



## **Park Life No 33 Autumn 2025**

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### **Introduction**

Welcome to the Autumn 2025 and 33rd edition of Park Life.

In this edition our “Around the Park” section brings you up to date with work going on to maintain our park as one of “the jewels in Watford’s crown”. Young volunteers get an especially welcome mention. The nature notes of Libby Gower and Peter Fewell describe the effect the warm frost-free spring and summer has had on our park’s flora and fauna; how nature is preparing for winter; and the opportunities for nature watching the coming season presents. Peter Cunliffe takes us back to the 1920s with the story of the sad demise of Cassiobury House, but also its afterlife through its contents scattered throughout the world. Raffi Katz re-visits the perpetual question of “how big is our park?” and puts it in the context of other parks we’re all familiar with, and as usual Raffi’s photos, together with those of Anna Brooks, illustrate what Cassiobury has to offer.

Enjoy the park!

Alec Thomas (ed), October 2025

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## AROUND THE PARK

## Volunteering (never too young)



Running a recruitment stall during a recent litter-pick was very successful, attracting eleven new members. A heartening aspect of the day was that a new family who had just joined FoCP also took part in the litter pick. They showed that you are never too young to volunteer and to take care of your environment. Their mother said: "Our daughter Miya has a strong passion for helping others ...today's event gave her a wonderful opportunity to make a difference for nature, and she was truly inspired"

FoCP has recently had success encouraging youngsters to participate both in the litter-picks and in the conservation groups. So, if you have a young family why not give our volunteering a go! We have small litter-picking sticks for really young ones, and continue to support teenagers working towards D of E Bronze Awards

Increasingly new joiners and volunteers come across FoCP through social media. Your committee posts updates, but stories direct from members and volunteers make a huge difference to our profile. Recently volunteers have posted about their park experiences, illustrating the value and benefits of taking part in park life. So if you post photos of the park, and/or Cassiobury events, please tag them “FoCP” as often as you can. It really helps us!

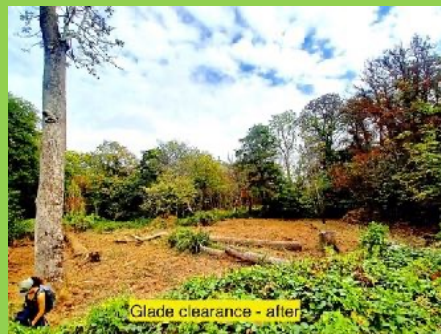
Bird-spotting can commence in early November when the bird-feeders will as usual be hung on trees near the hide.

During the last three months **Community Connection Projects** (CCP - river conservation and maintenance) have removed the lower branches from large trees near the Hub to discourage antisocial behaviour and open up these areas. The resulting brash (cuttings) was made into bundles and used for river repairs in Oxhey Park. We also removed hundreds of corona bottles from an area near the Langley Way entrance.

In the nature reserve we coppiced Willow upstream of the Water Crowfoot Bridge (see FoCP website for information on bridge locations) and the brash will be used for river-bank repairs. We removed two collapsed trees overshadowing the river near the miniature railway, pollarded two Poplars near a wetland pond and used the brash to create a dead hedge round the pond. Also in the wetlands we removed Gut Weed (green algae) from the ponds. Around the reserve we continued: removing Himalayan Balsam; controlling Signal Crayfish; scything and raking reeds to improve views; and installing posts to be used as fixed “shooting” locations for the creation of chronological photographic records.



As well as work initiated by FoCP and CCP, Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust (HMWT) have continued clearing scallops (small, curved clearings cut into the edge of a



woodland) alongside the woodland paths in the southwest of the park. Scallop creation, and meadow and scrub management alongside existing woods, trees and unmanaged scrub, provides space for less competitive species and those with a preference for open areas. By controlling growth we provide a habitat gradient from open meadow through to closed canopy woodland. We also cut the scallops on a rotation to provide uncut short-term hibernation areas for invertebrates, while ensuring they don't become too scrubbed over in the long term.

FoCP has recently applied for a grant under WBC's Neighbourhood Grants scheme, aiming to create a viewing area overlooking the Park's recently created wetlands, to enable access for all. This will involve building a viewing screen with an approach pathway, which will allow visitors to observe wildlife without disturbing it. Our application made it through to the public polling stage, and in December we will find whether or not we will receive a grant of £30,000.

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](mailto:secretary@friendsofcassioburypark.org.uk). For HMWT activities see their website.

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

## CASSIOBURY HOUSE - TREASURES UNDER THE HAMMER

When the auctioneer banged his gavel to start the sale of contents from Cassiobury House it sounded the death knell for what had been one of England's grandest stately homes. The 1922 auction gave antiques and art collectors the opportunity to buy a piece of history from a house with a dramatic story, including links to King Henry VIII and centuries of extensive rebuilding and renovations as it acted as home to successive generations of the Capell family and Earls of Essex.

In 1893, when the 7th Earl, George Capell married American heiress Adele Grant, Cassiobury could still boast impressive grounds and lavish interiors, but the heyday of vast country houses and estates was coming to an end. The family's fortunes were already suffering when the earl was killed by a taxi in 1916. Faced with the burden of death duties and huge running costs the 8th Earl and his mother, the Right





Honourable Adele, Countess Dowager of Essex, put the whole estate up for sale through Humbert & Flint in conjunction with Knight Franke & Rutley.

A sale of the house's contents was held at 20 Hanover Square in London in June 1922, with three days of viewings of the 2,606 items, followed by eight sale days starting on Monday 12 June. It was by any standards an impressive sale, with items

ranging from paintings by old masters, portraits of royalty and nobility, silverware and statues, as well as everyday items used by the owners, their guests and staff, which shone a spotlight on the Downton Abbey-style life at Cassiobury House.

The sale attracted huge interest at home and abroad, particularly among wealthy Americans eager to snap up the English aristocracy's cast-offs for their own grand homes, and the scale of the sale can be seen in a copy of the auction catalogue belonging to the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art and available online.

Day One begins with items from the Entrance Hall, starting with Lot 1, "two large coca mats and a length of carriage matting on rollers", followed by Lots 2 and 3, each of three stags' heads and antlers, and Lots 4 and 5, each of four pairs of antlers. Other items in that first session include "a bracket timepiece by MORSE, Watford, in painted case, designed in scrolls and foliage, 22 inches high", as well as a drawing of an attack by natives in New Zealand on a British merchant ship and "a glazed case containing the head of the chief".

In all, 224 items were auctioned on day one from locations including the Cloisters, the Dining Room, the Ante Room and the Green Drawing Room. They range from tables and chairs to curtains and fire fenders and include a full-size mahogany billiard table by Geo Wright & Co, 16 ivory pool balls, two sets of ivory billiard balls, a grand pianoforte, and a suit of armour and sword once belonging to a Spanish duke. The days of the sale worked through the house, both upstairs and downstairs, from the Great Library to the servants' quarters, taking in the Dramatic Room, Inner Library, Gallery Library, Oak Dining Room, Smoking Room, Garden Lobby, Empire Bedroom, State Bedroom, Her Ladyship's Bedroom and His Lordship's Bedroom. More than 20 Maid's Rooms are listed, as well as Footman's Rooms, Valet's Rooms, the Butler's Bedroom and the Housekeeper's Room. The Garden Lobby offered gems such as two axes and a long handle chopper, 12 tennis rackets and 24 balls, two archery bows, quiver and arrows, a gramophone with brass horn and two model yachts, while in the basement were a hammock, stage footlights and three toboggans.

There were separate lots for works of art and valuable pieces, including pictures, engravings, miniatures, enamels, tapestries, embroideries, sculptures, china, glass and silver.

The New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, which later went on to buy the house's 17th Century decorative staircase attributed to Grinling Gibbons and Edward Pearce,

made several purchases. Among them were a portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds of George Capell as a boy with his sister Lady Elizabeth, a double portrait of Mary and Elizabeth Capell by Dutch artist Sir Peter Lely and a portrait of their brother Sir Henry Capell again by Lely. Watford Museum was among the notable British bidders, acquiring an impressive collection of landscapes and portraits, including one of the house by JMW Turner.

The house was left an empty shell until its demolition in 1927 when the subsequent sale of the building materials also found buyers at home and abroad. That no individual or authority was willing to buy the entire building seems like a missed opportunity today, but at least some of its treasures have been preserved for posterity, even if they are scattered thousands of miles apart.

Peter Cunliffe. October 2025

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### **AUTUMN ABUNDANCE IN THE YEAR WHICH KEPT ON GIVING!**

Autumn is the season when the natural world prepares for winter. Just as we hunker down to darker colder evenings, so plants and animals prepare in different ways to 'winter well'. For most plants the work of reproduction is complete, by producing fruits and seeds, or asexually with tubers, bulbs or runners. The exceptionally warm frost-free spring and summer has resulted in a bountiful harvest of fruits and seeds. However, the dry conditions meant grass and cereals suffered, so there is less winter fodder for sheep and cattle. At one point there was concern that such an early surplus in nature's larder might mean that come the colder weather nothing would be left for birds and animals. The sheer abundance of all fruits and seeds now suggests otherwise.



Squirrels started early on the cobnuts on Hazel coppice, neatly slicing out a circle of shell with razor sharp teeth, to reach the still green nuts inside. Soft fruits were never going to last long either, so blackberries



were harvested by I suspect mostly humans this year, although birds, foxes and badgers also helped themselves. A few drunk wasps also enjoyed the fermenting fruit. Plum trees delivered crops beyond belief as the plums dropped to the ground for the wasps. My pear tree which had never borne ripe fruit was laden to the extent that a branch broke off under the weight. Cherry trees were a huge magnet for



Cassiobury's increasing population of parakeets, which screeched around on the summer evenings, Sloes persist in the hedgerows as fruit of the Blackthorns, ripe for the taking to add to gin (with some sugar!). The crop on apple trees has been amazing, truly a bumper year and often rosy red, even on cooking apple trees. My crop was safely gathered in for storage in a cool drawer under cover but the majority have been juiced and sterilised in glass bottles. We collected it from Chesham and sampled it. Truly vintage - it has much higher sugar content this year. More evidence of this being a 'mast year' comes from the sheer number and size of acorns falling from the oaks. They crunch beneath our feet in the park on the hard baked ground. Squirrels and small rodents can feast or cache these. The jays perform the same task but so far have not come back into the gardens and parks as the woods provide all they need. Beechmast and sweet chestnuts lie on the ground but most are just empty cases.

So what will last on into the winter months? All the winged seeds on hornbeam, sycamore, maple and ash trees are now in ripening bunches. The wind will bring them down, although ash holds onto its brown (keys) for many months. Bright red pyracantha or orange rowan berries hanging in clusters are feeding the blackbirds. Roadside hawthorns and holly have red berries which will last a few months to feed the migrant redwings and field fares arriving from the north and east in winter. Wild dog roses provide flask-shaped orange red 'hips'. The only shrub I failed to see bearing fruit was the elder – normally they have bunches of soft squishy 'elder berries' – perhaps I missed this or it may have been too dry to swell and last.



So having 'reproduced', how do the deciduous trees prepare for winter? By shedding their leaves to reduce transpiration (water loss) and thus limit water uptake by the roots. Sugars from the leaves are moved down the phloem tubes to be stored in the roots. The chlorophyll breaks down, revealing the yellow and orange carotenoid pigments of the leaves. The remaining anthocyanins produce the wonderful red and purple coloured foliage which cloak the beeches, until the rain and wind bring them down. Even then nature benefits, as a layer of leaf litter is home for overwintering beetles, ladybirds and other insects, worms, and woodlice. The winter winds will blow them under the shrubs in gardens so no need for too many "leaf blowers". Storm Benjamin passed through leaving cold northerly winds to



follow. The rain has filled my birdbath and a thrush had a long bath whilst a mixed flock of blue tits, great tits and coal tits moved in to feed at

my newly stocked feeders. Quieter, shyer birds like wrens find ivy as cover and enter bird boxes to keep themselves dry and warm. Large numbers can pack in one box.

Elizabeth Gower. October 2025.

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## THE NECTAR POT

As we enter the autumn phase of the year butterflies become harder to find . Although not many of our Scabious plants survived the mini-heatwave those that did should now reappear each year. At the moment there are not nearly enough of these fabulous plants to attract plant lovers and pollinating insects. I think I ordered the original batch of Field Scabious plug plants at the wrong time of year for Cassiobury Park, but if plug plants are available early spring I may well try them.



Common Blue on Yellow Rattle

On the last day of August we saw one Common Blue in the area where we sowed the Yellow Rattle last autumn. Birds-foot Trefoil plug plants were also planted along with a few Field Scabious. We were pleased to be able to relocate a few of the Birds-foot Trefoil as this is the main caterpillar food source of the Common Blue. Surprisingly Birds-foot Trefoil has also returned to an area near the car-park where we planted it last year but as it did not appear we assumed it had died. The stems traced back to the spot where we had originally planted, suggesting the growth wasn't from fresh seed. Towards the Rustic Bridge end of the park we found an explosion of probably "Greater" Birds-foot Trefoil as it tends to grow in damper spots.

Given our recent mixed but encouraging results we have planted more Yellow Rattle, and also intend to

plant it within the recently fenced-off areas around some of our veteran trees. These fences will not only protect people from falling branches but hopefully create small but welcome areas of increased bio-diversity.

Those that have been out and about this Autumn will have noticed it is one of those "Mast" years, with acorns in abundance, and that it has also been a good year for "conkers" and sweet chestnuts. Grey Squirrels are either going to die of obesity over winter, or mass produce next spring! Some fungi have appeared here and there but the woodland floor still seems relatively dry.



Small Copper on Scabious

We may have seen the last of this year's butterflies but this gives us the chance to enjoy other aspects of nature we often miss, but could enjoy. With this in mind we set up two trail cameras in Whippendell Wood and within a few hours we had our first badger, followed by shots of foxes, muntjac deer and a grey squirrel. Both trail-



cams are now covering two of the more active badger holes. During the winter, as badgers become less active, we'll explore other areas of the woodland to see what turns up. But hopefully come spring we'll capture shots of badger cubs, and a camera by the river may be useful in the search for the ever-elusive Water Voles. More on what turns up on our trail-cams in the next issue. Apologies for the quality of the badger photo as I had to pause the

video and take a photo from the video clip.

Peter Fewell. October 2025

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### HOW BIG IS CASSIOBURY PARK?

*The figures I quote come from research using the Copilot and Gemini AI (Artificial Intelligence) tools. However much data generated by AI is inaccurate and this may apply to some of the stats I've used. Please do tell me if you have better numbers! – [raffi@cassiobury-walks.co.uk](mailto:raffi@cassiobury-walks.co.uk).*

Walking home from work, through the park, near the Gade Avenue entrance, a young woman asked me the way to West Herts College. I explained it was at the other end of the park, about a 25 minute walk away. She was shocked. She had an appointment there in five minutes. How big could the park be? The answer: about 190 acres.

If you add **Whippendell Wood** (165 acres) you get to **355 acres**. By the way, have you noticed the spelling mistake on the signs in the park? They point to "Whippendell Woods". Wrong! There is only one Whippendell Wood.

After that, it's a matter of what else you wish to include as an extension of the park in terms of easily accessible open area. On the west side of Whippendell Wood (on the other side of Rousebarn Lane) are two more woods: **Harrocks** (106 acres) and **Merlins** (30 acres?). In addition there is the strip of woodland along the canal from Iron Bridge Lock to Bridge 168 (the track over the bridge leads to the southern nature reserve and Cassiobury Farm (10 acres but now closed to the public). Adding up the above, the area of contiguous publicly-accessible countryside is about **550 acres**.



**West Herts Golf Course** (not included in the 550 acres) weaves its way between the park and Whippendell Wood. There's no size listed on the internet but an 'average' for this type of golf course would be 135 acres. A wide path (Lime Walk) runs from the park (at Ironbridge Lock) up to the 'Rond', at the top of Whippendell Wood, and this path goes right through the middle of the golf course. There are two smaller very pretty paths (not so easy to find) that cross the course.

Add **The Grove** and you get another 300 acres. This is private land but the owners are very relaxed about access to their very beautiful (especially in the bluebell season) woodland.

So how do these areas compare with other local open spaces?

Small (3 or 4 acres each): Riverside Recreation Park, Greenfield Park Play Area, Cheslyn House & Gardens, Orchard Park, Meriden Park.

Slightly larger: Leavesden Green Recreation Ground - 7 acres; Harwoods Recreation Ground - 8 acres; Callowland Recreation Ground - 10 acres; Goodwood Recreation Ground - 15 acres; South Oxhey Playing Fields - 30 acres; King George V Playing Fields - 35 acres; Oxhey Park - 35 acres; Woodside Playing Fields - 55 acres; Leavesden Country Park - 70 acres.

Much larger, but still smaller than Cassiobury Park: Croxley Common Moor -100 acres; Bricket Wood (incl. the Munden Estate) - 150 acres; Aldenham Country Park- 175 acres

Two surprises (larger than Cassiobury Park): Oxhey Woods -245 acres; St Albans Verulamium Park - 247 acres.

Rickmansworth Aquadrome is 101 acres (mostly lakes) and this adjoins *The Hillingdon Trail* (an 18 mile path rather than a park) - another 1000 acres.

So what is the largest 'park' within reasonable travelling distance of Watford? Hampstead Heath: 790 acres, four times larger than Cassiobury Park.

Finally, how does the 190-acre Cassiobury Park compare with The Royal Parks?

Green Park - 47 acres; St James's Park - 57 acres; Greenwich Park -180 acres; Kensington Gardens- 265 acres; Hyde Park -350 acres; Regents Park - 410 acres; Bushy Park- 1100 acres (Bushy not Bushey!); Richmond Park- 2,500 acres.

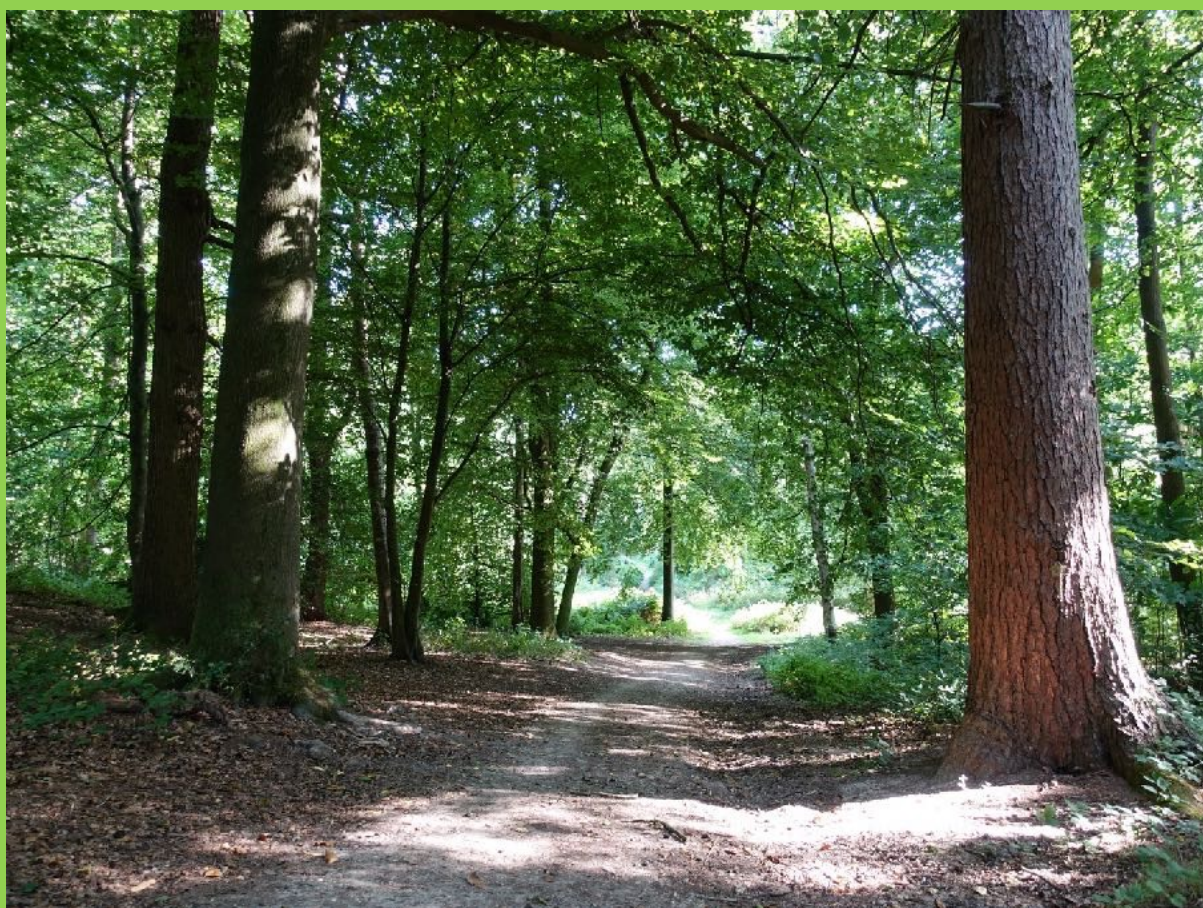
Raffi Katz. September 2025

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**Photo Gallery: life around the park**  
**Photographs by Raffi Katz: author of “Cassiobury Walks”**









**Photo Gallery (cont) - photographs by Anna Brooks**











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](http://www.facebook.com/FriendsOfCassioburyPark)

[www.instagram.com/friendsofcassioburypark](http://www.instagram.com/friendsofcassioburypark)

[www.twitter.com/cassioburyFOCP](http://www.twitter.com/cassioburyFOCP)

[www.friendsofcassioburypark.org.uk](http://www.friendsofcassioburypark.org.uk)

and at:

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

Enjoy the Park!

FRIENDS OF CASSIOBURY PARK: Park Life No 33 Autumn 2025

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