

# Newsletter

March 2019



## Welcome

Apologies for the late appearance of this newsletter but I have been in Pisa. Interestingly, although it is about 500 miles south of Canterbury, and was considerably warmer than here, the vegetation didn't seem any more advanced. Trees were mostly bare or just breaking into leaf, and in damper areas lesser celandine was flowering, just as it is now at Hambrook. Plants gained a head start in the second half of February when we enjoyed a mini heatwave and, with temperatures nearly up to 20°, the weather was warmer in much of England than on the continent. This may help account for the lack of disparity between plant development here and in Italy, but the colder weather holding back growth at home in late March and early April may well allow the Pisan flowers to streak ahead of us.

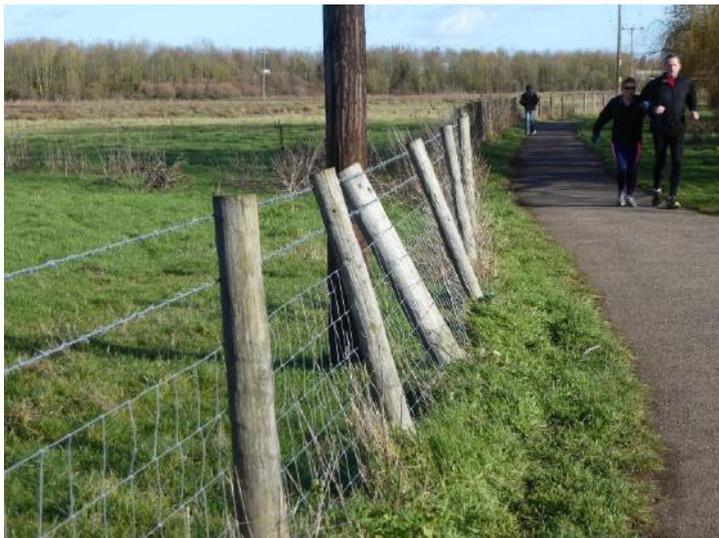
## Trustee vacancy

Following a successful recruitment campaign at the end of 2017, last year Hambrook Marshes was being managed by nine trustees, each with a specific role. A new job has now taken one trustee away from the area, so we are once again looking for an extra person to help with this interesting work. The specific vacant role is in managing social media, but we would also welcome anyone interested in developing the educational possibilities of Hambrook, or helping with any other aspects of running the site. Please email us if you think you might be interested.

## Proposed extension to the Wincheap park and ride

The number of new comments being posted on the council's website has tailed off now, but it still appears to be open, so if you haven't yet had your say, click [here](#), then click on the Documents tab to view all the available documents and comments that have already been submitted; or scroll down to go straight to the form where you can type your comments online. We received an encouraging amount of support in the Gazette during March, with two letters published from Love Hambrook Marshes trustees. Additionally, one local resident's letter queried the council spokesman's claim that the new location for the extension had already been approved in the Local Plan. Another reminded us that in 2009 consultants commissioned by the council had recommended the construction of a multi-storey car park on the existing Wincheap park and ride footprint, thus obviating the need for one in Station Road West or for the park and ride to be extended down to the river bank. A third correspondent lamented the harm that would be done to the valley's green space, and the impact of the project on people's enjoyment of the cycle path. Finally, the Gazette made an article out of a complaint from Network Rail that they hadn't been consulted, and their concerns that the development would lead to an increased risk of flooding of the railway.

## What's happening on the Marshes?



The fencing around Tonford Field was completely renewed just four years ago, but has not aged well, and around fifty of the posts have rotted at the base, weakening the entire fence, leading to the risk that the cattle could just push down a section and escape; the photo on the left shows four consecutive posts that had collapsed. We therefore had to get a Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership work party to spend a day repairing fencing around this field.

Unsurprisingly, there aren't that many trees on the marsh, but the gale on 12<sup>th</sup> managed to bring down two of them; one in Tonford Field did nothing more damaging than obstruct the cattle's route to their resting place beneath the A2 bridge, but a second one (right) blocked the steps up to the viewing point on the old embankment, smashing the new handrail in the process. The area probably supported rather more trees prior to the arrival of farming some 6000 years ago; the valley would have been swampy, with a patchy covering of willows, alders and black poplars then.



The willow weavers returned to spend another day cutting down whippy willow stems in the osier bed, where a handsome reed bunting occasionally erupted into his dirge that passes for a song.

## Wildlife Report

There was the usual interweaving of the seasons at this time of year: skylarks are seldom encountered at Hambrook, so one reeling out its song as it climbed into the heavens was a heart-warming sensation, and a blackcap newly returned from the Mediterranean on 20<sup>th</sup> seemed entirely appropriate in warm sunshine, as did a lone lesser black-backed gull, primarily a summer visitor, in contrast to the resident herring gulls, but the sudden reversal to chilly conditions meant that up to



40 snipe probing boggy areas did not appear out of place. Eight fieldfares flying over on 20<sup>th</sup> served more as a reminder that the sun's arc was reaching higher in the sky and that over-wintering birds now had thoughts of heading north to Scandinavia. However, there were still 15 tufted duck (two drakes and a female on left) on Tonford Lake at the end of the month, indicating a reluctance to head off to breeding grounds, though the fact that they were mostly in pairs rather than larger flocks

suggested that their minds were turning to thoughts of nesting. Only one meadow pipit was seen, and it has been a rather poor winter for this species; perhaps they need harsher conditions to prompt them into venturing down to these wetlands.

Daily rain in the first half of the month ensured that parts of the fields remained under shallow water, encouraging up to 17 mallard to forage there, sweeping their bills sideways to sift out floating seeds.



Odds and ends included five greylag geese honking overhead one morning; a pair of mute swans graced the river; my first pheasant (right) for eight months was a spectacularly handsome ring-necked male: very much part of the English landscape, and heavily entrenched in our rural culture, this is actually a non-native species. Some doubt surrounds the timing of its introduction to Britain, which may have been as long ago as Roman times or perhaps not until the Norman conquest. The longer-established birds originated from an area around the Black Sea, but the ring-necked bird I saw belongs to a separate Chinese sub-species. A rather forlorn great crested grebe on Tonford Lake was the first for nine months; its chances of obtaining a mate at this relatively late stage in the season (grebes are early breeders) seemed low but, breaking news, on 8<sup>th</sup> April it had been joined by a potential mate (left)!



A single cowslip plant (left) has again appeared in the hay meadow. Last year 29 home-grown marsh marigolds were planted out in various wet spots; only one of them (below right) appears to have survived the hazards of cattle trampling and summer drought, but it is very healthy, and should produce seed, so the plant's tenuous toehold at Hambrook may be strengthened. Looking much like an outside lesser celandine, both are members of the buttercup family; all the plant

books refer to it as marsh marigold, but I prefer the old country name of kingcup, as the petals do indeed take the form of a drinking vessel fit for royalty. While it is still in flower, you can view this individual from the riverside path south west of the old railway abutment (in the photo you can just about make out the metal railings of the small bridge immediately after the brick abutment. More seeds will be collected this spring to grow on at home and then plant out in suitable boggy spots in 2020.



*All bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith*

Registered charity no. 1156473