



# Newsletter

August 2023



## Love Hambrook Marshes

### Welcome

I'm sure that by now you will all have heard the announcement by Michael Gove (the housing secretary) and Therese Coffey (the environment secretary) that they plan to abolish nutrient neutrality rules. This arcane-sounding legislation was, you may recall, Natural England's reason for applying the brake to much development in the Canterbury area for the past two years because of the threat of increased pollution of the Stodmarsh National Nature Reserve. This affected all building proposals over much of the Stour's catchment area, from Lenham in the west, through to Ashford, almost up to Folkestone, and then in a broad swathe past Canterbury to St Nicholas at Wade. Naturally, this upset the developers, who have been complaining bitterly to the government about the current restrictions. Now it seems that their vociferous lobbying has borne fruit, and that legislation pushed through parliament will repeal the original law, brought in when the UK was still in the EU. Under the legislation, builders were only allowed to go ahead if they could offset the increased pollution from the development by installing on-site sewage treatment works or provide mitigation, such as creating reedbeds that would filter out the harmful phosphates and nitrates from the Stour. Gove and Coffey are now saying that developers can be spared that burden, but that the government will step in by investing an extra £280 million in its mitigation scheme. However, conservationists are not convinced that this will do enough to safeguard the environment, fearing that it will lead to additional pollution of rivers, wetlands and coastal waters. At this stage it is impossible to predict what adverse effects there may be on the river Stour as it flows past Hambrook Marshes.

## What's happening on the Marshes?

The two flights of steps leading up to the viewpoint on the embankment are starting to show their age. A particular concern was that the stone originally used as infill on the level part of each step had sunk, exposing the wooden lip of the step risers, and so creating a definite trip hazard. With the help of volunteers we spent a morning topping up all the steps with fresh stone to make the steps safer, at the same time taking the opportunity to clear away vegetation that was obscuring the steps and encroaching from the sides (it's been an excellent year for bramble growth!).



*Tamping down fresh stone*



*A safer flight of steps*



The hay field was mown by a contractor at the end of the month. In places the ground was too rough to risk using the expensive machinery, so those areas will have to be dealt with separately. Most of the hay, which is of poor quality, and for which we had no buyer, has now been dumped in the adjoining scrub field. The photo on the left shows the hay after it has been gathered into long heaps

(rowed up) prior to being raked and dumped. The aim of cutting and removing hay is to reduce soil fertility and eventually increase plant diversity.



## Great Stour Riverfest: 19<sup>th</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> September



This is a new council initiative, designed to raise local awareness of the wonderful chalk stream (the river Stour) that flows through the heart of the city. If successful, the hope is that this could become an annual event. The week gets off to a fine start with a 90-minute Zoom introduction on 20<sup>th</sup> September, with a talk by Ben Morris of the Environment Agency on the local beaver population, while Lauren Baker of the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership will tell us what makes the river special, and Jake Weekes of Canterbury Archaeological Trust will set the river in a historical context. There will be litter-picking sessions, a bat walk, river dipping, arts and crafts, photographic competition, bulb planting, and guided walks. All the events are free, but need to be booked at Eventbrite [here](#).

## Wildlife Report

I hate to say it, but it's beginning to feel autumnal, as warblers are seen foraging amongst the embankment bramble bushes in early morning sunshine. Bramble is wonderful for wildlife, providing cover, nectar and fruits for insects, birds and small mammals. While cattle will eat young bramble shoots, there aren't enough beasts in the Boardwalk field to keep it in check, and it is now spreading into the field from its original base on the embankment slope. The photo (right) shows how part of the fencing erected around 2016 has been engulfed, with the bramble spreading a good 15' into the field in places. You can just about see two strands of barbed wire towards the bottom right-hand corner of the photo; they continue in a straight line towards the top left-hand corner, burrowing straight into some incredibly dense bramble.



A new plant for the Marshes was a single rosette of great mullein leaves at the edge of the riverside path near the embankment. Next year this biennial should send up a magnificent spike of yellow flowers, and may then be targeted by the mullein moth. The plant's densely hairy leaves provide

good protection from most insect attacks, but the handsome yellow, black and pale blue-grey mullein moth caterpillars (right) can cope happily with this deterrent, and quickly shred the plant. This picture was taken in my garden, which often hosts a rogue mullein plant, and which not infrequently harbours one or more of these striking caterpillars.



Has the parakeet returned? This solitary, raucous bird first appeared on the Marshes in August 2021 and was then regularly present on the embankment until January this year, after which it could be heard screaming from across the river for four months before finally disappearing from the scene. I assumed it had either died or moved elsewhere in the hope of finding the company of its own kind, but after a blissfully quiet three months that unmistakable harsh call was once again heard nearby on 3<sup>rd</sup> August, and on my last two visits it has been perched in trees on the old embankment, for all the world as though it had never abandoned us. Are we now to have the pleasure of its company for the indefinite future, or was this just a fleet revisiting of its old haunts?

Kestrel and pied wagtail are another two species that I had not seen recently on the Marshes, following periods when both had been established residents here.

Six mute swans graced the river on 3<sup>rd</sup>, but then at the end of the month possibly a different family of two adults with seven full-grown young were much admired by passers-by (below).



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