

Initially it appeared that recent work on the Dukes land may have forced the Barn Owl to look for a new territory. However, after a period of absence the Owl is back again hunting the Meadow.

The Owl was also seen by Rob at dusk on the 30th December.

30th December 2016

The UK Waxwing invasion finally reached Queens Park and Handbridge. Ten Waxwings briefly landed on a Rowan tree in Eaton Road. Their stay was short-lived due to a territorial Mistle Thrush not prepared to give up any of the Berries.

1st January 2017

Julie's New Year's Day Plant Hunt yielded 20 species in flower. These included

7th January 2017

Five skittish Teal flew up river, briefly alighting in front of Chester Canoe club before heading off up the river. A few minutes later they were back, now flying

Hazel & Hogweed on Bottoms Lane track. On the Meadow, Yarrow, Annual Meadow Grass were found and Red Campion on Barnfield. (Julie)

down river & another short stop before finally heading off low over the Meadow. In contrast to the nervous behaviour, two Little Grebe happily fished the same area of the river.

Winter Tree Identification

Led by Julie Rose

**Sunday 26th February 2017
at 11am**

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 of Bottoms Lane.
Bring wellies!**



In memory of Val Gregson

Val was an enthusiastic member of Friends of the Meadows and a knowledgeable naturalist who knew her plants and birds well. She could enthuse and inspire others by managing to be both very modest and very loud. She was great company on our Botany walks on Chester Meadows and livened up our evenings.

Val passed away peacefully at The Countess of Chester Hospital on 30th October 2016 aged 62 years.

A Service of Thanksgiving was held 17th November at Handbridge United Reformed Church. Her funeral was packed with family and friends. She will be much missed.

Julie Rose