



# Newsletter

May 2021



## Welcome

An article in the Gazette on 3<sup>rd</sup> June suggests that the shelved off-slip road into the Wincheap park and ride area is not a dead duck. According to the city council spokesman, “the provision of the fourth slip road and the Wincheap relief road remain strategic transportation priorities for both us and KCC”. The report also states that Pentland Homes, the developers of the 750-home Saxon Fields site between Cockering Road and the A2, is “still investigating various alternative off-slip arrangements” with Highways England and KCC. Tied up with the off-slip development is the concomitant loss of parking spaces on the park and ride, and the council’s own plan, currently revoked, to extend parking onto the flood meadow opposite Hambrook Marshes. So, as we said in this newsletter in October when we first heard about the plan being dropped, “two cheers for a reprieve, but don’t relax your vigilance.”

A day earlier you may have read about an attack on some young teenagers by a gang of 14 or 15 youths. Several were punched, kicked or stamped on and their possessions damaged or thrown in the river. Two photos of the general area indicated that this took place on Hambrook, but the report itself suggests that it was further upriver, between Milton bridge and Chartham. Exactly where it happened is irrelevant, and it is just so sad that people of all ages cannot assume they are safe when on the riverside walk. If you should witness an incident like this, the advice is to phone 999 rather than get involved, which may not be advisable.

## What's happening on the Marshes?

As part of a Humanist Climate Action event, two small willows were planted to augment the 18 trees that were put in over a year ago to help screen the A2 bridge. Bizarrely, one of them was pulled up a few days later, but was fairly swiftly replanted and may yet survive. The bigger trees that were planted last year are looking much healthier after the damp start to their growing season; if the summer doesn't bring another severe drought we can expect vigorous growth without the need for an extended watering campaign.

One by-product of the wet month was rampant growth of vegetation alongside the steps leading up to the railway embankment viewpoint, to the point where the steps themselves had almost disappeared from view. The growth has now been cut back fairly severely, leaving the site looking a little raw, but it will soon recover, and then regular minor trimming should keep it in check for the rest of the summer.

Sustrans volunteers (below left) have installed six new signs along the Great Stour Way. The message has been simplified (below right) to give a more positive message, in the hope that it will encourage everyone to share the popular but narrow path considerably.



We're delighted to see that the council has at last removed the burnt-out motor scooter (left) from beneath the railway bridge; that land is just off Hambrook Marshes, so the clear-up was not our responsibility.

There are only four cattle presently in the Boardwalk field and, when lying down, they can be quite inconspicuous. We have therefore put up notices warning dogwalkers to keep their pets under control when passing through that field.

## Wildlife Report

No tufted duck were seen on Tonford lake this month, so it must be summer, and another sign of its arrival was that I finally heard a cuckoo (right) on 10<sup>th</sup>, though it can hardly be called a Hambrook cuckoo as the faint calls wafted over from the Chartham direction. As recently as the 1988-94 Kent bird atlas, the cuckoo was found virtually throughout the county, but by the time of the 2008-13 atlas its distribution was far more patchy, and the situation has deteriorated further since then. Interestingly, while declining throughout England and



much of Wales, it has increased in northern Scotland. One possible explanation for this is an effect of climate change: with warmer springs, many of the small birds in whose nests the cuckoo deposits its eggs are breeding earlier, but the cuckoo still returns to these shores around mid-April. It may therefore be that the arrival of the egg-laying females is no longer in synchrony with their principal hosts – reed warblers, meadow pipits and dunnocks - in the warmer southern counties, but that they can still find plenty of later-nesting hosts in the cooler climes of Scotland. It has declined by about 71% in England since 1995, and its evocative call is no longer regularly heard in many areas. I always used to hear them occasionally from my garden in Rough Common, but haven't recorded a single one this year.



You may recall that one of the hybrid poplars on the old railway embankment was heavily cut back last autumn because it was slowly dying back and becoming a hazard to walkers. I'm pleased to say that the surviving trunk and main boughs are still in demand by nesting birds, with both stock doves and great spotted woodpeckers (left) taking advantage of its rotting wood and old cavities, evidently unfazed by the tree's changed appearance.

A helmeted guinea fowl, believed escaped from the menagerie in what I refer to as the donkey field on the other side of the river, is seen on the Marshes from time to time, and I recently had a close encounter with this large bird (right) as it foraged in the taller vegetation close to the river. Native to sub-Saharan Africa, guinea fowl were domesticated by the ancient Greeks and Romans, but then seem to have died out in Europe, probably being reintroduced in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century by Portuguese traders, when it became known as the Tudor turkey.





One of the joys of plant-watching is that no two seasons are quite the same. They are affected by myriad factors, such as air temperature, soil moisture, grazing pressure and disease. Common wintercress, a crucifer (cabbage family) with an abundance of yellow flowers, is reasonably widespread in Kent, growing on damp ground. At Hambrook Marshes it is normally present as just the occasional scattered plant close to the river, but this year it is almost abundant in the area of the hay field where a clump of trees were planted last year (left).

*Cuckoo and great spotted woodpecker photos courtesy of Dave Smith  
Banner photo of buttercups courtesy of Simon Pettman*

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