



Park Life No 34. Winter 2025/26

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Introduction

Welcome to the Winter 2025/26 and 34th edition of Park Life.

Our “Around the Park” section brings you up to date with activity going on to maintain Cassiobury as one of “the jewels in Watford’s crown”. Our local Cubs get an especially welcome mention, while you can see in actual numbers how much time volunteers have contributed to the park; read about how the River Gade banks have been opened up to provide better habitats and views; and get news about forthcoming walks. Peter Fewell describes how the use of permanently positioned cameras (Trail Cams) allows us to discover there is even more life “down in the woods” than we may have thought. Libby Gower’s nature notes shows how you can gain a great deal of pleasure from observing nature without leaving your own garden. Peter Cunliffe once again takes us back to the 1920s with the second and final part of his story of the end of Cassiobury House, describing how the very structure of the house was widely dispersed – some of it ending up in the New York. Rudi Newman however describes a day in the life of a feature of the park that is still going strong after 60+ years – the much-loved miniature railway. As usual Raffi Katz’s photos remind us of the many faces of our park, irrespective of the time of year.

Enjoy the park!
Alec Thomas (ed), January 2026

AROUND THE PARK

Volunteering News

In November we hosted cubs from 74th Watford South who meet at St Lukes church



in Cassiobury. Working towards their conservationist and community badges, it was delightful to see them both enjoy the park and find loads of litter. We hope to run another session later this year. If you are involved with other groups who would like to be involved and/or do a special litter pick, then do contact us.

On the Saturday before Christmas we ran our last volunteer day of the year, and celebrated with mulled wine

and treats with the litter pickers, having welcomed a number of families and new litter pickers on the day. We also ran a small social event at the Hub for the conservation and bird-feeder maintenance teams.

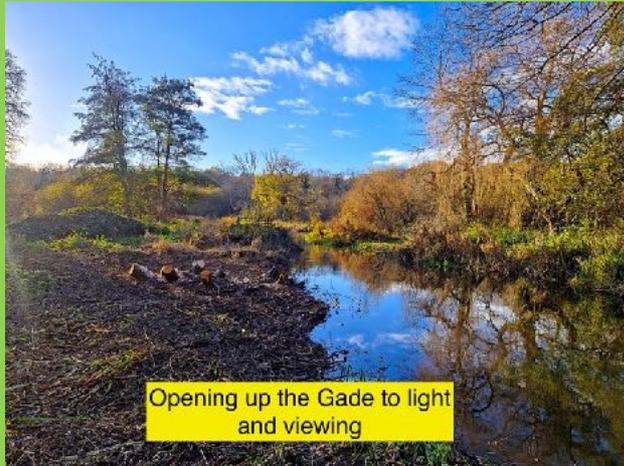
Winter maintenance of the bird-feeders in front of the bird-hide began in November and will continue until the end of March. We know these feeders have a lot of fans who enjoy observing the action on and around the feeders – regular feathered customers of the feeder cafe include: blue, great, coal, marsh and long-tailed tits, jays, parakeets, jackdaws, magpies, mandarin, nuthatch, pigeons, mallards, great spotted woodpeckers, robins, treecreepers, Cetti’s warblers, chiff-chaffs, coots. Volunteers make such a contribution to the state of our lovely park and we appreciate all the work they put in. The 2025 stats show the extent of their contribution; we are especially pleased with the success of the group dedicated to working in the Wetlands area every month.

	Total	litter	reserve	Wetlands	Feeders
Totals for 2025 - Hours	875 Hours	426 Hours	192 Hours	219 Hours	38 Hours
Totals for 2025 – Volunteers (comprises repeat participation by individual volunteers)	388	213	64	73	38

We always have a lot of work to do and really need more volunteers to come along and help, even if it's only the odd day. If weekend opportunities don't suit, then Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust (HMWT) run weekday working parties in the nature reserve and Whippendell Wood. The activities are not only enjoyable but you get to meet a group of friendly, like-minded people, while helping preserve our lovely park. Why not start the year with a resolution to come along!

Community Connection Projects (CCP) - river conservation and maintenance

During the last three months CCP work has included coppicing a large goat willow along the riverside path opposite the railway, both to let in more light for marginal vegetation and improve sight lines/views along the river. We



coppiced a large Crack Willow downstream from the Meadow Bridge and started to create a berm (raised bank) next to it with brash bundles. The area will be planted with translocated vegetation. We also cut back overhanging Horse Chestnut branches to reduce shade and encourage plant growth. We continued cutting back Willow opposite the Scrape Bridge to

allow the marginal vegetation to grow.

In the wetlands we removed reeds from the inlet channel, reduced the large brash pile next to the viewing area, and continued Signal Crayfish control.

In the main park we cut back the hedge by the Langley way entrance and removed wood from six Espaliers by Rickmansworth road.

Last summer FoCP applied for a grant under WBC's Neighbourhood Grants scheme; aiming to meet the costs of creating a viewing area overlooking the Park's 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. In December we were delighted to learn that our application was successful, receiving a grant of £30,000. Creation of the viewing area will start later in the year when weather conditions permit.

FoCP committee members ensure 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, FOCP Secretary, by emailing him at secretary@friendsofcassiobury.org.uk. For HMWT activities see their website.

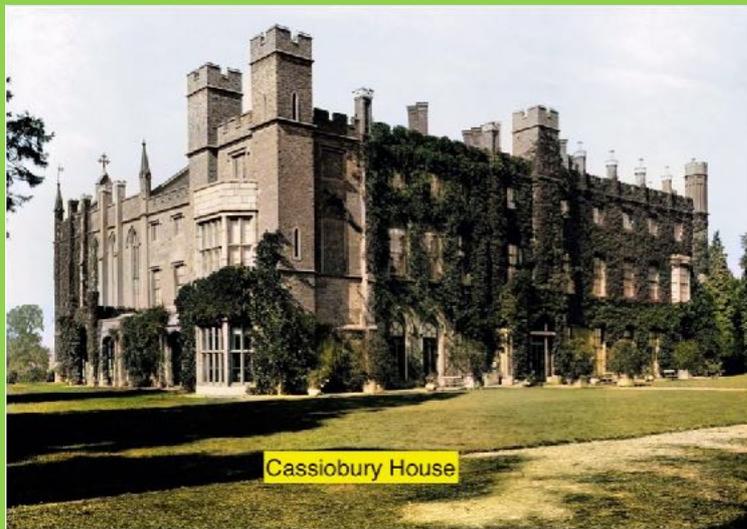
Volunteer-led walks.

So far we have two butterfly walks led by Peter Fewell in the diary: a Spring one on Sunday 3rd May, and a Summer walk on Sunday 28th June. Both starting at the Langley Way entrance at 2pm.

Alec Thomas, Robert Barnes, Alex Popple. January 2026

How Cassiobury House Was Recycled after demolition

As I described in the Autumn 2025 edition of Park Life, Cassiobury House's glorious history came to an undignified end in the 1920s, but the legacy of one of England's grandest historic homes lives on thanks to the sale of its contents and the fabric of the building.



Until a century ago Cassiobury Park was the site of a prestigious stately home dating back to Tudor Times and for hundreds of years it was the magnificent seat of successive earls of Essex and the Capell family until they fell on relatively hard times following the death of the 7th Earl, George Capell in 1916. Faced with hefty death duties and unable to find a buyer, they auctioned off the contents in 1922, from opulent works of

art and rare artefacts to workaday items from the servants' quarters (see the Autumn edition of Parklife). The 10-day auction attracted worldwide attention and buyers on both sides of the Atlantic snapped up lots acquired during the house's golden days. After the contents were dispersed to private collectors and museums, the building stood empty until efforts to find a buyer were finally abandoned in 1927 and the decision was made to demolish it and salvage and sell the building materials. Prior to demolition, notable parts of the building that were of historic significance and financial value were removed and sold separately.

Famously, the 17th Century decorative staircase, attributed to Grinling Gibbons and Edward Pearce, eventually made its way to the New York Museum of Metropolitan Art where it was displayed in pride of place as an example of the best of English aristocratic homes in the museum's British Galleries. For several years after its removal the staircase had languished flat-pack-style at various London antique dealers until the Met bought it in 1932 and – after painstaking restoration – reassembled it in the 1950s.

Other notable US buyers included newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst who bought a selection of Gibbons panels and overmantels for his Hearst Castle and Ocean House mansion in California. When Ocean House was demolished, the

panelling was purchased by the Edward Dean Museum & Gardens in Cherry Valley, California.

Some panelling and salvaged bricks are thought to have been shipped to the US for use at Little Cassiobury, in Bedford, upstate New York, home to antiques dealer and anglophile Mrs Harriet Hooper, whose late husband made his fortune from Encyclopedia Britannica.

Of course, not all items went Stateside. Other notable items included the mechanism of the house's tower clock, designed in 1610 by Leonard Tenant, which was removed from the turret and put on display at the British Museum, while a set of 12 late medieval stained-glass roundels was purchased by the Victoria and Albert Museum. Stripped of its treasures, the house was demolished in 1927, followed by a sale of the architectural fragments and building materials on Wednesday 9 November 1927, handled by auctioneers and surveyors Stimpson Lock and Vince.

A poster for the auction declares: "To lovers of the antique, architects, builders, etc. Demolition of Cassiobury Mansion. Notice of the sale of building materials and other effects arising from the demolition of the above including: 300 tons of old oak: 200 tons of firewood, 100 very fine old oak beams, 2,000 slates, quantity of iron piping, 100,000 old period Tudor bricks.

"Along with window sashes, stained glass windows, doors, quantity of flooring, floorboards, oak joists, quantity of stone paving, suitable for crazy paving, stones steps, other stones suitable for rockeries etc and numerous other effects. Which Messrs Stimpson Lock & Vince have received instructions to sell by auction on the premises on Wednesday November 9th, 1927, at 11am."

Some of the materials were reputedly used in the chimney stacks of houses on the Cassiobury estate in the 1920s and 1930s. Others are thought to have been used at Monmouth Place on The Parade in Watford, a Grade II listed building which dates to the 17th century. Once a dower house built by the Early of Monmouth, it underwent rebuilding in 1927 and 1928 when it was converted to shops and it remains an impressive landmark in the town centre, and one with echoes of the grand house that once stood in the town's park.

Peter Cunliffe, January 2026

A View from My Window.

January 9th

Storm Goretta has passed. The snow and ice have now thawed away but a breezy cold wind is shaking the branches of the huge Norwegian spruce and a Silver Birch behind it. This is a day for watching the sky as dark purple clouds scuttle about, lit from behind by weak watery sunshine. A hint of pink as the sun sinks lower. The sky has been busy today – the birds seem unsettled by the wind, as some people claim their cats are. A small flock of starlings is on the wing. Three Parakeets, all flashy green and long tails briefly rest up in the top of a Leylandii. Where would we be without the evergreens and conifers, the Yew, the Holly and Ivy covering walls and tree trunks? They provide valuable cover for the birds in winter, a chance to hide away and have shelter from the freezing weather and the storms. Branches provide the perches or somewhere to build a nest. The seeds and berries a winter feast for these hard months. The small migrant thrushes from Scandinavia, Red Wings,

arrived just ahead of Christmas and have been steadily feeding on the holly berries. I watch through binoculars, as they first pluck, then swallow the red berries entire. As the berries get digested the seeds inside will pass through with the droppings and have a good chance of germinating in Spring. What an opportunity to see how colourful these thrushes are - a speckled breast and each time the wings are raised a strong blush of red feathers can be seen beneath. Another identifying feature is the pale cream eye stripe on each side of the head.

The shrub layer in my garden also has many evergreen species. There are Laurels, Mexican Orange, Bay, Pyracantha and Photinia. All have thick waxy cuticles on the upper surfaces of their leaves so they can survive the water loss and frost damage of winter. In today's wind smaller birds are dodging between the safety of these shrubs and the feeders. Small flocks of three or four Blue Tits appear busy, stocked as the feeders are with peanuts, seeds and grain, and fat balls; whilst larger great tits with their darker crowns and broadly striped waistcoats are already paired up and beginning to dominate the feeders. Dunnocks and a robin wait below for any dropped food or risk an aerial trip to snatch some food. Smaller birds have a relatively large surface area through which they lose heat and must continually feed to maintain their core temperature. The fat balls are at risk of being devoured by squirrels far too rapidly and need a protected feeder. Squirrels seem to have a great deal of energy judging by their frisky chasing behaviour. Even confined to the house there is much to observe in the garden.

January 18th

Boot socks and wellingtons on, my sticks to stop me slipping, I head down the length of my garden to the compost bins. I had availed myself of the Council's food waste bin for the last two weeks. En-route I negotiated the steps by the pond and notice the water level is now higher and fresh green duckweed is in surface clumps. For once the dead leaves were raked out in the Autumn and the pond looks ready for frogs to lay their spawn. The apple tree which had been super abundant was now bare, it had about 20 small apples left on after the leaves fell, looking like a Christmas tree with minimal decorations. Then those apples fell onto the snow and the remains were now brown and rotten, but those slim pickings had provided some food – pecked at by blackbirds and thrushes, and eaten by foxes and badgers.. The air is now much warmer and Robins are singing sweetly in pairs, a Pigeon is cooing and a Song thrush is now calling its repetitions in the early mornings and late afternoons. Each day the dark steals in a little later until suddenly it is night. The birds' brains are able to detect this increase in day length and respond by starting their breeding behaviour; pairing up and looking at prospective nest sites. The pair of magpies is engineering large twigs into their nest at the top of the Norwegian Spruce. They are the sentinels of the gardens. As the small birds creep away softly for the night a Red Kite patrols down the garden, slowly looking for any carrion. As I return to the warmth of the house a large greying fox bounds up the garden and disappears behind the shrub border. The night will again be cold.

Elizabeth Gower, January 2026.

A Day On The Railway

*'Early in the morning,
Down at the station,
All the little engines
Standing in a row.'*

Such thoughts inspired the Rev. Awdry's *Railway Series* stories, and mornings on the Watford Miniature Railway start rather similarly. Arriving first thing the sheds are opened and the diesel engines 'woken up' – fuel, coolant and oil levels are checked, before the engine is started. Checking the notice board for any important updates, carriages are pushed out and seats cleaned ready for the day. As the engines and carriages are prepared they are checked for any faults.



As the train is prepared another member of staff conducts a full track walk, checking all is well, with no fallen branches or other obstructions. Occasionally a frog or other animal needs to be encouraged out of the way! Once the engine is backed onto its train brake checks are completed ensuring reliable operation. Much like on the main line our brakes are fail-safe and apply automatically.

On some afternoons we may use one of our steam engines.

Naturally these have different procedures and take a good while longer to prepare and raise pressure. First an inspection is made of the boiler and its tubes cleaned, before checking water level and then laying the fire. As pressure builds the many oiling points around the engine are dealt with along with filling up with coal and water.

Driving round to the station the signs are brought out, turntable and gates unlocked, and final preparations made to begin running services. The engine is uncoupled and shunted onto the turntable, ensuring it is centrally positioned, before being turned and run round for the first train.

Thereafter for most of the day our work falls into three main duties – station master, level



crossing keeper, and driver. Station master is the leading public-facing role but is far more than just taking fares, also covering handling enquiries, shop assistant, porter and other aspects all in one! Once fares are taken they ensure that all passengers are sitting safely (no limbs hanging out, standing or sitting sideways) and gives the 'right away' to the driver. On days with two trains in operation they also ensure passengers are directed to the correct platform for the next train.

Working the level crossing is no less important. On whistles from the engine the gates are opened and closed while maintaining public safety, particularly for any



errant/enthusiastic dogs. There is also frequent need to give directions and answer questions ('where is the waterfall [weir]?' being one of the most common), while an important side element is keeping an eye on the train in case anyone decides to break the safety regulations... Lastly, occasionally passengers drop things on the route so between trains they might have the challenge of hunting for water bottles and soft toys along the track!

Arguably the role that most fires the imagination is that of driver. We have a great fondness for our engines who all have personalities of their own (Awdry was not wrong!), and no two days are quite the same, what with weather, number of passengers per carriage and other variables. Upon leaving the station drivers need to keep an eye on the passengers, lineside and track,

gently progressing until the level crossing. With lots of children in the park and the line's primary objective being to spread a little joy, naturally we like to give a wave when we can. Speeding up slightly on passing the sheds, the riverside straight is the main gradient, so judging power is essential. Animals on the line are common – especially some rather too-interested squirrels and also the occasional deer – so a good lookout is vital as often they are slow to move! When not on the track, however, they add an extra sight for passengers, alongside our gnome population. On reaching the farthest point of the line, where it begins to loop back on itself, there is a lower speed round the curve before rejoining the path-side stretch. Checking speed on the now-downward river gradient, a whistle by the sheds instructs the level-crossing keeper before gently running back into the station. A quick spin on the turntable and it's off for another run...

The end of the day is largely a reverse of morning actions, checking all is well and noting anything important for the next day. Naturally there have been exceptions to these usual operations, from rain and snow to the occasional flood or fallen tree, but these add variety to the day. What is most important though, especially with so many noting how they visit the WMR and Cassiobury generation after generation, is how it is not only fun and interesting for us the crew but how much it means to the people of Watford.

Dr Rudi Newman, December 2024

The Nectar Pot

As mentioned in the Autumn 2025 edition of Park Life, myself and Rick Vickers have been making increasing use of cameras (Trail Cams) in Whippendell Wood, and the winter has provided some interesting footage beyond the badgers we were initially interested in.

Muntjak: the most frequently encountered deer species. Non-native, this species breeds all year round – we captured evidence of this with images of a newborn which probably wasn't more than a couple of days old.

Roe Deer: This native deer has shown up on numerous occasions. Generally shy, particularly when captured in a group of three. When alone they seem less scared



and we have a couple of clips of them coming up to the camera. Not seen in the same numbers as the Muntjac - there may well be some competition going on, but they all looked healthy in the footage. Roe deer are easily differentiated from Muntjac deer with longer legs, bigger ears, a black stripe across the nose and lack of tails.

Foxes: We have captured numerous foxes, with more recent

shots showing some seeming to be suffering with mange, although earlier ones looked healthy with bushy tails. One male fox in particular has stood out – the distinctive kink at the end of his tail has earned him the name “kinky tail”. This fox has been regularly captured on three cameras with one clip showing him entering a badger hole. He emerged unscathed but is likely to come off worse when the badgers are more alert!

Rabbits: We frequently capture images of rabbits but so far never more than two in shot at once. Given the number of holes there are probably more rabbits than you might think in Whippendell Wood. Last week a brave bunny went down a badger hole but like the fox above lived to tell the tale.

Wood Mice?: I put a question-mark by this as we are assuming what is seen in a wood is a Wood Mouse! Definitely mouse though, not Shrew or Vole.

Tawny Owl: We have recorded lots of calls but only one image. However the branch on which it was captured may turn out to be a regular perch, so hopefully we will see more of it in the future.

Moths and Bats: Moths have shown up regularly, unsurprisingly as moth species, unlike butterflies, are on the wing all year round. Although the species are impossible to identify under the infra-red light used by Trail Cams, most are probably Winter or

November Moths, although a larger species was also spotted. A Bat was seen in December – rather surprising for that time of year, although we also saw what looked like Bats in January, but the footage is not easy to interpret - Moths stand out under infra-red but Bats don't - but the movement fits the latter more than birds or Moths.

Birds: Little bird activity has been recorded so far - Robins, Blackbird, and maybe a Redwing captured in late January. Bird sound is however recorded when something triggers the camera, so a Muntjac movement could result in the capture of the spring dawn chorus.

Badgers: We have captured far more badger activity than we ever expected to over winter, with hundreds of clips to go through. We sometimes see a single badger not



doing much at all apart from maybe have a scratch; there is a clip where a badger curls up like a domestic cat for a short nap before wandering off away from the badger hole. Then we have more typical badger behaviour such as scent marking, grooming and wrestling. These images are complemented by the vocal sounds picked up on the trail-cams.

It has been a fascinating experience watching the clips,

and we look forward to continuing with the trail-cams through the year so there should be plenty more to review in future Park Lives.

It's never easy to write much about butterflies during the winter but Rick and myself are working on our Cassiobury butterflies 2025 report which will contain lots of material in due course.

Park Manager Isabel informed us about woodland maintenance work, so we were able to avoid damage to Elms and Honey Suckle by tying yellow ribbon around them, alerting workers on what to avoid. We hope to see White-Letter Hairstreak in the area as the caterpillars feed on the Elm. Holly clearance and thinning has provided more light to stimulate bio-diversity.

For details of Spring and Summer Butterfly Walks – see “Around the Park” above.

Peter Fewell, January 2026

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

and at:

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

Enjoy the Park!

FRIENDS OF CASSIOBURY PARK: Park Life No 34. Winter 2025/26
