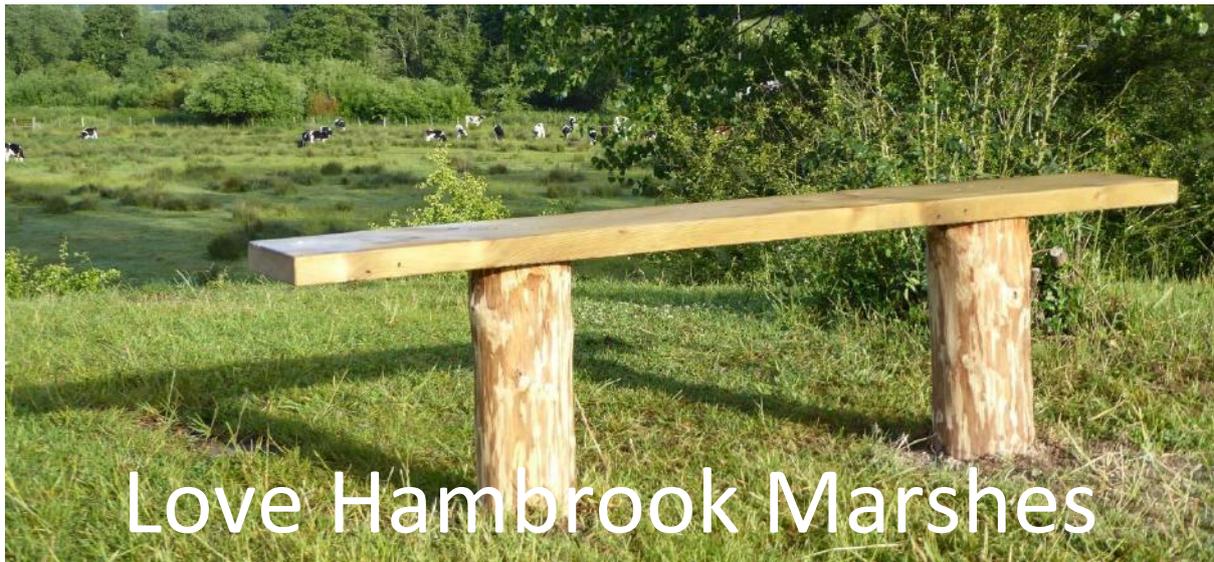


# Newsletter

June 2019



## Welcome

Hambrook Marshes are all about public access and wildlife, encapsulated in the banner photo above, which shows a new bench recently installed on the embankment so that visitors can admire the view, while cattle are doing their bit for conservation management in the background. It's lovely to see the Marshes so well-used at this time of year, with people enjoying this essentially rural landscape right on the outskirts of Canterbury. Two days ago I was delighted to see an enormous group of French children, probably in excess of a hundred, chatting happily as they strolled along the riverside path towards the city, until a cyclist heading in the opposite direction yelled at them to get out of his way, telling them it was a cycle path. I shouted back that it was equally a footpath, but he ignored me and rode on fuming. He evidently hadn't read, or had chosen to ignore, the recently installed Sustrans signs requesting that cyclists give way to walkers!

## Wincheap park and ride extension latest

At a meeting of the council's Regeneration and Property committee on 27<sup>th</sup> June, approval was given to the latest plan to turn the land lying to the north east of the proposed car park extension into a nature reserve. Depending on your inclination, this can be viewed as a bribe or a concession to those of us who submitted objections to the council's proposal to extend the park and ride onto the

Stour valley floodplain, and within the council’s own designated green corridor. The area under discussion is the large hatched oblong on the map below (we’ll come to the thin, hatched “handle” in a minute). To help you get your bearings, the river runs from the bottom left-hand corner to just left of the top right-hand corner. The old railway embankment shows up as a set of parallel curving lines swinging across the marshes to the river, to a point close to where the “handle” joins onto the main hatched area of the proposed reserve. This area of dense bramble, nettles and scrub is effectively impenetrable to humans, and therefore ideally suited for wildlife to thrive undisturbed and, as one of the councillors rightly pointed out, it is already a nature reserve in all but name, so



nothing new was being offered. The general plan put forward by the council would envisage the creation of a network of paths within the new reserve for public enjoyment. However, this would mean a huge increase in disturbance, more litter and anti-social behaviour. Do we really need to open up another unspoiled area to humans

when we already have the infra-structure of paths, seats, waymarkers and litter bins on the Hambrook Marshes side of the river? Also approved at this meeting was a proposal that the eight-

metre wide natural screen in the original car park extension plan be doubled in width to 16-metres, in the process knocking out about 40-50 parking spaces. The second map (left) shows the original plan overlaid by a wavy red line parallel to the river, representing the approximate extent of any screening under this revised plan. So, from an original stance of stating that an extra 280 parking spaces were vital to the success of the project, the council now seems to be happy to carve off about 16% of them, starting to make the whole enterprise look like a bit of a lame duck (perhaps a bird from the river that got run over by a car looking for a parking space?). This is all being put forward by the council in a bid to appease the 450 or so objectors who took the trouble to submit their comments on the council’s website earlier this year. Part of the need for extra parking spaces is that some of the existing spaces will be lost when the proposed off-slip road from the A2 is built, but Nick Eden-Green, who is a Lib Dem councillor for Wincheap, has pointed out that many parking slots could be saved by starting the slip-road further back on the A2,



so that it could link directly into the present access road. This would avoid having to install the incredible hairpin loop of the present plan, making access to the car park from the A2 much safer, but would necessitate building a new bridge over the Stour, so adding to the cost of the project. The proposal for the car park extension itself has yet to go before the planning committee, so we don't know what the outcome will be.

## What's happening on the Marshes?

A sturdy new bench (see banner photo at the top of this newsletter) has been installed on the embankment, close to the site of the original log seat that finally expired with rot last summer. Set further back from the lip of the embankment, it is hoped that this will discourage thoughtless visitors from throwing their rubbish down the steep slope, as retrieving cans and bottles in the past was quite awkward – abseiling might almost have been an option! Digging holes for the two uprights proved enormously hard work, as the chalk rubble used by the Victorian engineers to build the railway embankment nearly 150 years ago had consolidated into rock which the spade simply bounced off. A short section of tall riverside vegetation has been cut near the embankment abutment, in preparation for installing a second bench with views upstream.

Speaking of river views, a further 110 metres of dense bankside nettles have been cut back to reveal a water body that largely disappears from sight in the summer months. The work was all carried out using a traditional scythe but, in case you're wondering, you may be relieved to know that this didn't involve a Poldark moment!

Tagging has reared its ugly head again, with several information boards, finger posts and smaller signs all disfigured this month. Some paints can be removed relatively easily with graffiti wipes (tissues soaked with a specially formulated chemical), but increasingly we are encountering tags that are barely touched by the wipes, and this could become a major problem for us in future. The council is now putting more effort into removing tags in the town, but is having little success in apprehending the perpetrators.



A student has been undertaking a project on the Marshes this month, primarily looking at the aquatic life of the ditches and shallow lagoons. He hopes to come up with some suggestions as to how best we can protect those insects, amphibians and other creatures that are increasingly threatened by summer droughts. In recent years the Marshes have probably dried out more than in past centuries, and this creates a very real crisis for aquatic animal and plant life. It is unlikely that there are any simple or cheap solutions, but digging out a small lake that could act as a reservoir during the summer months might be one way forward.

## Wildlife Report

Up to five tufted ducks were present on Tonford lake in the first half of the month, raising hopes that one or more pairs were nesting locally, but so far no ducklings have been seen.

June is the month when cuckoos fall silent; it has been another fairly quiet year for this rapidly-declining species (right), but on 16<sup>th</sup> I was delighted to hear two males calling at each other.



At least 11 house sparrows have been foraging in the riverbank's uncut vegetation. On 24<sup>th</sup> I heard a reed bunting singing its unmelodious and unimaginative little jingle in the osier bed at the back of the Marshes, but I'm not certain that a pair have actually bred there.

Amazingly, and another sign of the times for another decreasing bird, my first Hambrook swallow didn't appear until 24<sup>th</sup>. In the past we could have expected to see flocks of these elegant birds swooping and darting low over the fields, picking off insects disturbed by the cattle.



The almost white female mandarin duck has once again successfully reared a brood of ducklings, and the whole family has been present at various spots along the river this month. The photo (left) was taken when the whole group obligingly bathed in early morning sunshine by the riverbank in the field that sometimes contains sheep and donkeys.

Yet another bird that is rapidly disappearing from our skies is the swift (right), with my first two of the year not putting in an appearance until 4<sup>th</sup>.



From time to time I see a crow with whitish wingbars on the Marshes. Normally this species is jet black throughout, but a genetic abnormality has resulted in this individual sporting identically positioned flashes on both wings. This is interesting in evolutionary terms, as it suggests that there is an ability, normally dormant, for these birds to develop wingbars, and demonstrating that it would be a simple matter for a new species or sub-species of wing-barred corvid to emerge, which could rejoice in the name of Hambrook crow!



It's been an excellent year for some of the flowers: meadow cranesbill (left) is a rather lovely plant that is native in England, but scarce in Kent, and it is believed that it was introduced to Hambrook by the previous owners, Kent Enterprise Trust. Most years there is just a scattering of plants, mainly alongside the river path, but this summer there seem to be more of them, with quite a few growing in the fields.

Common mallow (below) has also

thrived in the weather conditions this spring. Typically a plant of roadsides, it duly lines the edges of some of the paths at Hambrook, and the photo was taken along the path leading up to the park and ride bridge.



*Swift and cuckoo photos courtesy of Dave Smith*

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