



# Newsletter

September 2020



## Welcome

There's an interesting article in the 17<sup>th</sup> September issue of the Gazette about the new council leader, Ben Fitter-Harding. Encouragingly, he alludes to his thoughts on the proposed extension to the Wincheap park and ride:

*"With the park and ride, I've always been sympathetic with the campaigners. It's difficult as I want the city to function in the best possible way..... But it needs completely looking at again. I wouldn't put anything in stone that has been decided upon regarding park and ride. It needs a fresh look. I genuinely think the whole provision for park and ride needs considering."*

Unfortunately, halfway through this musing he added:

*"I know it's green space we're building on, but it's green space behind an industrial estate."*

Because it backs on to a built environment, Cllr Fitter-Harding deems it less worthy of preservation, neglecting its council-designated status as part of the Stour's green corridor, and leaving us to wonder what he might consider doing with the Westgate Gardens or Dane John Gardens, "devalued" as they are by their urban surroundings.

In the following Thursday's Gazette there were excellent letters from Pat Marsh, representing the Green Party, and Rick Norman, a trustee of Love Hambrook Marshes, making all these points and more.

# What's happening on the Marshes?

## Picnic table

It was a bit of a struggle, but at last the picnic table has been restored to its former glory by artist/sculptor Steven Portchmouth (on his knees in the top photo), who originally built this iconic piece of rural furniture. You will recall that the two richly carved and ornamented wooden panels had rotted badly at the base, causing one of them to break off completely. Steven ingeniously strengthened a badly damaged joint with a fat wooden caterpillar (bottom photo), and encased each panel in a sturdy metal frame concealed by more decorative woodwork. The metal legs have now been embedded in concrete, firmly anchoring the panels to the ground once again, with the hope that they will now survive many more years to delight passing visitors. Our grateful thanks go out to Steve for putting in so much time and imagination to salvage this little monument, and also to Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership for part-funding the restoration.



## Planted trees

I thought that by now we would no longer need to be tending the large trees we planted in late winter near the A2 bridge, once the drought broke in mid-August, but by the end of that month we were back into a stable pattern of warm or hot weather and no rain. But, thanks to help with watering from Sian and Rick, the trees are all alive, though without having put on as much growth as they could have done, had the soil remained moist all summer. I was put in mind of a tree-planting campaign, way back in 1973, following which there were complaints that most had died due to lack of after-care, which led to someone coming up with this little ditty:

*Plant a tree in '73*  
*Plant some more in '74*  
*Barely alive in '75*  
*Heap of sticks in '76*

A word of explanation to younger readers: 1975 was an unusually hot summer, followed by the memorable heatwave of 1976, when a Labour government was panicked into appointing Denis Howell Minister for Drought, producing the immediate, desired effect of conjuring up rain. Unfortunately, the minister overdid the rain-dance, as severe flooding quickly followed, but at least he kept his job, albeit now as Minister of Floods (he continued an illustrious meteorological career by being appointed Minister for Snow two years later). The problem with that tree-planting scheme, as with so many others, was that well-meaning volunteers considered the job done when the trees were in the ground, but two consecutive hot summers proved their undoing: without frequent watering, many of those trees simply couldn't survive, so contributing to the "heap of sticks". Hopefully, that won't be the fate of the splendid crack willow, aspen, field maple, alder and birch trees that we planted in February.

## Wildlife Report

Recording mammals can be quite hard work; we have a very impoverished mammalian fauna in the UK, and the majority of them are small, dull brown and nocturnal, so it's hardly surprising that no systematic observation has been carried out, and that the Hambrook list is rather short. Records are very much ad hoc, none more so than the other day when a tiny, but very dead lump on the ground proved to be a pygmy shrew – our smallest mammal. Although superficially resembling a mouse or vole, it isn't a rodent with gnawing teeth to cope with a vegetarian diet, but an insectivore with pointed teeth for eating insects, and is more closely related to bats.



A flock of 29 Canada geese (left) flew over on 14<sup>th</sup>, one more than the previous record. The same day I was pleased to see a spotted flycatcher (below), a rapidly declining summer visitor that would have been heading south for a winter in Africa.

Daylength in late September is the same as in late March, a time when



birdsong is reaching a peak. I have a theory that the minor resurgence in song at this time of year is due to some birds being fooled into believing it is early spring. So, is that why I am occasionally hearing brief bursts of wren, great tit and tree creeper song at the moment? Stock dove and wood pigeon singing may have more to do with the fact that some of these birds continue breeding well into autumn, while male and female robins set up separate territories in winter, and use belligerent song to stake out and defend their boundaries. The fact that the days are shortening is enough to prevent most birds from bursting into song, and the marked shrinkage of the males' gonads in

autumn means there is far less testosterone coursing through their blood, suppressing any breeding-related activity.



A single siskin (left) flew over on 14<sup>th</sup>; this small finch is mainly a winter visitor to Kent, and especially noticeable in early spring and autumn when it is migrating to and from breeding areas further north in Britain or on the continent. It looks as though this is turning into a bumper autumn for these charming little birds, with flocks already recorded at a number of sites locally, so some of us may well be lucky enough to have our bird feeders enlivened by twittering groups of these greenish-yellow birds.

We usually see sizeable post-breeding flocks made up of young and adult starlings in May, but then sometimes a second surge occurs around now. This month up to 57 have been strung along the electricity cables above the path beside Tonford field.

*All bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith*

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