



Newsletter

October 2019



Welcome

Park and Ride

There have been no developments on the park and ride front since we sent out an email update on 22nd October, describing what happened at the planning committee meeting on 15th October and the full council meeting two days later. You may recall that the application to extend the park and ride was approved at the planning committee stage, but a decision by the full council on whether or not to approve that decision had to be deferred, thanks to an intervention by Cllr Nick Eden-Green. At some point the application will return to the council, but we do not yet know when that will be – probably on 16th December – but we'll keep you informed.

Our thanks go out to all those who are keeping the issue alive by writing to the Gazette – four letters in the 24th October issue alone. Your letters have also helped to redress the published account of an alleged outbreak of violence and abuse after the planning meeting. Following Cllr Eden-Green's intervention at the council meeting, it is hoped that the Council will undertake a full Environmental Impact Assessment, in line with the commitment that it made in its Climate Emergency declaration, which was adopted in July.

There was an item in Radio Kent's *Wake Up Call* on 31st October, including interviews with our MP, Rosie Duffield, and Cllr Ashley Clark. To hear it, click [here](#) and start at 2hr 36min. However, a timely reminder: just as you shouldn't believe that there was a riot in the Guildhall simply because it was

reported in the Gazette, so you should be wary of accepting everything you hear in an interview. Ms Duffield was incorrect in saying that the Wincheap Meadow is in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, while the interviewer, Ian Collins, three times referred to Ashley Clark as being from Canterbury County Council! Fortunately, Ms Duffield rebuffed Cllr Clark's claim that a new nature reserve would be created as mitigation, when all that would happen is that the wild area adjoining the proposed extension would be relabelled as a nature reserve. Facts need to be sifted out of the flurry of media reports, and important points should often be double-checked.

The Save Wincheap Water Meadows petition now (6th November) has 3177 objectors. If you haven't already signed it, click [here](#), and help us get to 5000 names!

What's happening on the Marshes?

Routine maintenance included giving the path verges their final cut of the year, and saying goodbye to the cattle after nearly seven months on the Marshes. This summer's drought was less severe than in 2018, and the young heifers seemed to have enough grass for their needs throughout the period.

Last month I reported that the hay field had been mown and that the bulk of the hay had been gathered up, using a rather crude grab on the front of a tractor. This unorthodox technique had gouged out a series of unsightly strips of bare soil, but, with the help of a Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership (KSCP) work party on the last day of the month, we took advantage of these naked patches of soil by planting 400 snakeshead fritillary bulbs. I have mentioned this delightful early spring flower before, but the story is that about eight years ago the previous landowners planted a couple of thousand fritillary bulbs in the Boardwalk field. Unfortunately this work was undertaken in early summer, the worst possible time of year, when the ground is turning rock hard and the water table sinking out of reach. Another possible issue was the fact that the field is grazed periodically each spring and summer, and the cattle may have eaten or trampled many of the plants. Consequently, by the time I started counting the flowers in 2013, numbers had shrunk to 29, followed by a further collapse to just three this year. Formerly a moderately widespread flower in southern England, at home in damp pasture and valley meadows, it was all but eradicated in the 20th century as a result of changes in farming methods - a general intensification of land management, with drainage works, use of artificial fertilisers and pesticides and, perhaps most significantly, the ploughing up of permanent pasture to convert it to arable - which were all nails hammered into the lamented flower's coffin. Today it is largely confined to traditionally-managed land, mostly nature reserves, in the Thames valley and a few small fields in Suffolk, a desperately sad decline for such an elegant flower. So, the decision to take a very small step in making amends for past mistakes, by attempting to re-establish the fritillary at Hambrook seemed like an eminently sensible one. Four hundred bulbs sound like a lot until you stand, a diminutive figure, in the grassy expanse, and realise that this is just a token gesture; the site could support tens of thousands of fritillaries, so we'll be relying on the flowers to spread naturally if growing conditions are suitable. I'll be scanning the meadow for the nodding, purple-chequered heads next spring - that's if I can remember exactly where they were planted! Incidentally, the rather intrusive heaps of hay produced by the mowing are rapidly being colonised by grasses and an inordinate number of goosegrass seedlings (right), greatly softening their appearance.



More of the hay that the tractor failed to gather up was raked into piles and then barrowed away by KSCP volunteers, and the same day they tried their hand at willow-weaving in an attempt to keep the wayward growth of the willow maze in some sort of order. Weaving the stems into the existing structure will help tame the rampant growth of all the maze bushes, encouraging some sideways growth that will help to strengthen the maze walls and discourage “maze cheats” from pushing their way through from one dead end passageway into another!



To end this roundup of activities on a sour note: it was a great shame to find that the new bench beside the river has been vandalised, the plank that forms the seat having been ripped off its two uprights and then presumably thrown in the river.

Wildlife Report



The eighth of October was a special day for me, for two reasons. Firstly, while approaching the viewpoint on the old embankment, I heard a harsh croaking note in some dense hawthorn cover, and then glimpsed something very like a blackbird fly out, but the call immediately ruled out that species. I was fairly certain I knew what it had to be, and was fortunate to be able to follow its flight across the river into scrub on the far side, where it paused for a couple of seconds, the dull brownish bird turning slightly towards me to reveal a bold, off-white bib – a ring ouzel (left)! This bird is very similar in appearance to the blackbird, and probably evolved from it relatively recently to occupy a different habitat – the UK uplands. While the blackbird confines itself to lower ground, the ring ouzel takes over at an altitude of around 1000ft, being at home in the more extreme conditions of Dartmoor, the Welsh uplands, Pennines, Lake District and the Scottish Highlands. Worryingly, it is a species very much at risk from climate change: as summer temperatures rise in the

UK, the upland climate becomes less hostile to blackbirds, which are extending their range further up the hills and mountains, and outcompeting the ring ouzels, which find their preferred habitat no longer so suited to their needs. Like the redwing and fieldfare, the ring ouzel is a migrant, but, unlike the other two species, it is a summer visitor, arriving here from Africa in the spring with the swallows, and suffering the effects of drought and habitat loss in their winter quarters: the ring ouzel population is therefore being squeezed at both ends of the year. So it was exciting to record a new Hambrook species, but what made this a little bit special was that it was the 100th species that I have recorded there. Although there is no real significance to reaching this round number, it does demonstrate that regular watching of a fairly ordinary patch can still prove very rewarding. And if you're wondering what an ouzel is, it's simply the Anglo-Saxon word for blackbird!

With colder nights, we are moving inexorably towards winter, with the last swallow seen on 19th, and making room for wintering species such as meadow pipits (maximum five so far), the first seven redwings on 25th and a single fieldfare on 29th. Interestingly, I heard the wheezy call of a brambling on 29th, a year and one day after my first record of this winter visitor that is a close relative of the chaffinch.

Pheasants (right) are very infrequent visitors to the Marshes, so imagine my surprise when a cock and five hens turned up unexpectedly on 19th. But that proved to be just the prelude, for ten days later a procession of two cocks and ten hens solemnly paraded along the edge of Tonford Field, beside the A2 embankment. Where have all these birds suddenly materialised from, and how many can I expect to see on my next visit?!



Also of note was a cormorant on the river one morning, two kingfishers, and a little egret flying over, my first record since March.

As it has rained on 31 out of the past 43 days, it is only to be expected that the fields are getting squelchy; what does surprise me is that we aren't up to our necks in water. The hot summer certainly lowered the water table dramatically, and it is evidently only now reaching the surface once more. Where there are now areas of standing water, a few harmonious pairs of mallard can be seen waddling around, and our regular wintering flock of snipe in Tonford field has returned, with 24 there on 25th.

Banner photo at the head of this newsletter is of hawthorn berries, taken on the old railway embankment.

Ring ouzel and pheasant photos courtesy of Dave Smith

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