

# **Friends of the Meadows**



**Newsletter 218**

**Winter 2020**

## Welcome *to our* Newsletter for Winter 2020

As we welcome in another year and another decade, I've looked back ten years to our newsletter for Winter 2010. In January of that year there were reports of heavy snowfall on the 6<sup>th</sup> and by the 9<sup>th</sup> the river was frozen over with many waterfowl being seen on the river by Sandy Lane. By contrast, at the time of writing, temperatures are quite mild, although there is still scope for them to plummet before this Winter is out!

We have still heard little more regarding the proposed Watersports Hub on Barnfield, but it hasn't entirely gone away. We keep a watchful eye on progress, but without the required funding being in place there will probably remain little to report.

Recently, a small group from the Friends of the Meadows Committee met with Stephanie Hefferan, the Greenspace Officer who has responsibility for The Meadows, to survey the state of the path network across the Meadows and to consider what may be done to sensitively improve access. It was apparent that extensive remedial maintenance is required and Stephanie will be liaising with colleagues at CWaC on how to prioritise and allocate funding. We are hopeful that some money will be found and the FoM Committee will submit our views on what is needed and the priorities and will also contact local councillors. The more expressions of concern there are about the maintenance of the paths, and in particular access for wheelchair users, the stronger the case for extra funding will be, so please do contact the local councillors individually by email or letter to support the need for funding for maintenance and remedial work on the paths.

This edition's cover photo is of a Bullfinch, sat in the hedgerow at Chester Meadows stuffing its face full of Blackberry seeds by Andy Ingham

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All the sightings in the last few months.

We are also looking at the possibility of funding a couple of information and interpretation boards on the Meadows; one for the planting of black poplars and the other to acknowledge both the Meadows' history and importance to the City. Hopefully there will be more to report by the next Newsletter in the Spring.

Until then, I hope you enjoy reading this edition!

**Rachel Cross, Newsletter Editor**  
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### The Darkling Thrush



I leant upon a coppice gate  
When Frost was spectre-gray,  
And Winter's dregs made desolate  
The weakening eye of day.  
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky  
Like strings of broken lyres,  
And all mankind that haunted nigh  
Had sought their household fires.

**Thomas Hardy**



# Meadows Site Management

*An update from Greenspace Officer Stephanie Hefferan*

## Riverside Trees

In November, residents from Deva Terrace came out for a morning's volunteering cutting back some of the riverside trees.

The benefits of this will be to manage the trees along this stretch at a lower level and so maintain river views, offer structural habitat diversity whilst maintaining the root systems to keep the bank stabilised. The cuttings were donated to Chester Zoo for animal feed.

It was an enjoyable morning for all but hard work; thanks to everyone for a very productive morning! As the bankside is a SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) all work was done in accordance with the guidelines provided by Natural England for tree management within the SSSI.

## Willow Scrub

I am hoping to hear from Natural England regarding a grant by the end of March. This will be for managing the scrub on site: in particular the areas that surround the historic agricultural ditches and drains.

Whilst we need to protect these historic features, it is important to maintain a level of scrub throughout the site. This includes a proportion of mature specimens as well as smaller coppiced areas of willow and gorse to maximize the site's biodiversity.

**Steph Hefferan**  
**Greenspace Officer**

## Willow Scrub on Eaton Estate Land – Statement from Grosvenor Estates

Eaton Estate will be cutting some of the willow scrub on their land south of the meadows (and east of Belgrave Park). Signs will put up explaining the work.

To support biodiversity and maintain and improve the River Dee Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), we are removing areas of dense scrub from sections of the riverbank. Left unmanaged, scrub develops dense cover which impacts on the flora and fauna and grows large, unstable, trees which erode the riverbank when they fall, affecting the water quality.

The scrub will be cleared in sections to help create a rich and diverse habitat with open areas to encourage other plants and flowers to grow as well as creating new areas for birds to nest. Trees along the banks will be managed to maintain an ideal amount of shade, helping to cool the water. Following surveys by our experienced and highly skilled foresters, any trees which are home to protected species, such as birds and bats, will be retained.

Waste material will be chipped and used as biomass fuel – a renewable source of heat and hot water. New growth captures the equivalent carbon that is released making the process carbon neutral.

This work is part of a ten-year plan which is approved by Natural England, the government's adviser for the natural environment, and the Forestry Commission, the government department responsible for protecting, expanding and promoting the sustainable management of woodlands.

# Where have all the turtle doves gone?

*Julie Rose discusses the decline of this long-distance migrant in the pigeon family*

Turtle Doves are our only migratory dove, and a strict graminivore. They aren't guilty of eating your broccoli, or decimating young oil seed rape. They're small, much smaller than the butch wood pigeon that will push this timid dove off feeding patches.

The last Cheshire breeding birds were in Rixton, only 19 years ago. They bred in Delamere too. In Cheshire, they were reported in Chester and there are historical records for every surrounding tetrad, but not the Meadow, possibly because it was so short of scrub. How have populations dropped "from widespread over much of the country" to just hanging on in Kent and the South-East, and outposts in East Anglia, Yorkshire and Hampshire in two decades? Other migrants have fared better further north and west. There is widespread decline in Europe too.

Hunting, I hear you shout. Yes, it doesn't help, when British firms offer Brits the chance to blast Turtle Doves out of the sky in Morocco for €280 a day, saying that they are common, and we must acknowledge Scousers have done their bit for the environment in Kent: by exporting their hare coursing betting businesses down South, they have caused mass hedge planting, where there didn't used to be hedges for miles. Now the hedges stop the 4x4s driving over crops for miles. Every cloud has a silver lining.

The RSPB and others have had many research projects over decades to check for breeding condition, disease, breeding habitat etc. We know that years ago they would have had several



breeding attempts, now they arrive in the UK, in poor condition, fail to fatten up, and sometimes leave before they attempt to breed. Why? Traditionally they could loaf around grain stores down south and glean enough spilt grain to stay alive. Everything is much tidier now.

A RSPB research programme showed that supplementary feeding boosted breeding and there is now a Programme to support this. The RSPB hand out huge sacks of bird food for the farmers who have, or have had Turtle Doves in the past, or who have suitable habitat in East Anglia and Kent. The adults do well on this supplementary food, but supplementary feeding is a last resort, and the squabs are in much better condition when feeding on a wide range of wild flower seed.

Turtle Doves need thick prickly hedges 4m wide, 4 m high or scrub, or dense conifer. Not our toytown hedges, flailed to regulation 1x2m (if we're lucky). Someone told me that finding Turtle Dove nests was a painful, thorny process. However there are good, high, scrubby hedges, without Turtle Doves now, where they used to breed, so it doesn't appear to be lack of breeding habitat.

Trichomoniasis, a protozoal disease, is found in poorly Turtle Doves, but again, it isn't thought to be a cause of morbidity unless the birds are already in poor condition.

Tracking Turtle Doves is useful to elucidate their foraging range and food preferences but they are difficult to catch. Adults can forage over a wide area but recently fledged birds stay near the nest. They do need easy access to a clean water source.

Some farmers have taken field borders and awkward corners out of production and sown flower mixes for invertebrates and birds. Some are more native and less controversial than others. Some are just large scale gardening and damage our native flora. In East Anglia one legume nectar mix can have a specific Turtle Dove component – they are very partial to Fumitory seeds. One problem with this modified nectar mix is plant overgrowth; these little doves just like standing on bare ground, so they can strip seeds off the plants and pick the seeds off the ground. They can't hang off vegetation like the other pigeons. Apparently short-mown turf will do as well. This combination of bare ground or short turf and seed producing plants is rather a challenge to achieve; it requires continuous management that costs money and takes time.

Rainfall can be limiting in the South - East. There are many Mediterranean plants, which are generally fast growing annuals. Wild flower seed is increasingly hard to come by, as decades of weedkiller on arable fields kills off any germinating seedlings from the seedbank, until the seed bank is so depleted as to be non-existent. Or is it? A deep plough of field edges can yield some amazing displays of poppies and rare plants even now, especially on chalk soils. Which is why I've been nose down in vegetation quadrats all summer, on plots of 12 different seed mixes, unsown cultivated and uncultivated stubble margins on various farms in East Anglia, and one, with a view, on the Kent Downs.

Public engagement is a huge issue: do people just look on Nature as stopping them getting a house to live in? Much oohing and cooing emanated from a group of birdwatchers, with a magnificent view of a male Turtle Dove in Wrabness. Anxious to engage "Youth" they offered a view through a scope. Nah, it said, I'll look on Google! You couldn't make it up, but without enthusiasm or at least indifference I think much of our wildlife is doomed.

Turtle Doves, without improved breeding productivity here, won't survive in the UK. Adults can be supplementary fed if necessary, but squabs need wild flower seeds. Hopefully these will be native wild-sown wild flowers, but until there is sufficient wildlife friendly arable farming, there may need to be sown margins, of the right mixes that don't overgrow, and produce seed at the right time of year.

**Julie Rose**



# The “Thief Cook” of Erddig: Fact or Fiction?

*James Holroyd reports on the talk given by Jill Burton at our AGM in November*

Jill pointed out that Erddig is outstanding among National Trust properties for its massive collection of documents relating to the servants, which in most properties were regarded as of little worth and discarded.

This story begins with Philip Yorke III who, after an early marriage, was involved in a scandal and moved away, returning seventeen years later, just before his father’s death, to claim his inheritance. Up to that point the large workforce had been managed with skill, but Philip was quite unprepared for the task.



*Ellen Penketh*

In 1902, soon after his return, he married Louise, daughter of a clergyman, who likewise had no experience of managing a large staff, but insisted on being in charge. Luckily for us, she kept a diary! After the hiring and sacking of numerous staff, Philip and Louise found a young girl called Ellen Penketh, who they interviewed at a house in Manchester. She was appointed housekeeper in 1902 and was to remain in their service until 1907.

It is clear that as time went on demands on Ellen increased considerably. The number of house guests grew in number, menus were complicated and all meals had to be produced by Ellen, with the help of a scullery maid, a kitchen maid and a cleaner. Louise insisted that she oversaw the household accounts but in fact largely passed the responsibility to Ellen. It was Ellen’s job to go to Wrexham each week, cash a cheque, pay the bills in the different shops and return with the servants’ wages.

In 1907, the estate manager announced that the bills in Wrexham had not been paid. Ellen protested that the money had inexplicably

disappeared after she had left the bank. She was given several days to try to raise the missing sum, but when this was not forthcoming Philip and Louise dismissed her at 7.15 at night, sending her on foot to Wrexham. (The rest of the serving staff managed to raise £5 to help her). The next morning Philip went to the police and Ellen was duly arrested. After she had been in jail for a week he tried to withdraw the charge, but failed, and the case went to the Assizes. Pending the hearing she spent three further months in jail.

In what must have been a time of total despondency for Ellen, there was a ray of light. She was given a barrister of great skill, Artemis Jones, son of a stone mason. He had studied at Oxford and would subsequently be knighted. He argued that there was no sign she had spent any of the money, that she was over worked and too much was expected of her. The verdict was Not Guilty.

Absolutely furious at this outcome, Philip closed Erddig Park to local people, accusing the local press of bias and being too Welsh! Yet despite this positive outcome for Ellen, she was now unemployable without a reference. (Her previous employer had died). She therefore returned home to Salford, where she eked out a precarious existence and died in her early forties.

Philip, meanwhile, set about a publicity exercise to most visible effect. Many photographs of the servants were taken, some posed with servants recently retired or, in at least one case, an earlier photo was cut out and pasted in position. Poems were then written, even retrospectively in some instances about previous photos and paintings. Post truth and fake news are nothing new!



# “February’s Fair Maids” - Tougher than you think



**The snowdrop:** who isn't delighted to see the first ones appearing? And in Yealmpton where we have woods full of them we don't have to go on special visits to those vast gardens that have hordes of snowdrops. In the language of flowers the snowdrop signifies 'hope or rebirth' also purity.

Its botanical name *Galanthus nivalis* means milk flower of the snow, but it has many other common names such as 'Mary's tapers', 'Eve's tears', 'dewdrop', even 'death flower' as there was once a superstitious belief that to bring snowdrops into the house was to invite death in.

'Snowdrop', its most common name, comes from a long-ago fashion for white earrings shaped like drops.

It is not a native plant, probably arriving from other parts of Europe during Shakespeare's time; neither is it a protected species but when you read what I have to tell you about it, it will be clear it can take care of itself: the flowers may look delicate but the snowdrop is actually one of the most fiercely self-protective flowers. It closes its petals in really cold temperatures to protect its reproductive parts; its leaves contain a substance like anti-freeze to help it endure harsh winter weather; its bulbs are poisonous so not tempting to hungry digging animals like squirrels or badgers; it manufactures a lectin which acts as a natural insecticide; and on the rare occasions it manages to set seed, perhaps having been fertilised by the early-foraging queens of bumble bee *Bombus terrestris*, each seed has a tiny portion of a rich fatty acid attached to it which ants love, and they will carry off the seeds in order to bring this valuable food to their larvae. The seed usually falls off somewhere before the ant reaches its nest and thus the snowdrop spreads itself. Though mainly it spreads rapidly from its busy production of bulblets.

If you want lots of snowdrops in your garden buy them when they're still in green leaf as the bulbs do not keep long.

Medically the snowdrop is very important for its galanthomine, an alkaloid which is much used now in the management of Alzheimer's disease. It is approved by NICE and is marketed as Reminyl, and it serves to slow down the progress of the illness. There is some hope too that it might be useful in the management of HIV.

Such a humble little flower and so much to say about it, unless you're like the poet Ted Hughes who regarded it as 'brutal' and spoke of it "hanging its metal heads". Personally, I think it's a small miracle of the plant world, very beautiful, and extremely tough!

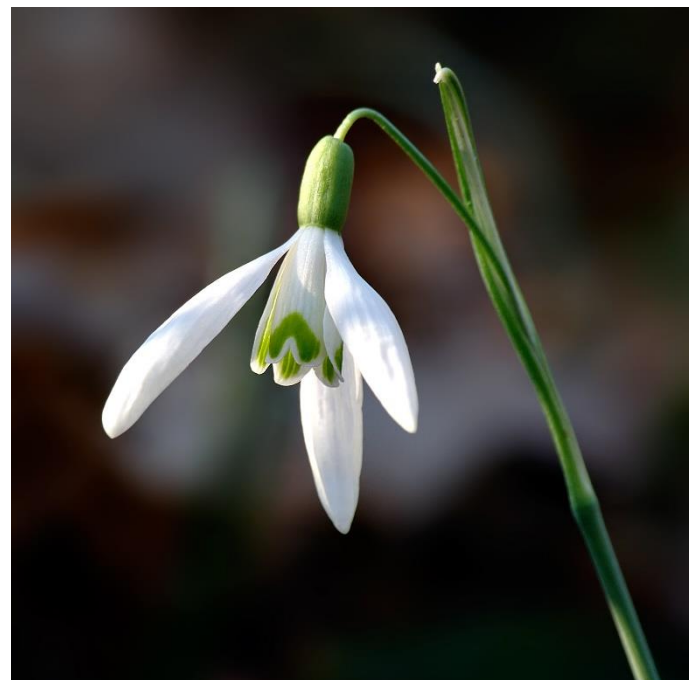


Photo: André Karwath



## October to December 2019

### 12<sup>th</sup> October 2019

A pair of Kingfishers flew over the Meadow landing stage. One of them pausing briefly to fish from a overhanging branch. On Bottoms Lane track a Comma and Red Admiral Butterfly were nectaring on Ivy.

### 24<sup>th</sup> October 2019

A handful of huge saucer shaped Parasol Mushrooms (*Macrolepiota Procera*) growing close to the river path. Unfortunately, heavy showers soon put an end to their impressive display. (*John Wainwright*)

### 26<sup>th</sup> November 2019

The haunting call of a male Tawny Owl could be heard coming from one of the Elizabeth Crescent gardens backing on to the Meadow.

### 5<sup>th</sup> December 2019

A fleeting glimpse of a Barn Owl at dusk hunting on land adjacent to the meadow. (*Trevor Dennis*)

### 7<sup>th</sup> December 2019

A male Blackcap was recorded by Trevor Dennis visiting a garden in St Annes Way.

### 19<sup>th</sup> December 2019

Probably the most interesting visitor to the Meadow this winter was a Little Egret flying above Bottoms Lane track. It had probably been fishing in the ditch when *Tim Schofield* had accidently flushed it.

### 21<sup>st</sup> December 2019

The distinctive sound of a Woodcock crashing through undergrowth when flushed is no longer a common sight. So, to see one at the west end river entrance was a pleasant surprise. A female Stonechat was

briefly perched on Hawthorn in the centre of the Meadow.

### 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2019

Sixteen Snipe were flushed on a walk through a very wet Meadow. One or possibly two Pipistrelle Bats were taking advantage of the mild weather and hunting at dusk along Bottoms Lane track.

### 24 December 2019

A pair of Goosander were fishing under the Old Dee Bridge and again on the 27<sup>th</sup> when Trevor saw a 2 male and a female.

### 27<sup>th</sup> December 2019

A rotund male Bullfinch (see cover photo) sitting low down in the Bottoms Lane hedgerow stuffing its face on Blackberry seed. Bullfinch are normally wary of people but this fellow was not disturbed by dog walkers passing only a few feet away. A Water Rail was flushed from a field bordering the Meadow; it flew into cover on the Handbridge marsh.



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