

Newsletter

November 2016



Welcome

In the September newsletter I noted the presence of a single hollyhock plant at the foot of the railway bridge that spans the river. This prompted the following email from one of our readers:

Just read the newsletter and saw the pic of the hollyhock. A friend and I sprinkled a load of hollyhock seeds by that wall last year and this one seems to have survived! I have hollyhocks in my garden in Whitehall Bridge Road which came via my friend's house in Chartham and originated in Giverny where she collected them off the path in Monet's garden, so they've come quite a way, hopefully they will spread along there!

It's interesting to be able to trace the pedigree of this plant all the way back to Giverny, and I'm grateful to our reader for supplying the information. We're delighted to know that people do indeed read the newsletter, and we are always happy to hear from you, so please take the trouble to email me at lovehambrook@gmail.com if you have something to share with others; it could be an unusual wildlife sighting, reminiscence about what the site was like when Bretts were quarrying sand and gravel in the 1960s and 70s, or simply recounting an enjoyable stroll on a frosty morning.

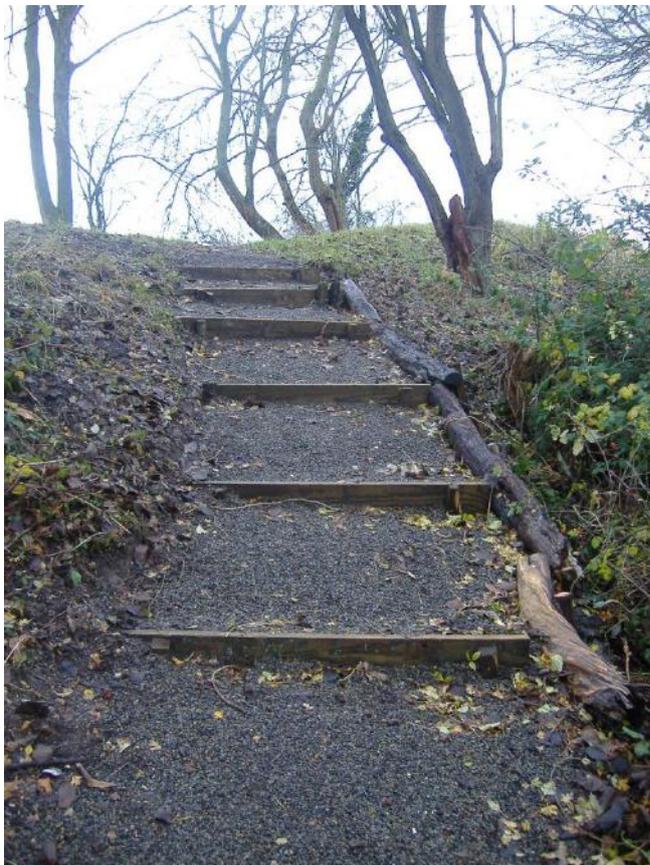
As hollyhock is a garden flower originating in Asia, it isn't something that we would be planting on the marsh itself, but growing ramrod-stiff against the bridge brickwork it didn't look at all out of place.

As you can read on page 3, we have started work on a management plan for Hambrook Marshes. One aspect of this will be to collate some of the historical information about the site. If any of you knew the area when Bretts were digging, we'd be very keen to hear from you. In particular, we would like to know how much of the area was dug out, as we understand that not all of the Marshes were quarried. The more we know about how the site was managed in the past, the better we can understand processes taking place today: there is, for example, some suggestion that the land may be sinking a little in places, which would be quite feasible in those areas where gravel was excavated and the hollow later back-filled with waste soil which, over the years would settle to leave shallow depressions. Please get in touch at lovehambrook@gmail.com if you think you can help. Thank you.

Recent developments

Path improvements

The path leading up onto the back end of the disused railway embankment was improved this month by volunteers from the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership. The photo (right) shows that fresh gravel has been laid and held in place by a line of logs, while the steepest section has been made easier to walk up by



the insertion of a short run of steps (left). This embankment is an interesting area to visit, as it gives grand views over the Marshes and, being the only patch of scrub, often has a good number of birds flitting around in the hawthorn and wild rose. It is also sobering to contemplate that just 70 years ago the ground you are treading on vibrated to the passage of passenger trains that rumbled through to Canterbury South station (where K&C hospital now stands)

and onwards to Bridge and Elham, eventually linking up with the line from London to Folkestone.

Flooding

After a dry end to summer, daily rain in the first three weeks of November led to parts of the Marshes going under water on the 21st and 22nd. The photo, below left, shows the riverside path heading towards Toddlers' Cove, while the photo, below right, is of the less-used back path that heads inland from the A2 bridge towards the disused railway embankment. Within a very few days most of the paths were reasonably dry again, although the fields retained numerous damp patches which made them more attractive to birds.



Graffiti artist strikes again

It is most unfortunate that the new display panels dotted around the Marshes prove irresistible to those compelled to daub their "tags" on every available surface. The good news is that we have a supply of special cloths which, with effort, can remove all the paint, although it is difficult to get out



of cracks that have been gouged by the knife-carrying fraternity. Our aim is to remove any tags as soon as they are discovered, on the principle that these "territory markers" lose their power if nobody else sees them, and this approach appears to be working reasonably well as, despite the large number of people visiting the site every day, we have not been overwhelmed with inane graffiti.

Farewell to the cattle

We said goodbye to the cattle early in the month. Regular visitors have enjoyed watching them grow during the summer, and we look forward to welcoming a new herd of young heifers in April.

Management plan

As mentioned in the Welcome section above, we have begun the process of producing a management plan. This will collate information that is known about the site – its history, geology, hydrology, wildlife and past management, and then describe how we intend to manage it for public access and wildlife in the coming years. These plans conventionally run for five years, after which

they are reviewed in the light of what has been achieved and, possibly, what went wrong, so that we can tweak our management proposals for the next five years.

Wildlife Report

The most emphatic sign of winter so far was the appearance of three lapwings on Tonford Field on 23rd, normally only seen here after a snowfall; perhaps they were trying to tell me something. A shift towards a more wintry feel was also reflected in the arrival of a pair of stonechats, first seen on 28th, and still present two days later, so I'm hoping they'll remain here for the winter. Snipe numbers have also been building up, with a healthy peak count of 54 on 16th.

Minor flooding of parts of the fields on 21st and 22nd saw 29 mallard dabbling in the shallows, along with 63 black-headed gulls, two little egrets and two herons. Ducks are classified as either dabblers or divers; our most familiar duck, the mallard, falls into the first category, whereas tufted ducks are divers, living up to their name by plunging head-first into the water in search of food. Mallard, and other dabblers, are largely surface feeders, their preferred method of feeding being to sift through shallow-flooded areas with their bills (dabbling) in order to filter out floating seeds of rushes and other aquatic plants. They can also up-end – pushing their heads under water while their rear ends project inelegantly into the air – as they hunt for food below the surface. On occasion, however, they try with rather limited success to emulate tufted ducks by diving, and I was amused recently to watch as a combination of greater buoyancy and less skill resulted in a tremendous commotion of splashing wings as two mallards tried desperately to force their bodies underwater. The number of tufted ducks on Tonford Lake increased to 15 during the month, but then dropped back to three or five.

Thrushes enjoyed a purple patch on 8th, when 65 fieldfares flew over, and the embankment scrub was pulsating with the busy activity of 31 redwings, 11 blackbirds and six song thrushes. Goldfinches (right) also excelled themselves: on 21st a flock



of 26 was squeezed into a rather tiny strip of young alders, and two days later no fewer than fifty birds were jostling for space in the same trees.

A chiffchaff sang briefly on 16th, but I think it got the hint after the cold snap, as nothing more has been heard of him. A novelty for me was seeing pied wagtails (left) on the Marshes, as I am far more used to recording grey wagtails there, but two were feeding in muddy spots on 21st and four evenings later a modest group of six flew over, heading for Canterbury, where they no doubt had a cosy

corner lined up for the night, this being a species that likes to congregate in winter roosts, gaining extra warmth and protection through numbers.

Meadow pipits peaked at 15, mostly seen in the Middle Field, which is managed for a hay crop. A bird I hadn't seen since May was a gorgeous cock pheasant (right), which parachuted in noisily on 28th. Back in 2012 and 2013 this was a species that I recorded moderately frequently, but for the past three years it has been an extremely scarce addition to my list – an annual visitor in the very restricted sense of once a year! The birds that formerly dropped by may have died, while their offspring have failed to develop the habit of calling in, which just goes to show that birds are in fact individuals, with their own preferences.



Mammals don't get much of a mention in this section, as they are either scarce (water vole) or are largely nocturnal and keep themselves under cover (voles, mice and shrews), but I did see a rat recently. Strip away all our prejudices, and rats are really rather attractive, with their beady black eyes, long whiskers and sleek fur, though the naked, scaly tail can be rather off-putting. A native of south east Asia, the brown rat made its way to England partly under its own steam, but largely by hitching lifts in ships, less than 300 years ago, and has done a spectacularly efficient job of colonising every available niche since then. Although traditionally associated with sewers and other insalubrious localities, they are actually very much at home in the countryside, especially close to water, so Hambrook is a natural habitat for them.

All bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith