



Park Life No 27 Spring 2024
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Welcome to the Spring 2024 and 27th edition of Park Life.

Some of you will be aware that because of the spread of Ash Dieback disease many of the Ash trees in Whippendell have had to be felled. This has brought a rather melancholy atmosphere to parts of the wood. However in this edition we not only place this work in context, but find some positive elements in the situation. Some of the wood will be used for wood-turning with the resulting products sold on behalf of FoCP, and while there is no doubt that although the felling will for example disrupt butterfly life in the short term, in the longer term nature will bounce back to enjoy the new habitats the removal of the trees will create, as described in the “Ash and butterflies” article. Also in this edition Libby Gower addresses the glory of springs both past and present, illustrated with Anna Brooks’ photos, and Laurie Elvin describes the eventful history of the Rustic Bridge.

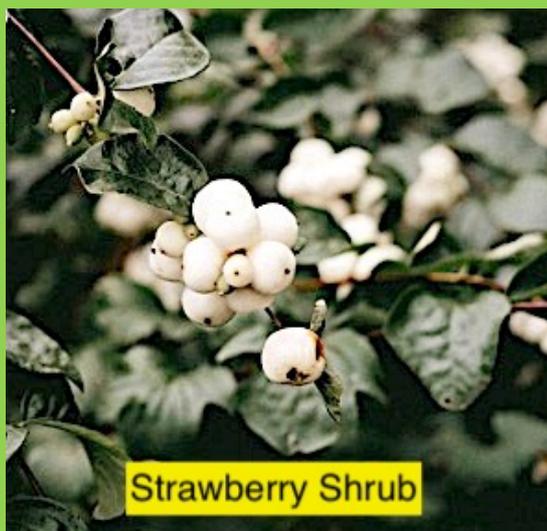
Dead hedging, tree planting, coppicing, invasive species control, litter-picking, and path and river-bank restoration as among the activities carried out in the last few months and described in “Around the park”, where we also feature the work FoCP does to encourage bird-life with the provision of food and nest-boxes, and bird-hide restoration.

Alec Thomas (ed)

Around the park and volunteering

Nature conservation

Our conservation working parties have been battling against the elements and floods to help maintain the reserve. Focus has been on keeping growth under control and reducing the spread of invasive species. This work has included coppicing Willows and Holly and removing Snowberry shrubs. The latter, less well-known than other invasive species, is a deciduous shrub producing white berries in the autumn and pink flowers in the summer. Originating from North America and introduced to the UK in the 19th century, it was widely planted in woodland to provide cover for game birds such as grouse. The berries are poisonous to humans so don't be tempted by them. As part of keeping things in check our volunteers also rebuilt a significant length of the dead hedging running either side of the bird-hide. This will help protect this popular bird-watching area.



Volunteers, councillors and park management staff planted trees along the new Wetlands perimeter fence to provide cover and protection for the reserve.

The Friends run working parties and litter-picking on the 3rd Saturday of every month. Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust also run regular weekday work parties in the park and Whippendell.

To find out more about these, please contact Robert Barnes, the FOCP Secretary, by emailing him at secretary@friendsofcassioburypark.org.uk.

Litter-picking.

Litter-picking is increasingly attracting keen Duke of Edinburgh Award (DoE) participants, with up to five teenagers at any one time helping to clear the park. This complements the Friends' efforts as DoE activity takes place between our own monthly events, and we hope to encourage more DoE involvement. In support of our efforts Veolia have kindly donated a dozen litter-picking sticks for the use of volunteers.

Bird-boxes, hide, and feeders



Topping up feeders the wet way

The bird-feeders have now been taken down for the season. Hanging above flood water as they did for most of the winter made topping them up every 48 hrs a slightly precarious venture. Despite this they were visited approximately 80 times, getting through 152kg (339lbs) of feed costing £258. FoCP is also paying for the renovation of the nearby hide - so far at a cost of £245 for a new roof – see photo. We have also acquired more nesting boxes; purchasing (for £71) and positioning three “Woodstone” long-life boxes, making a total of 14 boxes maintained by the Friends around the reserve,.



Re-roofed birdhide and re-built dead hedge

If you want to get involved, then beyond hands-on activities in the park we're also looking for people to join the FoCP committee. Members do back-room work that allows FoCP to contribute to Cassiobury life – finance, recruitment, membership, marketing, social-media and website, organisation of WPs/litter-picking/birdfeeding, production of Park Life magazine and newsletters, and liaison with Watford Council and the local wildlife trust. Membership is an excellent way to both contribute to the community and extend your range of friends and contacts – if you're interested, please contact our Chair Peter Jenkins (chair@friendsofcassioburypark.org.uk).

Citizen Science

Vicky d'Souza – the park's education officer - reports that in May students from West Herts College are running volunteer citizen science projects, including amphibian & reptile surveys, and monitoring mature & noteworthy trees. There are opportunities for the general public to get involved to collect data to better inform park management and contribute to local biological records. Training and site induction will be given - for further details or to sign-up, contact Vicky on Cassiobury@watford.gov.uk

Community Connections Projects

CCP have been working in the new wetlands area and have opened up a view (see photo) of its northern end by coppicing trees. Continuing the work that FoCP had started (see above) over 100 hazel and hawthorn saplings were planted along the woodland edge to create a hedgerow which will in due course protect the wetlands. A large horse-chestnut tree that fell across the wetlands inlet channel was processed.



In the northern reserve improvements were made to paths using wood chip, hydrated lime, and logs to help define edges and stop the waterside vegetation being trampled. The hydrated lime helps to firm up the mud, and the wood chip came from a tree that had been processed in the nature reserve. River-bank repairs were carried out using willow spiling and brush bundles. Elsewhere in the reserve the river channel next to the waterside path was widened to help stop flooding when water

levels are high in the winter; Osier whips were cut and planted along the bank next to the Rustic Bridge to help stop erosion. Goat Willow was cut for the Friends 'April work party to use in re-building the dead hedge by the bird hide (see above). A carpet of growth and intrusive saplings was cleared away from beneath the park's Tulip Tree. For more about the tree, to be found approximately 120 metres north-east of The Hub, see Park Life No 25, Autumn 2023..

Turning Ashes of Devastation into Objects of Consolation

Following the intensive Ash tree cull which took place in January and February (see



article on Ash Trees and Butterflies below), Tim Pettigrew was given permission (and helpful advice from Watford Borough Council's Environment Management Team), to harvest timber for making wood-turned items. These, when fully seasoned, will be sold to raise funds for FoCP, and may thus possibly help in the replacement of the lost Whippendell trees. Tim will be raising funds by selling items he already has in stock at the FoCP AGM on 15th May (details below).

Events coming up.

Butterfly Walk: Sunday 5th May, 2pm, Langley Way entrance.

FoCP AGM and social evening: Wednesday 15th May, St Luke's Church-hall, Langley Way, 7.30pm.

Presentation on Water-voles and their re-introduction to Cassiobury Park: Wednesday 5th June, the Hub, 7.30pm.

Official Opening of Wetlands area: 13th June (provisional date, subject to weather permitting further necessary work to be completed).

Robert Barnes, Alex Popple, Alec Thomas, Tim Pettigrew. April 2024

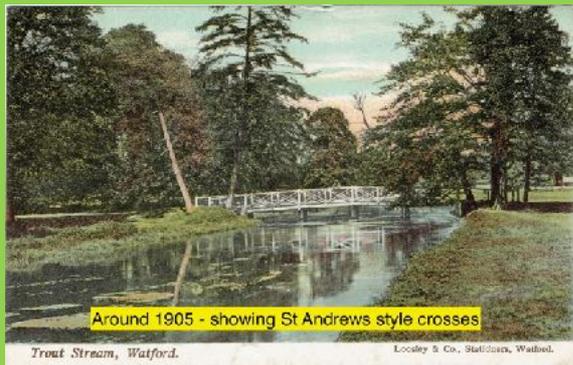
Rustic Bridge

In Summer 2023 Park Life, in my article on the history of Cassio Bridge, I mentioned a new feature on the FoCP website – one which presents brief descriptions of each of the park bridges, here's the link:

<https://friendsofcassioburypark.org.uk/the-park/the-bridges/>

This article is the second of a series about individual bridges, giving more information about each - in this case the Rustic. See the website for exact location if you don't already know it, but it's just down from the Hub, and is the biggest of the Gade bridges, allowing both vehicular and pedestrian access to the Iron Bridge across the canal, and beyond to Whippendell Wood and the golf course.

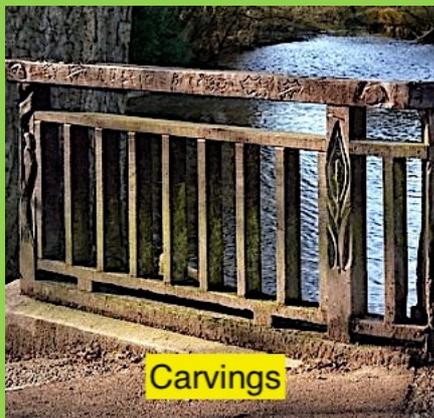
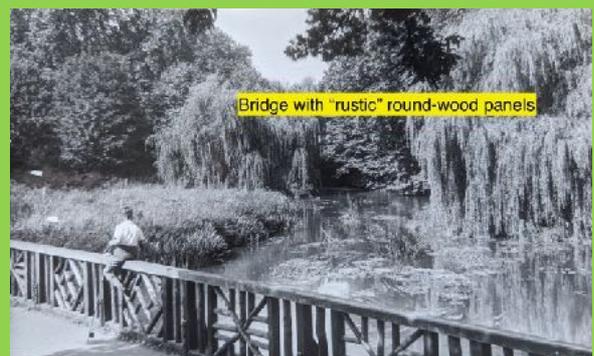
The birds' eye view of Cassiobury (published 1707) shows a bridge across the river Gade, but only as a distant detail. However, this and a later 18th century map (undated) locate this bridge at the mill. Following the opening of the Grand Junction Canal in 1797, a bridge in the location of our Rustic Bridge is shown on a map dated 1798. All later maps show a bridge in this position. The construction was possibly strong enough to carry a carriage, but heavy carts would have crossed via a ford, just upstream.



The earliest photographic evidence is found on postcards from about 1905 (see photo); showing a wooden deck and substructure, with barriers of vertical and diagonal squared timber, forming panels of St. Andrew's crosses, which appear to be painted white.

Watford Borough Council purchased this part of the park in 1930 and replaced the

original barriers with squared timber handrail and verticals with panels of roundwood (see photo) in patterns that are truly 'rustic'. This is, presumably, when it acquired the name, despite later barriers being all squared timber. At the same time the deck was strengthened by brick abutments and piers.



The rustic panels seem to have gradually disintegrated and sometime in the 1950s or 60s all the rustic work was replaced by squared timber. This would undoubtedly have needed repairs periodically. The last



renovation included carvings (see photos) of flora and fauna on the handrails and some of the verticals, probably to coincide with the centenary of the public park in 2009. The bridge and carvings were officially 'unveiled' by the Mayor on 21st June 2008.



Carving

A major renovation, which included further strengthening of the deck, was carried out in 2019, as part of the park Improvement project. It included entirely new barriers,



Bridge as it presently appears

comprising intricate geometric panels of interlocking green oak (see photo).

Next time you cross the 'Rustic' bridge, take a moment to admire the joinery of the new barriers and look at the information panel, where you can line up the bridge with an image of the mill building (demolished in 1956).

Lost Bridges nearby.

Near to our Rustic Bridge there were wooden footbridges across other branches of the river, connecting the park to the mill. They survived post-WWII but became dangerous and were removed in the 1960s. And as a follow up to my reference in Park Life No 26 to the lost Golfers' Bridge here is a photo of its post-Cassiobury incarnation crossing the river Colne, providing access to the Aquadrome from Riverside Road, Rickmansworth, near to the children's playground. It was replaced by a step-free bridge.



"Golf" bridge

Acknowledgements:

Watford Museum for permission to use images from the collection.

Chris Orchard for scanning images

Everyone who supplied photos of the carvings

Laurie Elvin, April 2024

Near and Far.

Whilst Spring advances in the garden or park it sometimes takes a trip out of Watford to fully appreciate the changes. Something about distant woods, and shelter belts and hedgerows surrounding open fields can cause one to gasp every bit as much as cultivars of pink blossom-laden cherry trees. A mosaic of distant white blossom on fading blackthorn or small bird-cherry trees, with interspersing woodland trees such



as birch, maple and beech when their buds first open, is joyous. This patchwork will include the pinkish glow of buds yet to open such as oak. With wild white cherry and hawthorn also coming into leaf the world returns to life after a dormant and very wet winter and early spring. The value of habitats formed by trees and shrubs must not be underestimated; they provide protection from the wind and weather, and homes for wildlife in the trees themselves and below in the leaf litter and at the margins. Valuable for small mammals, hiding in holes or flattened grass, right up to the very treetops where rooks might be already 'cawing' as they

add sticks to refresh their nests. If you can't get out on that road trip then stand in our park and look towards the opposite bank of the canal for the same wooded effect. You may hear the 'chak' of jackdaws. Many of our suburban garden birds moved in from woodland, becoming established and finding the food and habitats needed for nesting, with parks also playing an important role, especially with old or veteran trees.



A country childhood long ago gave us licence to roam hedges and ditches, disappear all morning and only come home when hungry and then with a jam-jar of tadpoles and a bunch of cowslips. This lifestyle has changed now for many reasons; the lack of freedom, overprotective parenting and perhaps more respect for the wildlife, although the tiddlers were always put back in the river, and the birds' eggs that were discovered were left to be safely incubated. Perhaps because we were the right height to peer into hedges we frequently spotted nests - often a blackbird's, a loose affair made of sticks lined with grass and moss with 3-5 pale blue eggs streaked brown, or a more elaborate song-thrush nest; instead of moss these were lined with mud held together with saliva to form a hollow cup, with brighter blue eggs with some black spots. Our best find was a juvenile cuckoo which had usurped a dunnock's nest by pushing out the rightful fledglings.



In my large garden blackbirds begin to make themselves noticed in March when they scuttle about at the margins of lawn and shrubs, usually two glossy black males with bright yellow beaks and rings around their eyes. This fandango is usually to win the attention of a single brown streaked female. They also feed on worms and invertebrates from the leaf litter, or thrash about some newly spread homemade compost in search of worms. Around this time the males might be heard trying out their scratchy song perhaps cautiously at dawn or at late afternoon vespers. Occasional tic- tic's might be heard from laurels or a more rattling alarm call rings out – possibly a predator about, a fox or cat. Only when the nest is built and the female is incubating eggs does the male serenade us, with lugubrious phrases initially, then melodic song, with pauses. A long sunny afternoon and evening suits them and their performance seems to be for sheer enjoyment, but it may be warning other birds out of its patch. A similar story with the song thrush, which I see jumping about the garden after invertebrates or snails. I have no idea where they nest but their song rings out loud and clear anytime after 3pm. However the performance requires sunshine, which has been in rather short supply this spring! Ever reliable, a pair of robins has nested in ivy just a few feet from the kitchen window. Their work rate is amazing; scarcely gone before returning with beaks full of grubs, pausing only to perch on the bird table or washing line, checking round to see if's safe to enter the nest. Robins lay up to 5 small white eggs covered with brown streaks. I just hope that other nesters, magpies, high in that Norwegian Spruce, are not waiting to raid the fledglings.

Back in the park this week, when it has been unseasonably cold, I am reminded that



this is the season for blossom and bees as well as birdsong. An avenue of white flowering cherry trees lines the Stratford Way path. Ahead of me a fox (rarely seen in daylight in the park!) runs across my path and disappears into a bramble thicket opposite the carved 'Owl tree'. A black Labrador type dog is off along its scent trail in excitement. Either side of the main sycamore avenue garlic plants are beginning to flower, useful for Orange Tip

butterflies to lay their eggs on, and in the last few days one did fly about in my garden. In nature timing is everything. A few bluebell clumps are good to see but unfortunately they're the Spanish variety or hybrids, with wider leaves and strong upright stems. Crab apples trees on the hill just up from the Tulip tree are in flower and bees are buzzing there. Elder shrubs have one or two white musty inflorescences. The white or pink horse chestnut trees 'candles' are beginning to open.



Spring was slow this year as we waited for better weather and the sweet chestnut trees will be the last to come into leaf.

Elizabeth Gower, April 2024

Ash Trees and Butterflies

Visitors to Whippendell Woods will have noticed the large number of trees that have been felled in the western part of the woods. In this article we'll explain why this work has been done and consider its impact on Whippendell's butterfly population.



Felling was required because of the need to deal with the effects of Ash Dieback disease. First recorded in Poland in 1992, Ash Dieback reached the UK in 2012. Since then this fungus has spread through much of the country, killing Ash trees with an alarming 90% mortality rate, and inevitably reaching Whippendell Woods, with



almost all our Ash trees showing 50-to-100% loss of canopy. Proximity to pathways raised concerns about falling branches and trees, and emphasised the need to deal with the problem through felling many of the trees. The felled timber will be removed when surface conditions are dry enough to permit vehicle movement, and the bluebells have gone. Some standing dead trees have been retained where they pose no safety risks, and will serve as a habitat for

invertebrates, bats, and owls. The work is supported by the Forestry Commission and Natural England, the agencies responsible for monitoring woodland Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). It will help ensure the long-term sustainability and preservation of Whippendell Wood. The Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust (HMWT) are partnering with the council to manage the woodlands and there is more information about the impact of Ash Dieback Disease on their website: <https://www.hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/ashdieback>.

Removal of infected trees may affect a number of butterflies – but not always adversely - and a few saplings may develop immunity. -One species which will be affected is an aphid that produces honeydew and is associated with two well-known butterfly species - White-Letter Hairstreak and the Brown Hairstreak. Although the latter is unlikely to inhabit Whippendell and in our woods our attention is on the White-Letter Hairstreak, as the wood's small population was probably reliant on Ash. Since 2018 sightings have been rare but this species is renowned for being elusive, spending most of their time out of sight



feeding on honeydew from aphids high in Ash trees. If they are still present they will lay their eggs on the Elms, which still look free of disease, and there is a good chance they will come down to feed on flowers such as brambles and hogweed due to the lack of Ash. Certainly the removal of the Ash trees will make it easier to monitor the Elms for their presence during the butterfly's flight period - generally from the latter half of June until early August.

in 2022 and 2023 we enthused about the presence of Purple Emperors along the Lime Avenue, but it's the White Admiral that's really the jewel of the Whippendell Woods butterflies! Although not doing well in other areas they continue to flourish in our woods, and hopefully the Ash removal should not affect them adversely, apart from a few changes to particular hot spots. This season we'll attempt to locate eggs to help identify such breeding spots, and thus allow management of these areas. We have recently started using the Ordnance Survey Maps app which not only plots locations and distance but gives elevation above sea level. This latter feature will help us better understand the Whippendell terrain and therefore where to look for butterflies such as the White Admiral and Silver-washed Fritillary that favour sheltered lower areas which have been difficult to visualise and identify within the contours of the wood. In the longer term the Silver-Washed Fritillary may actually benefit from the removal of the ash as more light on the woodland floor will encourage the presence of violets, a preferred nectar source, as long as the cleared areas aren't taken over by brambles and bracken.

Apart from the dramatic Ash clearance, Anna Daniels of Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust has been leading working parties carrying out more "gentle" clearance of bramble – creating meadow-like areas which will encourage diversity.

To better understand the longer-term consequences of the loss of Ash trees and future management of Whippendell Woods we recommend an excellent book produced by Mike Slater and Keith Warmington published by Butterfly Conservation - "The Warwickshire Approach". The book gives readers insight into the management of a variety of butterfly habitats, and the woodland management section is relevant to our woods with advice on rotational scalloping of woodland rides, coppicing, and tree planting, including what trees to plant where and how to look after them.

For the next butterfly walk see the "Around the Park" section elsewhere in this edition.

Isabel Crozier, Peter Fewell, Rick Vickers, April 2024

If you have enjoyed Park Life, then continue to follow the Friends of the Park on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter and on our website:

www.facebook.com/FriendsOfCassioburyPark

www.instagram.com/friendsofcassioburypark

www.twitter.com/cassioburyFOCP

www.friendsofcassioburypark.org.uk

Information about Park events at:
www.watford.gov.uk/cassiobury

www.watfordbigevents.co.uk

Enjoy the Park!

FRIENDS OF CASSIOBURY PARK: Park Life No 27, Spring 2024
