



Park Life No 30 Winter 2024-25

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Introduction

Welcome to the Winter 2024-25 and 30th edition of Park Life. Whatever the season life in the park - birds, deer, squirrels etc, goes on. The same applies to the Friends. Indeed the current winter season has been a particularly busy one for FoCP. As you'll see in our "Around the Park" section we have at last been able to gain access to the wetlands, with a new monthly working party specialising in wetlands tasks. This section also refers to the rather onerous administrative process associated with becoming a Charity Commission registered charity, so many thanks to our secretary, Robert Barnes, who has done much of the work required. Returning to a wetlands theme, Peter Cunliffe's article puts the previous incarnation of our wetlands as watercress beds into the context of the local watercress industry. We welcome the return of Libby Gower's nature note in which she explains how trees can have a fascination whatever the season, while Peter Jenkins points the way to some seasonal bird spotting opportunities. Also in our "Around the Park" section you'll see reference to a large tree-planting initiative in Whippendell Woods, and in his article Peter Fewell gives details of the native species that are being planted. As usual the beautiful photos of Raffi Katz illustrate what Cassiobury has to offer.

Alec Thomas (ed), February 2025

Around the park and volunteering

Volunteering

Despite Winter weather and short days, in the last three months or so both Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust (HMWT) and FoCP volunteers have been very active. Both have run a number of Working Parties in the Nature Reserve (including the Wetlands area) and Whippendell Woods. In Whippendell HMWT have completed a winter cut of the 'strawberry fields' glade. This should help encourage more delicate flora and provide the open feeding areas with the bramble required by White Admiral



butterflies. In the Reserve HMWT completed cutting and clearing three woodland glades. This should help reduce the sedge dominance and encourage greater plant diversity. The Trust also cleared "Archie's Pond" – a large pond in the north of the reserve, to encourage emergent vegetation, and carried out coppicing work to create different tree age structures.

FoCP have now launched our new Wetlands Conservation Group. The first event was a huge success with a good turn out and weather! The initial focus is on improving access to the site, making it safer, and managing the watercress that is trying to return! There is a lot of work to do and the site will need regular maintenance to be successful. This year, because of delays to work caused by flooding, and the fact that few winter migratory birds have appeared, we intend to work through the migration period. Hopefully our efforts will be rewarded with more birds in the future.



Veolia have kindly awarded FoCP £1000 to purchase the tools we need for wetlands work.

In cooperation with Samuel Henderson, our local HMWT reserve officer, FoCP's regular conservation groups have also been very active. Their focus has been on habitat creation and maintenance to help improve biodiversity, largely through

improvements to the scallops in the southern reserve/ woodlands and in the northern reserve through coppicing of willows to open up the area.

Winter saw the re-appearance in front of the reserve hide of the ever-popular bird-feeders. Regular muddy visits by a volunteer ensures these are topped up through winter to early spring.

Recent FoCP litter-picking sessions have been very successful, especially with families taking advantage of our new “shorter” child-friendly sticks. Along with our work with Duke of Edinburgh volunteers this helps to educate and involve an increasing number of younger people. Something we will continue to encourage as it helps build a new generation to care about the park and their local environment.

New Constitution

Our new FoCP constitution was passed (and wine and nibbles were enjoyed) at our Special General Meeting on 13th Nov 2024, and then accepted by the Charity Commission (CC). Our CC registration has already raised our profile and enabled us to take advantage of free Microsoft software. We expect it to continue to bring further benefits. The new constitution and some of our governing documents can be found at <https://friendsofcassioburypark.org.uk/governing-documents/>



FoCP volunteers are also very involved with WBC's ongoing programme of planting 3,000 native saplings to replace the trees lost last year to Ash Dieback disease. See Peter Fewell's article below for more information about the new trees.

Community Connection Projects

Over the winter months Community Connection Projects (CCP) have repaired the river-bank upstream of the Crowfoot bridge, using brash (brushwood) bundles and planting translocated sedges and rushes. A wooden bench was put in place near the bird hide; the path in the northern reserve was repaired using lime and granite stone dust; riverfly monitoring continued (to check water quality) at two sites on the river; and Signal Crayfish control continued.

The new FoCP wetlands work parties were supported;



deep water warning signs by the sluice gates were put in place; log piles were moved to allow access to cut vegetation later in the year; and some of the old estate fencing was winched out.

CCP also supported the WBC tree planting sessions.

FoCP would like to recognise the support we've received from CCP, who have been very helpful in getting our new wetlands group going and in making the wetlands area suitable for volunteers to work in.

As we increase our involvement in the reserve and elsewhere the level of cooperation between HMWT, CCP, WBC, and the Friends is increasing. To aid communication we are creating new interactive maps. They are still in an early stage but if you are interested in seeing the names of the paths and bridges in a unified view you can visit:

https://umap.openstreetmap.fr/en/map/cassiobury-park-paths-and-bridges_1147336#17/51.66314/-0.42356.

We will also be working on a map of "hot spots" where we can focus efforts on reducing anti-social activities.

FoCP committee members are ensuring that FoCP is represented on local WBC community groups eg Community Networking, Sustainability Forum, and the People's Panel.

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

Finally, one of our members has asked us to raise the matter of stories that have circulated over the years, about the possibility of the existence of tunnels in the Cassiobury area, maybe associated with Cassiobury House and/or gardens. If you have any information to offer please email the editor at: alecthomas1@aol.com

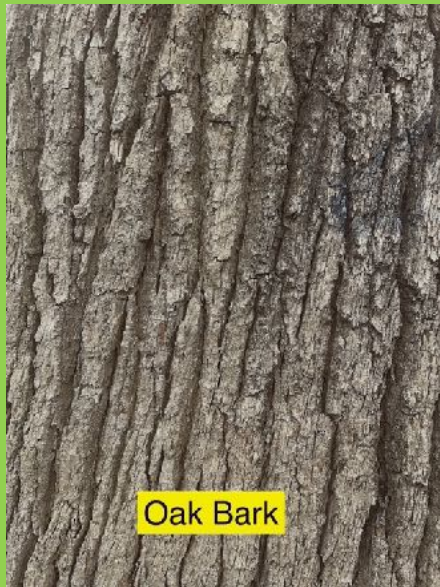
Alec Thomas, Robert Barnes, Samuel Henderson, Alex Popple. January 2025

Winter Watching.

Hopefully, the thaw has begun after a long spell of below zero temperatures which has seen us reaching for woollies, scarves, hats and gloves. These crisp days when the sky is clear and sunny get many out into the park for the pleasure of gentle exercise, be it walking, cycling or taking out the dog. Often in my case in the afternoon, when the sun, already low in the sky, begins to sink. If the clouds are of the stratus type the sunbeam strips create shafts of light across the frozen grass. If the clouds are cumulus and sunset not far off then the clouds might have a deep under-belly of red. One Sunday around the time of the winter solstice, when the sun

had already dropped below the horizon, and the red light was still shining upwards, the effect was amazing. Even more so as I changed direction to come home and saw the red light was being reflected fully around 360 degrees so that the clouds in all directions were glowing red with purple above. This made getting out of the house totally worthwhile.

Winter walks give us a chance to notice the bark on different tree species. We have



Oak Bark

many veteran oaks in the park and these have deep vertical fissures caused by the increase in girth of the trunk, as vascular tissues, xylem (wood) and phloem (cells and vessels which carry sugars) are laid down annually in rings. Below the layers of dead bark are living cambium cells which grow and divide to produce corky 'suberized' cells outside which become the new bark. Thus a waterproof protective barrier is maintained to stop the entry of pathogens - fungi and bacteria. In dead trees where bark has split, many boring insects can attack the wood, also fungal mycelia will penetrate the wood and start decay, putting out various bracket fungi or toadstools. Large Sweet Chestnut trees have deeply fissured diagonal patterns on their trunks. Beech trees have smooth grey bark. Cherry tree bark has circular fissures every few inches and noticeable

pores for breathing, called lenticels. Exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide is needed for the living cambium below. A good tree for looking at examples of these pores is Horse Chestnut, especially on the younger twigs at the end of branches. Now is a good time to observe the 'sticky terminal buds' that will open as spring advances.

There are three London Plane trees in the park which have shed their outer bark shed, leaving quite distinctive pale patches.

Shedding bark protects these trees from being unable to breathe due to pollution build-up which happened during the Industrial



London Plane

Revolution and the London 'smogs', hence their

popularity in the metropolis. Silver Birch, a very attractive species, has small irregular fissures running horizontally around the silvery trunks. So tree bark in winter is well worth noting as it is so distinctive, and can be used to help identify each species, but bark does also change in appearance as the trees age. Trees are definitely 'huggable' but preferably not if covered in green powdery lichen! Wet soggy moss is likely is likely to grow on fallen



Moss and Lichen

tree trunks and this can create a new habitat for small invertebrates or even earthworms. It is always worth leaving dead log piles when small branches are felled. For more information on trees generally and links to other sources of information see Peter Fewell's article (below).

24th-26th January saw the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch. At time of writing I am hoping I will have had as many visitors as I had during the recent freeze. I had invested in a new bird table, squirrel proof feeders for both seeds and nuts, and a bargain offer on a box of suet/seed products and fatballs. For once the squirrels stayed away and the birds came in - all the titmice regulars which add colour and liveliness, along with robins, jays and woodpigeons clearing up any spilt seeds. Regular quiet visits from dunnocks; often on the ground but getting more agile on the feeders, were followed by a tiny wren and a blackcap.

Further down the garden blackbirds are often scuttling about the shrubs and lawn and can be heard making 'tic-tic' warning calls as I walk past to the compost bins. It would be great to be able to offer them ground feeders but I don't want to encourage rats or other rodents. However, each late afternoon a beautiful fox patrolled the garden in search of any food, as did Sebastian, my neighbour's cat. Despite being the grand age of 19 he still displays all the stealth and cunning of a youngster, but luckily does not retain the 'spring' needed to reach the bird table! I wonder if other people have noticed the lack of redwings in their gardens and the park? This may be due to last Spring's poor weather, which lead to very few holly berries in Autumn and a distinct lack of beech mast under the trees, where they normally feed.

Elizabeth Gower, January 2025

The roots of the watercress trade

The wetlands restoration project is breathing new life into the Park's former watercress beds, marking a new chapter in the history of a site that has its roots in one of Hertfordshire's most important agricultural trades.

The watercress plant

Watercress is native to Britain and places as far afield as Kersey in Suffolk and Kersal near Manchester derive their names from "caerse", the Old English word for the plant. Although its nutritional and health benefits have been known for centuries, it was not farmed commercially in this country until the early 19th Century.

Related to kale and broccoli, *rorippa nasturtium aquaticum* – to use its Latin name – bears little resemblance to its puny garden cress cousin found in supermarket punnets. The whole plant is edible, including shoots, oval leaves and flowers, though the roots are not usually

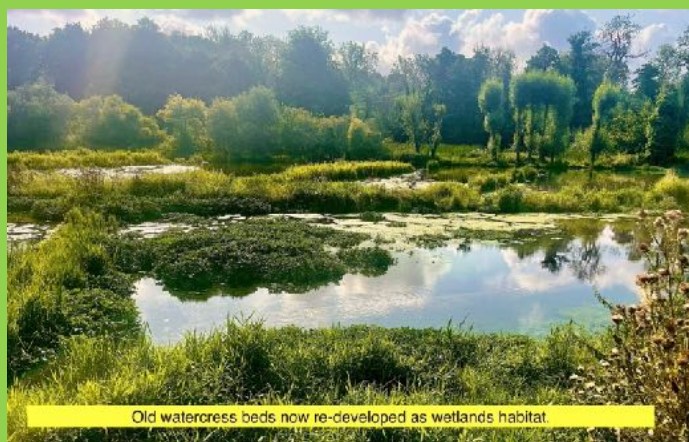


eaten. It grows up to 30cm long and is usually cut between 7cm to 12cm. The Romans called it “nasturtium officinale” or “nose twister”, referring to its peppery flavour and medicinal qualities. Like the Greeks before them, they recognised it as one of the original superfoods, rich in vitamins C and E and a good source of calcium iron and vitamin E, as well as containing vitamins K and B6. To grow best, the plant requires clean running water at 10-11 degrees Celsius. In the right conditions it can grow all year round, giving it a big advantage over other native crops. Two centuries ago, the geology and hydrology of Hertfordshire, with its network of chalk streams and springs, provided perfect conditions for watercress production.

Historic roots

An early pioneer was William Bradbury who began cultivation watercress in Gravesend, Kent, in 1808. Recognising the richness of Hertfordshire’s chalk river system, he moved to Rickmansworth in 1820, developing watercress beds at West Hyde, close to the river Colne. His success inspired a flourishing watercress trade across the county, along the valleys of the Colne, Gade, Chess, Ver and Lea, as farmers used the rivers and streams as well as springs and boreholes to nourish their crops.

Within a few decades, the landscape was sprinkled with watercress beds. Among the most prolific growers was the Sansom family who farmed at locations including



Old watercress beds now re-developed as wetlands habitat.

Rickmansworth, Boxmoor, Redbourn, Whitwell, Hitchin, St Albans, Welwyn and, for a time, Cassiobury. Most closely associated with Cassiobury was the Payne family who farmed the beds at Cassiobury Park and Cassiobridge from the mid-1800s through to the 1960s.

In the early decades, the crop was transported to markets by horse and cart. The trade was transformed by the advent of the

railways in the 1830s and 1840s, speeding up the delivery to the main market of London as well as cities in the Midlands and the North.

In London, wholesalers took delivery at Farringdon Market from where it went to Covent Garden for dispatch to restaurants and hotels to be eaten raw in salad or cooked in soups and stews. At its peak, Hertfordshire provided a third of Covent Garden’s watercress.

It was also sold by the bunch on street corners as a tasty and nutritious snack nicknamed “poor man’s bread”. The street hawkers were often young girls from poor families. In a groundbreaking 1851 study into poverty, journalist Henry Mayhew used the “watercress girls” to provide an important insight into Victorian society. An eight-year-old watercress girl told him: “Sometimes I make a great deal of money. One day I took 1s. 6d., and the creases cost 6d.; but it isn’t often I get such luck as that. I oftener makes 3d. or 4d. than 1s.; and then I’m at work, crying, ‘Creases, four bunches a penny, creases!’ from six in the morning to about ten.”



Changing tastes

In the 20th Century Britain's watercress trade had mixed fortunes, helping to feed the nation through the two world wars before going into decline in the face of changing public tastes and foreign competition.

Nationwide, cultivation plunged from 1,000 acres in the 1940s to around 150 acres by the end of the century, though Hampshire, Dorset and Wiltshire remained strongholds. Hertfordshire watercress farms also suffered from the impact of rising demand for water for housing and industry which affected the rivers and aquifers which supplied the essential water, reducing the county's trade to a handful of growers.

In many places, former watercress beds have been turned into thriving nature reserves. Cassiobury Park's watercress beds may have ceased commercial production half a century ago, but they still have a valuable role to play— not growing food for people but providing food and shelter for wildlife.

Peter Cunliffe, January 2025

Winter Birds in Cassiobury Park

Our Park is a haven for birds, even in the winter months a variety of species are to be seen and heard. With 190 acres of woodlands, wetlands, and meadows, it offers a perfect environment for resident and migratory birds.

The Residents

Throughout the winter our park is home to many resident species that have adapted to our chilly climate and can be seen foraging for food and taking shelter in the park's trees and shrubs.

Robin

Many people see the Robin as our national bird. It is certainly the most common and visible bird in winter, with its bright red breast and loud melodious song. These



Little Egret

plucky little birds are territorial and can be seen flitting about the park, especially near the bird hide, hedgerows and nearby gardens.

Wren

Not quite our smallest bird, but probably the most common in our reserve, where it can be seen in quiet spots and its rapid call can be heard everywhere.

Blackbird

With its glossy black plumage and striking orange beak, the male

Blackbird is a familiar sight, while the female, with her brown feathers, is more subdued in appearance. Known for their beautiful early morning song they can be found searching for worms and berries. However, like other thrush species their numbers are declining.

Blue Tit

The Blue Tit is not in decline and is a delightful sight with its vibrant blue and yellow plumage. These small, agile birds are often seen hopping from branch to branch, searching for insects and seeds. They are particularly fond of our feeders and can be observed performing acrobatic feats to access the food.

Great Tit

Likewise, Great Tit are also doing well. Larger than the Blue Tit, the Great Tit is distinguished by its black head, white cheeks, and yellow underparts. Versatile feeders which can adapt to various food sources, they are a common sight in the park during the winter months.

Woodpeckers

The Great Spotted Woodpecker is another resident that uses our feeders. With its striking black and white plumage and distinctive red patch underneath near its tail (and on its head in the males), it is often heard before it is seen, thanks to its characteristic drumming on tree trunks. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker are similar but much smaller and tend to be high in the trees. Unfortunately, the latter are in steep decline and the Park has lost its status as a good place to find them. Although Green Woodpecker are also in decline, their 'laughing' call can be heard on most walks in the park.

Other Residents that can be seen or heard include: Grey wagtail, Goldcrest, Long tailed tit, Tree Creeper, Nut Hatch,



Mandarin (on L) & rare visitor: a Wood Duck

often

are



Great Tits

Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush and wetland birds such as Moorhen, Little Egret, Mallard, Mandarin Duck and Kingfisher. You might also hear Water Rail....they sound a bit like squealy pigs! Little Owl make a home in the large oak trees near the Hub. As their camouflage is good, patience is required to find them. Worryingly there have been no recent reports of their presence.

Migratory Birds

Winter also brings migratory birds to the reserve. Traveling from colder regions to take advantage of the milder climate and abundant food sources found in the park, they include:

Redwing

Small thrushes that migrate from Scandinavia and Iceland, Redwing can be identified by the distinctive red patches on their flanks, and the creamy stripe above their eyes; often seen feeding in flocks on berries and fallen fruit.



Fieldfare

Closely related to the Redwing, the Fieldfare is another winter visitor. Larger thrushes with a distinctive grey head, chestnut back, and speckled breast, Fieldfares are often seen in large flocks, foraging on the ground for worms and insects or stripping berries from bushes.

Siskin

A small, lively bird with yellow-green plumage and distinctive black cap. They are often to be found in alder trees, where they feed on seeds. Siskins are social birds and can be seen in flocks, sometimes mixed with other

finch species.

Enjoy our Winter birds and get ready for more migrants in the Spring.

Peter Jenkins, February 2025

Native Tree Planting in Whippendell Woods

As is described in the “Around the park” section the planting programme has got off to a good start. Park Life’s Spring edition will include an article by Park Manager Isabel Crozier looking back on this work and describing WBC’s general approach to the project. In this article I want to “set the scene” by introducing the seven native trees being planted and describing their roles in the life of the woods and beyond.

English Oak (*Quercus Brobury*) One of our best-known trees, reaching a height of 40 ms, taking 150 years to mature, and with some ancient specimens reputed to be near 1000 years old. It supports more wildlife than any other tree, including many species of insect that in turn support birds. The Purple Hair Streak butterfly lays eggs on oak buds and is mainly seen around the leafy canopy. The Oak’s hard wood has had a variety of uses eg shipbuilding, wine barrels and flooring.

Wild Cherry (*Prunus avian*) Unlike the oak, wild cherry is relatively short-lived, living for approximately 60 years, reaching a height of around 30m. The flowers are a good nectar source in early spring and, unlike the ornamental varieties, produce fruit which is consumed by birds and woodland mammals, with the foliage providing food for several moth species including the Orchard Ermine and the Brimstone.

Small Leaved Lime (*Tilia cordata*). Growing to a height of over 20m and living for hundreds of years, pollinating insects such as bees and butterflies take advantage of its flowers. Aphids often infest the trees, with their honeydew providing food for bees, while the aphids themselves are preyed on by ladybirds and hoverflies. Several moth species such as the Lime Hawk Moth and Vapourer are to be found in these trees. Lime wood is used for turning, carving and furniture making, also for piano keys as the wood doesn't warp.

Hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*). Growing to around 30m, this hardy tree can live over 300 years. The buds and leaves are like those of the Beech but the trees are not related. But like the Beech the Hornbeam keeps its leaves through the winter, providing shelter in hedgerows. The seeds offer food to birds such as Finches and Tits as well as small mammals. Several moth species are associated with the tree, including the Nut Tree Tussock. It is often coppiced, and due to its hardness it's used for making charcoal.

Field Maple (*Acer campestre*) Reaching a height of 20m it can live for 350 years. The UK's only native maple, renowned for resisting air pollution and provides food for caterpillars of moth species such as the Mocha. Aphids attract ladybirds and other predators such as hoverflies. The flowers' nectar is favoured by bees and the fruits are eaten by small mammals. Maple syrup can be made from the sap, and the wood has been used to make musical instruments such as harps.

Crab Apple (*Malus sylvestris*). A member of the rose family, it can reach 10m in height and live to 100 years. As with most native trees it plays host to a number of moth species, including the Eyed hawk-moth and the Pale Tussock. The early spring flowers provide a good source of nectar for bees and other pollinators. The fruits are eaten by birds such as the thrush, and woodland mammals such as foxes and badgers. Fermenting fruit is often enjoyed by late season butterflies eg the Red Admiral. The fruit can be turned into wine or crab apple preserves, and the wood used for turning and carving.

Silver Birch (*Betula pendula*). Tall specimens can reach 30m and can live for 120 years. The catkins are wind pollinated and provide seeds for birds such as Siskins. It is associated with 300 insect species, including moths such as the Buff-tip and Angle Shades, with aphid and their honeydew providing food for ladybirds and hoverflies. Fungi species connected with Birch trees include the Fly-agaric and the Birch polypore. Its relatively light leaf canopy lets more light to the woodland floor, allowing other plants to grow. Birch twigs were used to make besom or witches' broomsticks. The wood is used for plywood and was used in the cotton industry for bobbins and reels.

I have only touched on the seven tree species planted, but more information can be found at the Woodland Trusts A-Z of Trees:

<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/british-trees/a-z-of-british-trees/>

and the Forestry Commission website at:

<https://www.forestryengland.uk/trees-species>

In the Spring Park Life I hope to give butterfly walk dates for 2025. To whet your appetite, look at the latest edition of “Whippendell and Beyond: butterflies of the Watford area” written by myself and Rick Vickers – available on the FoCP website at:

<https://friendsofcassioburypark.org.uk/butterflies-2024-report/>

Peter Fewell, February 2025

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:

www.facebook.com/FriendsOfCassioburyPark

www.instagram.com/friendsofcassioburypark

www.twitter.com/cassioburyFOCP

www.friendsofcassioburypark.org.uk

and at:

<https://www.watford.gov.uk/cassiobury-park-3>

Enjoy the Park!

FRIENDS OF CASSIOBURY PARK: Park Life No 30 Winter 2024-25
