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Events

**** Work parties:** Meet at The Scout Hall, Greens Farm Lane at 10.30. Tools/gloves provided – wear old clothing and wellies or water proof boots

Saturday 9th January: Work party,

Monday 25th January: Discovering Fossils in Essex and beyond. A talk by Gerald Lucy of The Essex Field Club. Preceded by a short AGM of The Norsey Wood Society who are hosting the event. 7.45 pm. Day Centre, Chantry Way, Billericay.

Saturday 13th February: Work Party

Saturday 12th March: Work Party

Saturday 9th April: Work Party

Monday 11th April: 65 Years in Horticulture – an evening of anecdotes. A talk by Jim Buttress. Hosted by The Norsey Wood Society. 7.45 pm. Day Centre, Chantry Way, Billericay.

Thursday 21st April. 7.45 pm: our Annual General Meeting in the Reading Rooms, Billericay. Details to be advised in the next Newsletter.

Chairmans Report

I wish all members of The Society a Happy New Year. For many local conservationists there is a sense of déjà vu as we are, for the third time, responding to Basildon Council's Draft Local Plan. This has just been approved by Cabinet for release for an 8 week public consultation from end January. In the meantime, this is the link to the pre-approved draft: <http://tinyurl.com/j85vr92>



There is one particular item that will be of interest to you on pages 178/179. The land east of Mill Meadows, along Greens Farm Lane is subject to a proposal for part development and part extension to Mill Meadows Nature Reserve. You may recall that this proposal has appeared before and many of you received a document through the post inviting you to comment. The proposal is now described in the Draft Local Plan and features two proposed developments with "a central open land buffer...extension to Mill Meadows Nature Reserve..". It goes on to state that the land must be gifted to the Council, or a third party, and a commuted sum paid to maintain it for at least 20 years. The Local Plan also designates a landscape protection area incorporating Mill Meadows, Norsey Wood and land east of these sites, effectively joining up with the Living Landscape of Ramsden Heath and Woods. Hence, land between Outwood Common Road and Outwood Farm Road is now not proposed as a development site.

I know that this will be met with a mixed response from our members and everyone must comment on the Local Plan according to their own views.



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The Billericay Action Group will have their response and they have already been challenging the rationale that it is necessary to allow any building on Green Belt land around Billericay.

The Mill Meadows Society should also consider making its own response and we will discuss this at the next committee meeting. I urge that The Society's comment is based solely on the impact on Mill Meadows.

I see this proposal as a compromise, with positive and negative aspects for wildlife and recreational interest. For your information, we have been provided with some glossy brochures describing the Extension. It will take many years to turn a piece of farmland into an area of unimproved grassland and this will require many measures to do so, some of which may include restricted access for a period to allow the habitat to develop. So "the devil is in the detail" and we will need to comment and influence that accordingly. Commenting on a proposal does not necessarily mean giving consent to a proposal and we should bear in mind that this is a broad brush description as part of the Draft Council Local Plan Consultation; there will need to be a formal Planning Application.

Whereas the thought of 1700 additional homes in our Town, with all the added demands on services and infrastructure, is a cause for concern, we are constantly told about the shortage of housing (something I am very much aware of in the part-time day job). And as far as Mill Meadows is concerned the situation has been mitigated because Planning are paying due regard not just to Mill Meadows and Norsey Wood Local Nature Reserves but also to the importance of the adjoining land in providing wildlife corridors. You will see in the Draft Local Plan that the land east of Billericay is a new "landscape protection area". This is in no small part due to the efforts of members in understanding and promoting the local wildlife and in feeding back on planning proposals and applications.

The Committee will be interested in hearing the views of members : my contact details are below.

On that note, we have learnt that the current Chairman of the Norsey Wood Society, Clifford Mullet, is to move away from the area so will be stepping down from this role at the AGM this month. Clifford has worked hard not just for Norsey Wood but for Living Landscapes and Billericay in general, especially with planning matters and with his work on the Design Statement. We wish Clifford, and his wife Jo, well in their new home and are grateful for everything he has done for the local environment and wildlife. Anne Gray, the previous Chairman and long-serving member of the same committee is also stepping down from the Norsey Wood Committee. Anne, also one of our members, has organised many events for the Norsey Wood Society and ensured that our Society is kept informed and invited to these.

2015 ended with another well-attended Work Party – see Peter's article below. Our last Work party included planting new trees – Mill Meadows already features some magnificent ancient trees (see Ken's article below) but we do have losses and need to replenish.

In Chris's report you will see a further update on the proposed footpath improvements through Oakfield. We have applied for funding to a grant scheme being run by Tesco and await the decision. Unsurprisingly given the weather, the footpath has turned very muddy again so I'm hoping for a favourable decision.

You may have noticed that the Council have installed new lectern-style information boards positioned around the Reserve at Langemore Way, Chaffinch Crescent, Scout Hall and Wantsfield entrances. These are useful in promoting the message about the importance of grazing on the Reserve. Let's hope that, with grazing and other factors, we can look forward to a good year for wildflowers and insects after the soggy winter.

Neil Sumner

Neilsumner123@aol.com 01277 630849



Rangers Report – Winter 2015

Not an enormous amount to report this time, but there are a few updates.

Grazing

I had a 'review' meeting with the people from the Essex Grazing Project just before Christmas to discuss how last year's grazing went. There was general agreement that it had gone very well, and thanks was expressed to the volunteers who check the cattle and assist with moving them about around the reserve. Thoughts turned to this year, and we hope to be able to get an early graze in the SSSI fields before turning the cattle loose on the rest of the reserve until mid-July. This seems especially important this year as (so far) the weather has been so mild that the grass has hardly stopped growing. Did anyone else mow the lawn over Christmas? I'll be arranging a walk round to check the fencing soon, so that any repairs needed can be done as early as possible and not cause any delays.

Winter works

I am in the process of securing assistance with the hedge cutting, and am going to give my colleagues in the Parks department a try this year. Times are tight financially as I'm sure you're aware, and this is a way of saving a bit of money, rather than paying contractors. I will monitor the work however, as I've been pretty pleased with the contractors we've used for this work over the last few years. There will also be a few tasks that can be managed by work parties, although I may ask if people are interested in a few more, maybe during the week, as there is quite a lot to do this winter.

Footpath

Prompted by requests from the society, I have been in contact with Natural England with a view to getting a surface path installed along the muddy bits of the public footpath that runs through Butchers, Oakfield and Cumborrow. The current state of play is that NE are waiting for us to come up with a proposal about exactly where and what type of surface we have in mind. All this is obviously dependent on finance so we will need

to explore our options as far as grant money is concerned. Further discussions amongst the MMS committee members are also needed.

New Mill Meadows leaflet

This is something I have wanted to organize for some considerable time, and at last I seem to be making progress. I'm hoping it will be of a similar format to the Norsey Wood leaflet, including a map, and details of the reserve and what can be seen around it. It's still at a fairly early stage, but the council's graphic designer is on the case, and I am in the process of drafting up the text etc. It probably won't be a quick process, but things are on the move!

That's if for now. Happy New Year, and I hope to see you around the reserve.

Thanks

Chris Huggins

January 2016

Countryside Ranger, Basildon Council

My December work party,

words and pictures by Peter Croot

The final work party of 2015 was attended by 12 men all eager for a morning workout. Ranger Chris Huggins assigned two groups, one to tree clearance, the other to tree planting.

The tree clearance gang worked in Greens at its boundary with the fenced off wood bordering the grazing land of Gatwick House. Storms in November had taken down a limb of an oak tree.

The Ranger had found the remainder of the tree to be rotting and subsequently felled it. The work party members completed the tidying up of the oak remains and then set about removing three sycamore trees as they were felled by the Ranger. This patch of sycamore trees were encroaching the wide grassy plateau area of Greens, with their high leaf canopy reducing light levels to the area beneath them.



Work party – a rest after planting new trees funded by The Society

The sycamores had been identified for removal in the Mill Meadows Management Plan and some were felled last winter



The working party group assigned to tree planting set about hole digging mainly in the Watts area of the meadows. Species planted included Rowan, Alder and a couple of Horse Chestnut saplings.

As the drizzle intensified a successful morning concluded with steaming mulled wine and hot mince pies superbly provided by Mrs Glyn Sumner. This was a fitting end to a year in which a lot has been achieved in both maintaining the meadows and providing new habitats.

Veteran Oaks

by Ken Williamson

Looking up from my study desk I see it is almost midwinter and in the garden another autumn gale is buffeting the shrubs and trees. My oak tree is one of the few trees that still has any leaves remaining, the rest of the trees seem to have deposited all their leaves in my pond! The trees stand like a row of skeletons with their limbs outstretched against the leaden sky. In a neighbour's garden a construction of small twigs reveals where a bird built a nest on a branch in the far off summer days. When I first moved to my home the individual tree outlines would have been harder to distinguish as the rear boundary may have been an old hedge line containing a tight knit community of trees. Gradually trees have been felled or greatly reduced in size and during winter a solitary leylandii offers the only privacy from the houses in the next road.

The oak is at least 15 metres tall and is not the tallest in the row. Other species include ash, sycamore, smaller hawthorn plus some non-native garden species. Next door, a newer arrival is a horse chestnut that has nearly overtaken my oak, partly because I had some of the crown reduced.

Most of the road originally contained pre-war plotland style bungalows and until recently a few were still identifiable from their origins. I began wondering if my oak was about the same age as the original development. Looking at the tree it seems big enough but I did not have any



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“scientific” data other than it looked roughly the same size when I moved here over 20 years ago.

A few searches on the internet kept my investigation alive. Many factors influence a tree's shape and size and some species grow quicker than others. A solitary specimen will have less competition than a tree growing in a woodland where the “race” to reach the sunlight will often produce straight trunks with few side branches. In very exposed sites the effect of winds could influence the growth pattern. The amount a tree trunk grows annually will depend upon the supported canopy size that provides the food source. As a tree matures the canopy may become weak and major branches fall off. Serious caterpillar attacks also reduce the leaf canopy and thereby food supplied to the tree and the amount of material available for adding to the trunk.

Obviously I did not want to fell the tree or bore through the trunk to count the number of annual growth rings. Luckily data exists that can help determine a tree's age using examples where trees had been felled in a variety of scenarios. First off I knew it was a sessile oak and presumed it had never been growing in woodland (that had since been felled). I noted the crown reduction and that it had grown slightly lop-sided where a larger oak had out-competed it for sunlight. Next step was to measure the girth of the trunk at chest height (150cm). If a tree has a bulbous or misshapen trunk or major side branches at that height then take a reading as near as possible to the desired height where the trunk shape returns to normal. A circumference measurement of 185 cm was recorded and using the ready-reckoner on the woodland trust website the age equates to approximately 75 years if growing in ideal conditions. The crown reduction and competition may have slowed the growth rate of the trunk, allowing a few extra years would put its age as pre-war so maybe my original guess was correct.

Very old oaks may have some of the core trunk hollowed out as the tree begins to die. It is still worth measuring the trunk as it would not shrink in size and the tables can be adjusted for this sort of situation. There is a very detailed calculation on the forestry commission web site that also

includes other species so you can try and measure a tree you think may be a veteran.

Now I was curious as to the age of the oak in “oakfield” at mill meadows. This oak is very conspicuous on the ridge as you climb from the bridge. I thought the girth would be larger than my oak and it measured 334 cm, an age of approximately 150 years. A nearby oak beyond the field gate in Greens (badge number 0840) was estimated at 348 cm. During the rest of my



Winter sun shining through a veteran oak.

walk I looked out for other large oaks though some could not be measured because they were on too steep a bank or within deep undergrowth.

A tree in Coles (in secondary woodland) measured 366 cm. The largest examples were Butchers near the stile (grid reference TQ682940) at 378 cm and in Hillmans adjacent to the path by



Boggy Piece (TQ682938) was 414 cm. That largest measurement meant the tree is probably more than 210 years old and had started growing before the Battle of Waterloo!

Lake Meadows Water Birds Count

Whereas Mill Meadows is a Local Nature Reserve, Lake Meadows, in the centre of the town, is different in its main function which is an amenity park. However, it still has important value for wildlife and the Friends of Lake Meadows, working with the Town and Borough Councils, are keen to promote and encourage wildlife within the park – adding to the enjoyment of its users. Some of our members are assisting the Friends with this and one activity has been counting the birds which use the lake and its immediate surroundings. This was triggered by a concern that the Canada Geese numbers were increasing. We want to check that this is actually the case and whether this is having an effect on other bird populations. Whereas it takes many years of monitoring to determine this, the first year's counts have been interesting.

Highlights: both Grey Wagtail and Great Crested Grebe have bred around the lake (the latter has



Goosander at Lake Meadows – photo by Michael Southcott

been doing so for several years).

Canada Goose numbers seem to peak in June after the breeding season (79) whereas numbers in winter are around 1/3 of that. The average count was 35. The number of young amongst them indicates probably only single figures of breeding pairs.

The second most numerous bird is Mallard which peaked at 67 and averaged at 46.

Moorhen numbers peaked in winter (24) and Coot numbers (19) in summer. Both are resident and breeding birds but are the former supplemented by winter visitors ? It needs more years of monitoring to find out.

Goosanders are winter visitors: their numbers vary but one count this month has reached 15.

Gulls arrive in late summer and increase as autumn progresses into winter then disappear in the breeding season. They are mainly Black-Headed but we do have the occasional Common Gull, Lesser-Blacked Gull and Herring Gull. Although the latter two seem in recent years to be more frequent and numerous around the town they don't seem to be significant users of Lake Meadows.

Egyptian Geese are becoming more frequent visitors. Swallow, House Martin and Common Tern are summer feeders.

We have also recorded visits by Mandarin Duck and Kingfisher.