



# Newsletter

April 2020



## Welcome

### Virtual concert

As many of you will be aware, on 14<sup>th</sup> February most of the boardwalk was destroyed overnight in a devastating arson attack, followed just over a month later by the deliberate burning of a second pond-dipping platform in broad daylight. Many people were extremely upset and wanted to help in some way to put things right on an area of land that they were very fond of. In the weeks that followed, the idea surfaced of putting together a concert in the Westgate Hall to raise funds for a cleanup and reconstruction project. The covid-19 lockdown put paid to all that, but didn't kill the basic idea, which was then reinvented as a virtual concert. So, thanks to the inspiration of local musician, Richard Navarro, who put in an immense amount of hard work in collaboration with a team of artists, a virtual concert was broadcast on 26<sup>th</sup> April. We are extremely grateful to Richard for organising this epic 1¾-hour medley of entertainment, and also to the 22 local musicians, singers, photographers and poets for freely donating their talents. The virtual concert has so far raised £3714 from 136 supporters, and if you haven't yet contributed to this worthwhile cause, please click [here](#) to make a donation via Justgiving. And don't worry if you missed the live concert, as you can still watch it directly on [Youtube](#) or via [Facebook](#). For names of all the artists and links to their performances, please see the full list on page 4.

## International Dawn Chorus Day

If World Naked Gardening Day on 2<sup>nd</sup> May didn't appeal, perhaps you were able to enjoy International Dawn Chorus Day on Sunday. To celebrate this event, a short piece has been put together of bird photos from Hambrook Marshes, taken by Simon and Sian Pettman, to the soundtrack of Nightbird, by Ben-Francis Malcolm Milbery-Jones, which also featured on the virtual concert last week. Watch it [here](#), so that, even if you are unable to get outside, you can still bring birdlife into your world.

## What's happening on the Marshes?

The area around the burnt-out boardwalk and pond-dipping platform is still too wet for machinery to get onto, so it has not yet been possible to make the field safe for livestock and the public. Consequently, the main event of the month, which was the seasonal return of cattle to the Marshes, involved putting all the animals into Tonford Field rather than the Boardwalk Field. Unfortunately, there was an incident on 25<sup>th</sup> when a cyclist's dog, off its lead, frightened the cows into stampeding to the gate under the A2 bridge, which resulted in two animals receiving injuries to head and legs, and two managing to get into the next field. In a busy area like the Great Stour Way cycle path it is impossible to prevent such incidents altogether, and we can only ask the public to behave responsibly in the vicinity of the cattle, even if they are on the other side of the fence.

## Wildlife Report

It wasn't just the temperatures in the lower 20s signalling the end of winter; the wintering tufted duck flock on Tonford Lake was last seen on 2<sup>nd</sup> April, the last of the snipe departed in late March, along with our small flock of meadow pipits. And then there were all those beacons of hope – the spring migrants returning from Africa: first up, as usual, was the chiffchaff, followed by blackcap on 2<sup>nd</sup> and common whitethroat (right) on 21<sup>st</sup>. Swallow, swift and lesser whitethroat just managed to squeeze in on 30<sup>th</sup>, along with that ultimate harbinger of spring, the cuckoo. Still thriving in northern Scotland, the cuckoo (below) has suffered a dramatic 65% decline in southern England since the 1980s. Being more often heard than seen, the cuckoo inspired Wordsworth to write "Shall I call thee bird or but a wandering voice?", which fitted well



with my record at the end of the month, for the calls I heard came from so far away, in the region of Chartham Hatch, as to be almost subliminal. Surprisingly, though, I have yet to hear a reed warbler chattering away in the damp undergrowth. Our sixth warbler – Cetti's – isn't a migrant, and has been around, on and off, through the winter, lurking invisibly in dense vegetation until suddenly giving away his position by bursting into explosive song. For the first time we have a territorial bird on Hambrook, regularly blasting out his rapid staccato notes in the corner where the small pond-dipping platform was destroyed by arson in March.

It usually takes flooding to attract gulls down onto the Marshes, but on 11<sup>th</sup> a flock of 16 herring gulls descended on a dry middle field. Perhaps a hatch of flies or some other prey item had enticed them in, but whatever it was didn't hold their attention for more than a few minutes, and then they were gone. Ten days later 23 herring gulls were joined by two lesser black-backed gulls on the same field, though this was three days after moderately heavy rain which may well have displaced some invertebrates, causing them to move towards the surface of the soil, where they could be picked off by the gulls. And to finish this section on gulls, a common gull seen on Tonford Lake on 2<sup>nd</sup> was my



first record for 14 months of what is in fact one of our less common gulls .

The delicate grey wagtail (left), in an endless struggle to balance its body against an unnecessarily long tail, delights in bobbing around at the edge of the river, and is currently spending a lot of time beneath the A2 bridge, leading me to suspect that a pair is nesting there. It may have a grey back, but the grey wagtail's most eye-catching feature is a bright yellow breast, leading to frequent confusion with an altogether different bird, the yellow wagtail. A squirrel, also on the river bank on 11<sup>th</sup>, was presumably there for completely different reasons known only to itself.

It seems that we went straight from monsoon weather in February and early March to drought conditions for the next six weeks. The wet winter probably adversely affected the newly-planted snake's head fritillaries, as many of the bulbs were standing in water for several months, but despite this 26 plants flowered, and there were at least a further 36 non-flowering stems: I say 'at least' because, without the drooping fairy lantern flowers to home in on, their long, narrow leaves are incredibly hard to spot amongst all the grass. Fritillaries do like damp soil, so may not have thought much of the dry spring, and it is impossible to predict how well they may do next year. We desperately need them to thrive, as the original 2011 planting in the boardwalk field is only just hanging on with three flowers this spring. It is a shame that these elegant, early portents of spring have such a short flowering period.

## Tonford view 50 years on

It's often easy to believe that views are unchanging, but the first photo, taken in the 1960s, and courtesy of Dave Hanna, shows the scene looking across the river towards the level crossing, while the second photo was taken last week. Just about everything seems different! The bridge has been replaced, a house beside the level crossing has gone and, most strikingly, there are large willows blocking the view of the Downs at Chartham Hatch. We tend to lament the loss of woodland from the landscape, but in fact many areas around settlements are now far more tree-shaded than a century ago, a point borne out by Sidney Cooper's numerous paintings of the Stour valley.



## Virtual Concert performers

Frances Knight/Ginger Bennett/Derek Sellen 'The Marshes of Hambrook'

<https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=101>

Luke Jackson 'More Than Boys' <https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=439>

Josh Magill 'Tomorrow from Buggy Malone' <https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=782>

Melzebra and the Buffalos (Mel Dawkins, Heejung Chung and Rachel Hinz): 'Wishing Well'

<https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=1086>

Sam Bailey 'Rolling Acorns' <https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=1378>

Mary Anne Smith 'Rural Living' <https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=1703>

Coco and The Butterfields 'Battlefields' <https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=1849>

Anne James 'Sweet Melody' <https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=2099>

Funke and the Two Tone Baby 'Tales of the Place I Live' <https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=2374>

Richard Navarro 'Remember' <https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=2643>

Brendan Power 'The Dawning of the Day, trad. Irish' <https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=2971>

Tom Cooke the Boater 'Heron' <https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=3170>

Ben Millbery 'Nightbird' <https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=3322>

William Rowlandson Poems by Yeats/The Waterboys and Gerald Manley Hopkins:

<https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=3500>

Luke Dodson 'River Man' by Nick Drake <https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=3918>

Derek Sellen 'Green' and 'Ragwort' <https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=4206>

Chaucer Fielder 'Tales of the Blean' <https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=4425>

Alice Heggie 'Hedgehogs' <https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=4702>

Ray Fielder 'Taken' <https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=5010>

Blake Sonnet 'Mother Nature Calling' <https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=5310>

Sarah from Dune 'Fields of Gold' by Sting <https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=5581>

Paul Shave 'Days in the Forest' <https://youtu.be/wDMdKzHu5oM?t=5886>

*Bird photos all courtesy of Dave Smith*

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