Park Life No 28 Summer 2024
Contents

Welcome to the Summer 2024 and 28th edition of Park Life.

The extremely varied weather we’ve “enjoyed” over the late Spring and Summer has certainly had an impact on the park and its users. We’ve got too much water in the new Wetlands area – a classic example of too much of a good thing - not enough butterflies in Whippendell, and arguably too much growth in the park. Peter Fewell and Libby Gower spell out the consequences for our flora and fauna of our erratic season.

Peter Cunliffe and Laurie Elvin both address, in different ways, aspects of the relationship between the wider park and the waterways – canal and river – that run through it. Una McTernan also takes an historical perspective, reflecting on a tangible example of park history of the sort that you may literally stumble across!

Bird-hide restoration, FoCP recruitment, invasive species control, glade and meadow management, tree and flower planting, litter-picking, and Wetlands management are among the activities carried out in the last few months and described in “Around the park”.

As usual the beautiful photos of Anna Brooks and Raffi Katz illustrate what Cassiobury has to offer.

Alec Thomas (ed), August 2024

Around the park and volunteering

The weather was finally kind enough for FoCP to run a membership stall at Wildfest on 13th June – this is an annual gathering of local nature/environmental groups held in the park and organised by Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust (HMWT). It's a family-friendly day out, exploring nature in the park, taking part in fun activities and finding out more about the local organisations working for wildlife - a great success with lots of interest from the local community. Our stall saw a small but steady flow of interested people, allowing us to recruit new members and raise awareness of FoCP activities. Simonie Jeffree, our treasurer, did great outreach work with children by getting them to try the litter-picking sticks in a very enthusiastic way. So much so we are considering getting some smaller sticks to make it easier for families to join us. Wildfest also gave us a chance to talk to Councillor Ian Stotesbury (WBC Portfolio Holder for Transport and Sustainability) about the issue of large parties being unable to put their rubbish in the black bins. For several reasons it is not easy to resolve this matter, but Ian is very aware of the issue, and FoCP will continue to help with finding a solution.

Volunteers manning FoCP recruitment tent at Wildfest 24

Partly due to the poor weather, but also the efforts of various members who regularly litter pick on their own, Duke of Edinburgh volunteers, and the hard work of Veolia, the park has been relatively tidy over most of the last three months. However the recent warm weather and school holidays did generate a lot of rubbish in a short time, but luckily we were able to deal with this on our regular monthly pick in July.

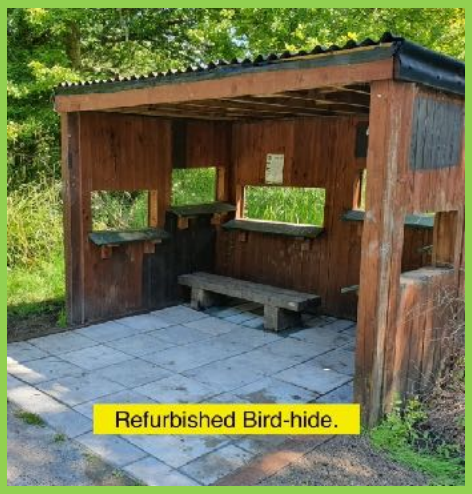
FoCP and HMWT conservation working parties did not take place in April or May, during the bird nesting season. June parties focused on removing invasive species: Small Balsam, Snowberry and Rhododendron. While in July we started our seasonal glade and meadow grass cuts, and scallop management - in Whippendell Wood and in the area in front of the bird hide.

The new Wetlands reserve area continues to be flooded to an excessive degree due to the exceptional rainfall, and the river bursting its banks into the new ponds in the meadows area. Consequently FoCP has not been able to do any work in the Wetlands, although CCP (see below) has been carrying out some repair/ development tasks. However, we aim to start work once water levels drop, and are planning to create a team of volunteers specialising in Wetlands work, and are therefore looking for team leaders who would be willing to lead such activity. If you are interested in this sort of role do let us know. Presently FoCP runs working parties and litter-picking on the 3rd Saturday of every month. HMWT also run regular weekday work parties in the park and Whippendell.

To find out more about these and other FoCP volunteer opportunities (including committee work) please contact Robert Barnes, the FOCP Secretary, by emailing him at secretary@friendsofcassioburypark.org.uk.

CCP

Community Connection Projects (CCP) carries out work around the park, and recently completed the restoration of the bird-hide by laying a concrete slab floor to improve park users' birding experience. The cost (£783) of this work was met by FoCP. In the new Wetlands vegetation has been managed by removing Nettles and Creeping Thistle, while leaving some of the Marsh Thistle for pollinators. Plants have been added to the enlarged pond created in the wetlands area. Also in the wetlands a breach next to one of the new sluice gates was repaired with a corrugated metal sheet and park-sourced wooden stakes, and 100 Osier whips were planted along the fence protecting the area.


Refurbished Bird-hide.

In the northern reserve CCP repaired the riverbank with brash bundles and stakes, and joined FoCP and HMWT in the annual campaign against invasive species by removing Himalayan and Orange balsam.

The pond in the Peace Garden was planted with several species including Water Mint, Water Forget-me-not, Marsh Marigold and Marsh Valerian.

Heritage Walks 2024

Cassiobury was the seat of the Earls of Essex from the 17th century until it was sold in 1922 and Cassiobury House demolished. If you are interested in its history, come on a guided walk led by Laurie Elvin, archaeologist and local historian. The walks lasts 1.5 - 2 hours. We will cross the canal and walk up to Jacotts Hill, the highest point in the park. You will hear about prehistory and the history from monastic times to the 20th century (there's even a mention of 'Star Wars'). We'll start at the Hub, on the upper patio. Booking is essential on Eventbrite, and no refunds of the £3 charge can be made.

Wednesday 21st August 2024 starting from the Hub at 6 pm
https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/cassiobury-park-watford-heritage-walk-in-aug-tickets-957276950127

Sunday 8th September 2024 starting from the Hub at 11 am
https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/cassiobury-park-watford-heritage-walk-in-sept-additional-walk-tickets-957295766407

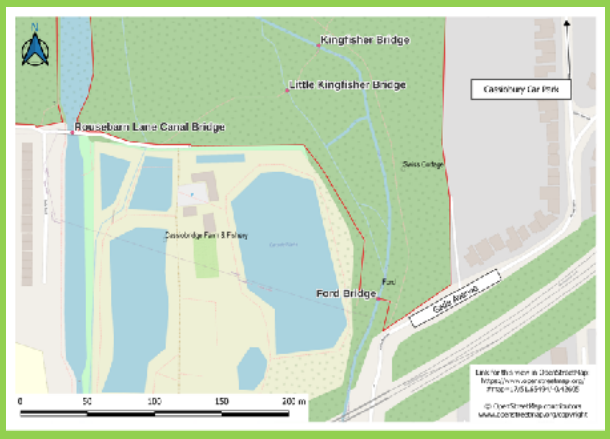
Robert Barnes, Alec Thomas, Alex Popple, Anna Daniels. August 2024

Ford Bridge

In Summer 2023 Park Life, in my article on the history of Cassio Bridge, I mentioned a 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 third in a series about the individual bridges, giving more information about each - in this case the Ford Bridge. In the south of the park, just off Gade Avenue, this is a modern footbridge connecting the park with the path leading to Cassiobridge Farm, the canal and Rousebarn Lane. The deck is formed with precast concrete panels on mild steel supports. The bridge barriers were renewed recently with green oak timbers, instead of the previous plywood panels.



It's on the site of a ford across the river Gade. Use of the ford ceased upon the construction of this bridge, possibly in the 1970s. The approximate position of the ford can be seen from sloping granite kerbstones that still survive on the bend in Gade Avenue.

The ford provided a route for animals, carts, and probably early motor vehicles; connecting the Rickmansworth Road to Rousebarn Lane, and on to Croxley via Green Lane, and Sarratt via Chandlers Cross. This route was outside the boundary lines of the Earl of Essex's Cassiobury Park, therefore in public use and is probably ancient.

Lost bridges

A wooden footbridge accompanied the ford, approximately 17 metres downstream from the modern bridge, which provided pedestrians with a dry crossing.

No physical evidence of this footbridge has been found but its timber construction is clear from many postcards. It was called the 'Splash Bridge' on an early 20th century postcard.

Some postcards of the old footbridge also show the Swiss Cottage – sited north of the bridge (see map). People were living in

the Swiss Cottage until 1939, and a letter to the Watford Observer refers to residents using the bridge to cross the river to use a latrine on the west bank. No evidence of sewerage or plumbing was found when the cottage was excavated in 2016.
This footbridge can also be seen in the photo of the National Fire Service personnel 1943 – 1945 (courtesy of Hertfordshire Fire Brigade Museum, Watford). Watford Borough Council bought the land in 1952 but how long the bridge survived is not known.
Before that a sluice gate existed, comprising 8 wooden panels that controlled the flow of water in the Gade, which can be seen on early 19th century postcards; some called it the 'waterfall'. It was required when the 'New Mill' was situated downstream of the sluice (1598 to mid-1700s). A map dated 1766, titled 'A Survey of the Manor of Croxley and Snells-Hall' shows an earlier bridge, about 10 metres wide, labelled "Jaggerts Bridge". This bridge probably coincided with the existence of the New Mill and was removed in the latter part of the18th century, when the means of crossing the Gade at this point reverted to the ford.

Thanks to Watford Museum for provision of images.
Laurie Elvin, August 2024

Hay Making and Willow Herbs.

Early June and Summer was suddenly upon us, not noticeably sunny, as one frontal system after another rolled in from the west but the Met Office assured us temperatures were above average. On a walk to Rickmansworth Road I decided to return right through the middle of the park on a man-made track. FP30 was to the right of me and the Sycamore Avenue to the left but not actually visible! The height of the grasses and the low dark green, dense foliage on the trees completely blocked any view of people walking the main paths. I felt as if I were in a country meadow not a town park!
It wasn't a wildflower meadow, just rather common coarse grasses such as Rye grass, Cocksfoot, Oat grasses, some soft silky flowered Yorkshire Fog, delicate Poa and Cats'- tails. There were some yellow flowers of Hawkweed and some Buttercups. Of course it was all due to the rain that growth had been so prolific, and before long the sun did arrive in a heat wave- 20th -28th June. Lucky enough to be

away that week, on my journey around the M25 I saw haymaking in action. Some fields had already been baled whilst elsewhere grass was being cut and turned to dry. It might indicate a bumper crop, well ahead of schedule, for storage as winter fodder. Undoubtedly not all regions and farmers will have been this lucky and one can only hope the wheat and barley harvests this summer will be warm and dry after poor, cold wet planting conditions in winter and spring.

Six weeks on and weather has again improved. The section of grassland either side of the Garden's Path has grasses, but no longer flowering as they have set seed, and are dying back and drying so no longer look so tall. The Hawkweed is shedding windblown seeds; the acid loving sorrel has red seeds, little Harebells flower amongst the grasses. There are a few crickets and grasshoppers around and more butterflies are on the wing, fluttering around when the sun is out. Before leaving home I checked out my butterfly book for revision as I had mostly just been spotting Meadow Browns. I saw the Gatekeeper butterfly, small with orange brown wings pictured on a ragwort flower as it took nectar, with bramble alongside. I suddenly realised the number of yellow ragwort plants flowering in this part of the park so walked across to look and there was a Gatekeeper butterfly which then fluttered onto the marginal brambles! I have also noticed that roadside verges have abundant ragwort plants flowering and I am speculating that the rainfall this year has triggered germination of dormant seeds.


Gatekeeper on Ragwort

Whilst ragwort is good for wildlife, as a source of pollen and nectar (drone honey bees were working on the flowers) and is a food source for the cinnabar moth caterpillars, it is not welcomed in meadows which will be cut for hay. This is due to its toxicity to cattle and horses so has to be removed before mowing.


Purple Loosestrife and Cabbage White


Rose Bay Willow Herb

You cannot miss the huge clumps of Rose Bay Willow Herb in the park. They have tall spires of purple/pink flowers, with buds at the bottom opening first, then a progression up the stem. They have four notched petals and four darker cerise sepals with a loose cluster of stamens and the stigma in the

centre. Check out the flower in Peter Fewell's beautiful July 2023 Skipper butterfly FoCP calendar photo. Soon long red seed pods will be releasing feathery seeds to be blown by the wind, which make this species so good at colonising bare ground. There is another species of Willow Herb in the park, growing alongside the river and true to its name (Great Willow Herb) it is very tall, up to 7 feet. A lover of damp places this has darker pink flowers and a more leafy appearance. A few have colonised my own pond margin, but on a wonderful shade walk this morning I could see them growing all downstream along the Gade bank, with also Hemp Agrimony which has rather shaggy loose pinkish white composite flowers. The huge white bell-flowers of Hedge Bindweed, are also there as this straggling climber winds itself around any plant strong enough, such as the Reedmace. Delightful to see the back end of a Buff tailed Bumble bee as it disappeared into a white bell, you guessed it, for pollen and nectar. Colourful Orange Balsam added to the picture. The cooling cascade of water over the waterfalls, the Banded Demoiselle damsel flies and the Brown Hawker dragon fly made this a magical return to the river.

I would like to express thanks to WBC for having Disabled bays in the car park.

Elizabeth Gower July 2024

"Gongoozling" at the Grand Union Canal's history

If you have ever joined the spectators on the Iron Bridge over the Grand Union Canal at Cassiobury Park watching boaters operate the lock below, then you are – to use a boating term – a "gongoozler".
Gongoozling has long been a popular pastime for park visitors at Bridge number 167, as it is officially known, next to Iron Bridge Lock No 77.
Although it is now separately owned and maintained by the Canal & River Trust charity, the canal provides a waterside oasis that helps to make Cassiobury Park special. The histories of the two are closely entwined.

Creation of the canal
Known as the Grand Junction Canal until it merged to form the Grand Union in 1929, it was conceived during the canal mania of the 1700s when horse-drawn narrowboats – later replaced by steam and diesel power – provided a more efficient way of carrying bulky goods than roads.
The 1790 Oxford Canal linked the Midlands to London via the Thames but was too slow. Various alternative routes were proposed, but the most direct was the Grand Junction, running 93.5 miles from Brentford to Braunston in Northamptonshire, via Rickmansworth and Tring. The Act of Parliament to approve construction by the Grand Junction Canal Company was given royal assent in April 1793.
Original plans for the stretch from Rickmansworth to Kings Langley proved too costly, involving a flight of 16 locks, a long tunnel at Langlebury and an aqueduct. Instead, the company opted to follow the Gade Valley, requiring the agreement of the Earl of Essex, owner of Cassiobury Park, and the Earl of Clarendon, owner of Grove Park, both shareholders in the company.

In November 1794, it was agreed to pay Lord Clarendon £5,000 and to pay Lord Essex £15,000. A new act of parliament was passed in 1795 to approve the diversion and the following year work began on the new section, by which time the canal was open from the Thames to Rickmansworth.
As a result of the canal coming closer to Watford, plans for a branch line into the town were dropped. It reached Kings Langley in 1797 and by 1805 was fully operational to Braunston.

Both earls demanded the canal through their land remained as attractive as possible. Thanks to their vision, Grove Ornamental Bridge (taking traffic up to the Grove Hotel) number 164, is surely one of the prettiest in the country, and the stretch through Cassiobury Park gives the appearance of a gently flowing river.

Locks and bridges
Travelling down from Grove Park, the canal drops through two locks in quick succession: Cassiobury Park Top Lock 75, and Cassiobury Park Lock 76. Just before the Iron Bridge Lock 77 there is an extra wide section known as a winding hole where working boats could be turned around.
Boats leave the park at Rousebarn Lane Bridge 168 and then drop down again at Cassio Bridge Lock 78 before travelling under the London Underground Metropolitan Bridge 168A, a symbol of a new age in transport.
From the former Grove Mill, once powered by the river, the Gade runs to the west of the canal before briefly merging just below Lock 76 and then crossing to the east at the northern tip of the park alongside the sports fields. Visitors can still see where it once drove the wheel of the old mill next to the weir, before it flows into the nature reserve and on into Croxley.
Mileposts along the towpath, such as the 72-mile marker near Lock 77, indicate the distance to Braunston, a nationally important transport hub in its heyday. There is a 71-mile marker between locks 75 and 76.

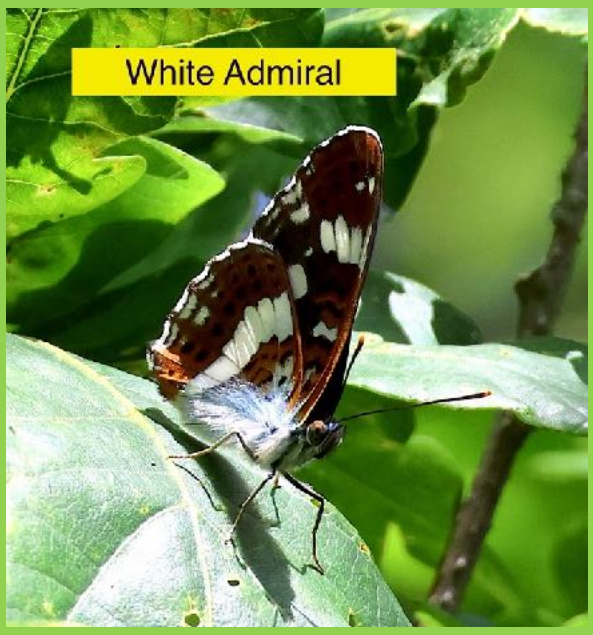
Driving the Industrial Revolution
Although the canal's main purpose was to be part of a national thoroughfare, it also played an important role in the local economy, including bringing in coal at Lady Capel's Wharf near the Grove until the mid-19th Century and a range of goods at Cassio Bridge wharves into the 20th Century.
Some local businesses relied on the canal, most notably paper maker John Dickinson & Co, with its own fleet of narrowboats serving its mills in the Gade valley.
At its peak, the Grand Junction Canal was part of a network that helped to drive the Industrial Revolution and supercharge the British economy just as significantly as the railways and motorways that followed.
Today, the Grand Union Canal is part of a second gold age of canals as they enjoy a resurgence for leisure use – something gongoozlers and boaters can appreciate.

Anyone interested in reading more should look up Fabian Hiscock's fascinating book "Passing Through - The Grand Junction Canal in West Hertfordshire 1791 – 1841", or Alan H Faulkner's "The Grand Junction Canal in Hertfordshire".

Peter Cunliffe, August 2024

The Nectar Pot

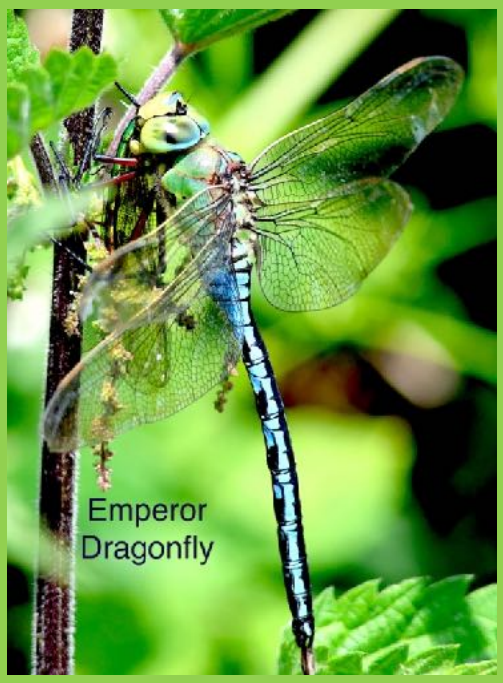
To start with I'd like to describe the experiments with butterfly- friendly plants we started last year. Not all of have been successful, but some have survived or germinated. Although we scattered a good amount of Ox-eye Daisy seed in various spots in the park the germination rate has been poor, with only a few popping up - a small patch flowering in an area where we've seen Common Blue, Brown Argus and Small Copper butterflies. The reasons for the low germination rate are unclear but it is likely that the seeds have been dominated by other plants, particularly grasses. Grasses have the ability to grow in temperatures above 6 degrees and spread with their rhizome roots sideways, quickly filling in any bare gaps. We've been more successful with Yellow Rattle – with all patches flowering. We now at least know that this plant will grow in the desired area. We lost some of the Birds-Foot trefoil and Lucerne plug plants from last autumn. The plants that did survive have flowered, so fingers crossed they will become established and get through next winter. Three of the Field Scabious plants we planted survived and one has flowered. A few more Scabious plants planted during spring are doing well but probably won't flower until next year. Two Wild Marjoram plants planted in spring look like they have bedded in. We noted a common spotted orchid for the first time, which was a surprise. During the autumn more plug plants are available to go in which will hopefully boost what we have started. More on this for the next issue.



Alas weather condition have not made it a good year for butterflies or other insects such as bees. However some species are bearing up better than others: Meadow Brown, Ringlets, Gatekeeper, Commas and Speckled Wood have been seen in reasonable numbers. But the numbers of Large/Small and Essex Skipper are noticeably lower, and were late in emerging. Some of the Blue species are having a bad year, while Brown Argus, Common Blue and Small copper have been hit hard. Only one Common Blue has been seen in the park so far, with no Small Copper or Brown Argus sightings at the time of writing, and Holly Blues are well down on last year's bumper numbers. There was a good "spotting" week around the summer solstice when White Admiral started to emerge, along with Silver-Washed Fritillary and Purple Emperor, with sightings of White Admiral on

Camilla Oak in Whippendell Wood and Purple Emperor sightings along the Lime Avenue. But of course the weather wasn't to last, with some unseasonably cool weather thrown into the mix. The butterfly walk on the 30th June was cool and cloudy, but there were two brief sightings of White Admiral, and we also saw Large Skipper, Comma, Red Admiral, Ringlets, Meadow Brown and a couple of White butterflies. At the park's Wildfest event on 13 July we again struggled to find butterflies on the two walks we did – only managing Essex Skipper, Ringlets, Meadow Brown, Gatekeeper, and a couple of Whites. One 14th July we failed to attract any Purple Emperors down from the trees but did at least get to see Silver-washed Fritillary, Comma, Red Admiral, Ringlets, Meadow Brown, Gatekeeper, Large White, Green -Veined White, Large Skipper and Small Skipper. Hopefully our walks will be more successful next year.

Dragonflies are frequently seen along the rides in Whippendell Woods and we've noticed that when the larger Hawkers emerge butterfly numbers decrease, with Emperor, Southern, Migrant and Brown Hawker dragonflies predating on butterflies such as the White Admiral. Even the smaller Common Darter dragonfly can make a meal out of smaller butterflies like the Skippers. Emperor dragonflies are the largest and first be found in our Woods -emerging mid-May onwards, with Southern and Brown Hawkers from June, and Migrant Hawkers in July. They tend to peak in numbers during August when the butterflies become scarcer. I came across an Emperor Dragonfly close to Rousebarn Lane that had captured a female Banded Demoiselle and perched long enough to get some photos. They're fantastic insects to observe and their numbers are good indicators of the health of insect populations. Although the life-cycle of Dragonflies begins in water they usually leave the immediate aquatic environment to harden up their wings, and hunt in open spaces such as woodland rides. Whippendell Woods is close to water and provides a variety of habitats for our British species. With the new wetlands project now underway I would expect to see a greater variety of dragonflies after a few years. Hopefully the wetlands will attract a Hobby, a small falcon which eats dragonflies and which will help prevent the dragonflies from eating all the White Admiral and other butterflies in Whippendell Woods!



Peter Fewell, August 2024

A bottle full of local history by Una McTernan

This is the story of a glass bottle which we found while litter-picking in the park in the autumn of 2023. It was deep in the mud on the bank of the River Gade, close to the weir, upriver from the Rustic Bridge (the FoCP website shows the locations of all park bridges), and near the site of the old Mill of Cassiobury Park. As soon as we saw it, we realised it was not modern and was made of heavy glass. I cleaned it up and then did a little research about what it was and who it was connected with.

The bottle is intact and is of a type possibly called a Codd bottle, although these generally have an 'indented' neck and a 'chamber' within the neck to hold a marble, a rubber washer seals the top- with the pressure of the contents keeping the marble in place, until pushed down.

The front is embossed with a thistle and the name A.J. Kerridge. Below this it says Boxmoor. On the base is embossed Rylands 4 Barnsley – this may mean the bottle was manufactured using process patented by the Rylands Glass and Engineering Company - a major manufacturer of Codd style bottles in England at the turn of the century. The story of the entrepreneur Dan Rylands is fascinating in itself but this is more about our bottle. Here are links to more detail about Codd and Rylands.

http://stairfootstation.co.uk/rylands-and-codd/

https://sha.org/bottle/pdffiles/Rylands-Codd.pdf

The style of this bottle and the lack of a neck marble dates it to approximately 1912-1916.

So what did it contain? I had initially guessed at beer but this was not commonly consumed outdoors in this period, and some searching on the name A.J. Kerridge gave me the answer. It had contained mineral water, bottled by Arthur Kerridge in Cowper Road, Boxmoor. Here is an entry from the Kelly's Directory of Hertfordshire, 1914:

https://specialcollections.le.ac.uk/digital/collection/p16445coll4/id/59310/rec/1

Elsewhere in the same directory, Arthur Kerridge is listed as a Councillor for the Hemel Hempstead Corporation but retired from this post in November 1916. Was he killed in the First World War? I can find one Arthur Kerridge who died of wounds in

Ypres in May 1915 but he would only have been 19 then. So possibly he was a very young entrepreneur, but unlikely.

I like to imagine Arthur Kerridge starting his small water-bottling plant close to the River Gade. Taking advantage of the fashion for people to enjoy walks and picnics in Cassiobury Park and selling the fizzy drinks on a hot day. Did the bottle come in a barge along the canal or by horse and cart through the ford crossing where we now have the Rustic Bridge? The riverbank where the bottle was found would have been a popular place to view the old watermill. A prime picnic spot.

Una McTernan, August 2024

Thanks to Three Rivers Museum Trust for their cooperation.

Photo Gallery: life around the park

Photographs by Raffi Katz: author of “Cassiobury Walks”

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

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www.friendsofcassioburypark.org.uk

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

Enjoy the Park!

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