



# Newsletter

January 2020



## Welcome

The campaign to prevent the extension of the Wincheap Park and Ride onto the Wincheap Water Meadows, across the river from Hambrook Marshes, is still active. Canterbury City Council has not yet made its final decision on whether to go ahead with building the car park, but a judge has given permission for a Judicial Review of CCC planning committee's decision to approve the application. The legal case is in the name of CPRE (Kent). They are working closely with the local community, who will almost certainly be launching Phase 2 of the fundraising drive in the near future to meet the legal costs.

This means it is unlikely that the Council will make a decision at their full council meeting on 20<sup>th</sup> February. Council officers have said that they will be looking at alternative locations for the Park and Ride extension, and we know that various discussions have been going on. Meanwhile, some readers may have noticed that a circle of willows has recently appeared on the Wincheap meadow (right). We thought they had



been planted by a group of campaigners to mark World Wetlands Day on 2<sup>nd</sup> February, but recently-obtained photos now reveal that the guerrilla planter was none other than our Wind in the Willows friend ..... Ratty! The circle of 39 trees represents the number of councillors who will make the final decision on the fate of the water meadows, and the stunt was intended to put across the message that planting trees on this site is a much better use of the land than building a car park.



## What's happening on the Marshes?



Our band of willow weavers returned for a weekend this month to take another harvest of young stems from the stumps that were cropped last year. The women in the photo are loading cut stems into a plastic barrel, and then bouncing the willow wands up and down to get them all to rest on the base of the barrel, when the task of teasing out stems that are too short or too long is far easier. After all the recent gloom, the workers were delighted to be out in dazzling sunshine.

We have marked up an area of the hay meadow where we hope to plant a small copse of trees in February. Ranging in height from four to sixteen feet, the trees are taller than we would normally use, but with the benefit of providing some instant impact, and helping to screen the A2 bridge for visitors approaching from Canterbury. The downside is that they are likely to take longer to get established, and will probably need regular watering through the summer. The bridge, with its inevitable accompaniment of graffiti, is no architectural beauty, so even the minor degree of screening provided by the trees in their early years will be welcome.

## Wildlife Report

Back in 2013, overflying cormorants (right) were not an unusual sight, but for some reason numbers have tailed off since then, so I'm pleased to report that in January I had already seen as many as in the whole of 2019, with the highest count so far this year being



18 on 7th. In the early morning, which is when most of the bird surveys are conducted, the cormorants are mainly flying upriver, visiting the string of lakes between here and Chilham; during the afternoon the same birds probably fly downstream to join the massive roost of up to 3000 cormorants at Stodmarsh.

Not to be outdone by cormorants, the local rooks have also been more in evidence, and I've already seen more of them flying over this month than in the whole of the past three years. Admittedly, they aren't pausing to feed at Hambrook, but it's still pleasing to see the birds flying over, cawing companionably to each other; and to think that in the December newsletter I was getting excited at having seen three rooks!

45 snipe were present on 7<sup>th</sup>, but numbers then declined to 21 on 20<sup>th</sup>, perhaps due to the unseasonably mild weather. The same day, 80 black-headed gulls flew over, some now in the process of acquiring their brown breeding hoods.

Odds and ends included two greylag geese flying over twice, four little egrets on nearby Tonford Lake, and 13 meadow pipits on 10<sup>th</sup>, while nine chaffinches on 7<sup>th</sup> was my highest ever count, and two pheasants were present the same day. But the highlight of the month had to be a lone marsh harrier (right) that drifted over Canterbury on 7<sup>th</sup>, passing low over Bingley Island, and in the process upsetting the herring gulls that hang around the Wincheap area. Reduced by a combination of pesticide poisoning, marshland drainage and persecution to about five breeding UK pairs in the early 1970s, vigorous conservation management and the banning of the most persistent and toxic insecticides has since resulted in a strong recovery, with around 350



pairs now present nationally, a hundred of which nest in Kent. Stodmarsh is the closest stronghold of these raptors to Canterbury, and the bird I saw had probably wandered over from there. As I wasn't on Hambrook at the time, I can't say if it actually flew over the Marshes, but it was heading roughly in that direction, so arguably deserves to be added to the Hambrook bird list. This is of more than academic interest to me, as it would constitute the 100<sup>th</sup> species that I have recorded on or over Hambrook Marshes since I began my weekly visits in September 2012.



With so much mild weather, it has felt more like spring than the depths of winter, a sensation accentuated by frequent song from great tit (left), song thrush, mistle thrush, wren and robin. Unfortunately, early breeding behaviour now doesn't mean that the worst of winter is behind us – remember the Beast from the East! Further thoughts of spring were engendered by one of the transplanted marsh marigolds being in full, radiant flower in its wet ditch on 7<sup>th</sup>.

*Banner photo at the head of this newsletter is of an artist at work on the old embankment.*

*Marsh harrier, cormorant and great tit photos courtesy of Dave Smith*

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